

RESPONDING TO RADICALISATION THROUGH EDUCATION

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In October 2020, the French teacher in history and civic education, Samuel Paty, was assassinated outside his school. The perpetrator was an 18-year-old Russian of Chechen descent. He had learned on social media about this teacher's alleged habit of showing derogatory cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in class. Therefore, the act appears to have been motivated by political-religious hatred and was characterised as violent extremism. The incident sent shock waves through schools, teachers, and pupils around the globe. In the aftermath of the events in France, all over the European continent, incidents were reported where pupils and parents disputed with and even threatened teachers for their use of the cartoons in class. The killing of Mr. Paty was a recent example of ideologically motivated school-related violence. For decades, schools and non-formal youth educational sites have made headlines as loci of shooting (Pfeifer, 2017), hostage taking (Beslan, Russia), and killing sprees (Utøya, Norway), and are unfortunately globally considered soft or easy targets for extremist violence (UNESCO, 2017).

Yet, these incidents are rare, whereas many places of education are easy targets in a different way. Over the years, a whole branch of social strategies aimed at prevention of violent extremism (PVE) has emerged (see also Augestad; Ragazzi & Walmsey, both in this volume). As a result, schools and youth work have also been expected to take part in the efforts to prevent and counter terrorism. Hence, the threat of extremism in broader society has rendered schools and youth work targets for policies aimed at preventing or countering extremism. Governments across the world want to use education to prevent extremism, whether it is religiously motivated, left- or right-wing-oriented, or COVID-related anti-science activism. Since it started developing counter-radicalisation courses for schools, UNESCO has described radicalism as a learned behaviour. This characterisation implies that it can be 'unlearned'. While it is broadly agreed that education can play an important role in addressing the challenges surrounding extremism, there are deep concerns about *how* places of education are called upon to do this. Too often, it is argued, preventing extremism in education is approached from a security paradigm (Waeber, 1995), with the central aim being to identify threat. This paradigm can undermine broader educational goals and pedagogical relationships and lacks a clear educational core (Glaser, 2017; O'Donnell, 2016; Sieckelinck et al., 2015; Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020). Still today, for many people, PVE-E entails the obligation/expectation of teachers to report any potentially radicalised/radicalising individuals. This security lens raises the question, which lies at the heart of this chapter: is it possible for the prevention of extremism to find a pedagogical core?

On various levels, from local governments to transnational institutions, programmes have been developed for schools that can be used to deal with extremism. At the time that this branch of preventing violent extremism in education (PVE-E) became operational in many countries, scientific findings about its benefits were still limited, and assumptions were fraught with many complexities. Notwithstanding the inconclusiveness of the academic debate, the importance of education in prevention strategies became widely recognised in policy and practitioner circles. Around 2013, while many interventions were still in the pilot phase and conceptual debates about the key terminology of radicalisation were far from concluded, governments took decisive measures around PVE-E, and for many schools and neighbourhoods, doing nothing in the face of a huge escalation or extremist threat was not an option as the safety of their pupils was at stake. Consequently, a multitude of approaches, methods, and interventions were developed and tried out. However, in general, schools were not given time to reflect on the assumptions of their responses to political and religious violence.

Since then, all over the globe, new technologies have been high on teachers' and educators' lists of concerns (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Teachers generally feel they lack information, instruments, and control to address what their pupils are experiencing online (*ibid.*). For all the affordances of new technology, teachers are faced with a new and constantly changing arena of engagement and exchange, which they can quickly feel incapable of keeping up with, let alone addressing (Katz & El Asam, 2021).

These rapidly developing technologies mean children and youth are easily exposed to roughly the same information as adults, albeit packed in often less nuanced forms (Katz & El Asam, 2021). It is through these technologies that societies' most polarising issues can generate the greatest heat, with the potential to drive young people to more extreme corners (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). A non-exhaustive list: the regulations regarding religious practice and symbols in public space (headscarves, ritual slaughter, the 'burkini issue'), racism and the pain of colonialism and white privilege, political agendas related to gender and sexism, the dilemmas regarding freedom of expression. These are all major themes that, in a polarised society, usually in a raw, unmediated, and often online form, penetrate students' hearts and minds and can trigger a chain reaction of intense emotions (Katz & El Asam, 2021). It has even been argued that in this hypermediated era, adolescence itself, as a bridge between childhood and adulthood, is on the brink of collapse (Koops & Zuckerman, 2003). Considering this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that some young people are already exploring the more radical spectrum. Even more so when this attraction can be understood in light of their identity development (see further).

Many authors from different fields of interest note, based on various studies, that an important difficulty with discourses of radicalisation and extremism is that they have been too closely linked with counterterrorism rather than education or pedagogy (Davies, 2018; Glaser, 2017; O'Donnell, 2016; Sieckelinck et al., 2015). A significant body of literature thematises the tensions of securitised educational efforts in the context of preventing violent extremism. The underlying logics of educational and security paradigms overlap but are sometimes diametrically opposed: idealistic educators are committed to independent critical thinking and the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions, while security actors want to gather intelligence and detect possible deviants (Halstead & Pike, 2006; O'Donnell, 2016; Sieckelinck et al., 2015). Interpreting ideas and discussions in classrooms through security-driven frameworks can undermine pedagogical efforts. Most of this literature reflects on the UK's Prevent strategy or the specific dilemmas of educators or youth workers. But also more broadly, Christodoulou (2020) observes how the securitisation of education can have ethical, pedagogical, social, and political repercussions. Some have warned of the 'instrumentalization of civil society' (Kundani & Hayes, 2018) and its co-optation in security

paradigms. Therefore, we argue that schools can only contribute to the agenda of tackling extremism if radicalisation is considered a pedagogical challenge, that is, if the tackling of radicalisation is organised through a pedagogical lens in formal and non-formal educational settings.

After nearly 20 years of educational responses to extremism, it is about time to take stock. What are the main arguments for paying attention to extremism in education? What are the pitfalls when this ambition is pursued? Educational thinkers have discussed and underlined the value of educating against extremism at length (Davies, 2008; Sieckelinck et al., 2015). However, the political expectation that education should be able to defeat extremism raises doubts (O'Donnell, 2016). Not in the least because some of these politics may have a radicalising effect themselves (Jackson et al., 2011; Sieckelinck, 2017). Moreover, PVE-E risks instrumentalising the authentic educational relationship (Biesta, 2014) and stigmatising members of marginalised groups (O'Donnell, 2016). All these considerations raise another question: Can/ought it be prevented in schools at all?

Educational actions start from diverse and even opposing assumptions, target different groups, have a range of foci, and aim for different outcomes. Though most PVE-E interventions are seldom properly tested or evaluated, many schools and teachers across Europe seem to have tackled these challenges with increasing confidence. The experiences of these educators can help identify and address problems and challenges and can also offer guidelines for other educators (Nordbruch & Sieckelinck, 2018). We will examine more closely the precise role education is supposed to play and what a genuinely pedagogical/educational approach to PVE could look like. It will be argued that schools can only contribute to this agenda if radicalisation is considered a pedagogical challenge and the tackling of radicalisation is organised through a developmental lens with an eye for individual and societal development, materialising in formal and non-formal educational programmes. Hence, the importance of resetting the pedagogical parameters of PVE-E as a truly educative response cannot be predicated on fear.

Preventing radicalisation through education: a contested concept in a complex field of practice

Before outlining PVE-E policies, however, we must first contextualise the concept of radicalisation in the sphere of education. Most people regard radicalisation as a process in which an individual or group increasingly embraces extreme political, social, or religious ideals that threaten to undermine the established or social-democratic order. Major attention has been given to jihadi extremism as a radical evil (Schoorman, 2019). More recently, xenophobia and white supremacy have gained traction among young people (Krall, 2021). Further, environmental or animal rights may lead people onto an extremist path, while others target abortion clinics or expose virologists, spurred by conspiracy theories on the coronavirus (Nogrady, 2021). The banner of radicalisation conceals many divergent practices. It is safe to say, though, that when someone radicalises, they become increasingly resentful and hateful towards a section of society and anyone who defends the status quo or the elite.

However, it is far from clear what process is exactly being suggested by the idea of radicalisation. Empirical and theoretical research into radicalisation processes has shown that there are many different pathways towards extremism and violent extremism, many of which do not start with ideological affinity/attraction (Bertelsen, 2018) and do not even necessarily lead to extremist attitudes or an extremist mindset (Roy, 2014); young people also join extremist groups without becoming ideological extremists (Horgan, 2008). Radicalisation is the result of a multitude of political-societal conditions, troubled relationships, and behavioural antecedents (de Ruyter & Sieckelinck, 2023).

On a more fundamental level, the notion of radicalisation has been regarded as the master signifier of the late ‘war on terror’ (Kundani, 2014, p. 3), providing a ‘vehicle for policy-makers’ who required a discourse through which they could discuss the supposed ‘causes of terrorism’ while at the same time delimiting the boundaries of what it was permissible to include in any explanatory framework (Heath-Kelly, 2013). Namely, giving primary attention to individual and ideological factors to the exclusion of structural and state-related factors. Most authors agree that radicalisation is a process, be it a staircase, pyramid, or pathway, but apart from this, there is little consensus on when radicalisation is at play, why it occurs, and how it can be prevented (de Graaf, 2011; Fadil et al., 2019).

In relation to young people in particular, the prevention of radicalisation has been characterised as ‘a solution in search of a problem’ (Ragazzi & Walmsley, 2020). That is to say, there are pressures from above and below to ‘do something’ about radicalisation while this challenge is numerically marginal in comparison to the usual, regular issues faced by schools. Additionally, some public policies on radicalisation have undermined the confidence of many educators in their ability to respond to traditional pedagogic challenges when these are reframed in terms of ‘radicalisation’. As Ragazzi and Walmsley (2020) put it, ‘the discourse of radicalisation generates in part its own reality’ (p. 14).

These critiques, as we will argue below, underline the importance of studying and approaching the prevention/countering of extremism through an educational lens rather than the other way around. A pedagogical perspective should allow us to treat what is often defined as a security concern as a developmental concern, as understood in positive youth development. One issue this brings to the fore is that of definition. As Marsden (2020) argues, different actors and communities of practice have different definitional needs: ‘it is useful to recognize the differing priorities, scope and real-world implications of each community’s engagement with the definitional question’. A pedagogical approach to preventing extremism requires a pedagogical definition of the issue at hand. To this end, a definition was constructed in an attempt to be more attentive to the meaning experienced by actors in an educational environment (youth and teachers alike) and puts the pedagogical relationship at the heart of the concept: ‘when a child or adolescent starts to develop strong political or religious ideas and agency that are so fundamentally at odds with the educational environment or mainstream expectations that the pedagogical or educational relationship is increasingly put at stake’ (Sieckelinck, 2017). This can be contrasted with a more security-oriented definition, such as ‘The process by which people come to support terrorism and violent extremism and, in some cases, then join terrorist groups’ (UK Home Office, 2011). While this definition is potentially valuable for security actors, it cannot provide a sound basis for an educational response. It is not unthinkable that the use of the concept ‘radicalization’, with all its discursive flaws (Heath-Kelly, 2013) and potential biases (Kundani, 2012), may in some cases have been useful to thoughtful social and educational professionals such as teachers and youth workers in better addressing their concerns about some of their students or clients. The radicalisation frame enabled some social professionals to become more attentive to a process of moral disengagement at a stage in which they were often still able to make a difference. The question taken up here is, however, to what extent this is still true today.

The role of PVE-E in counter-radicalisation policies

It is clear by now that since PVE-E policies first emerged, the landscapes of security, intelligence, and education have started to shift. This shift determines, to a large extent, as we will see, the educational space to work on countering extremism (Sieckelinck, 2017). First, we will take a brief

look at some prevailing education policy initiatives on a transnational, national, and local level in order to trace how the role of education has been framed.

Education has often been included as one of the central tools for preventing extremism within a general strategy for the prevention of extremism. That is, education is adopted as one of the forces within the control of the government that can be drawn upon to achieve the overall goal of prevention. We define PVE-E policy, then, as the ‘set of actions taken by a government’ (Walker, 2000, p. 13) to utilise education as a tool for prevention. Reaching a set of actions involves a process of problem definition, and as such, the framing of the problem is inherent to and shapes the policy (Walker, 2000).

The role of education in prevention has been established in the European context through a number of EU-wide policy initiatives (O’Donnell et al., 2021a). The inclusion of education as a pillar of prevention was evident in the establishment of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which drew frontline workers, including teachers and youth workers, into a network of practitioners addressing the prevention of radicalisation. Between 2015 and 2020, a specific working group focused on education as a preventive instrument. In 2017, the European Commission zoned in specifically on the role of youth work in ‘*The Contribution of Youth Work to Preventing Marginalisation and Violent Radicalisation*’ (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, & Culture, 2017). Through these initiatives, an array of educational materials and practices have emerged, with their influence spreading across the EU through the RAN. In a review of this process, it was concluded that ‘over the last few years, an impressive corpus of educational methods and tools has been developed by educators and researchers across different fields . . . promising an evidence-based responses to various dimensions of radicalisation’ (Nordbruch & Sieckelinck, 2018, p. 23). Yet teachers and school officials generally see room for improvement and often voice concern over a lack of resources and opportunities to implement these strategies in a sustainable and wide-reaching way (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016).

This central role given to education was consolidated when the High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R) identified education ‘as a cornerstone for effective prevention of radicalisation’ and framed the role of education as ‘strengthening resilience against radicalisation and recruitment’, pointing specifically to the importance of ‘fostering social inclusion, promoting common democratic values and managing controversial issues with open discussions in safe classrooms’ (European Commission, 2018, p. 12).

Unsurprisingly, this attention to the role of education also finds expression in national strategies, many of which similarly frame the role of education in terms of building resilience and promoting democratic values (Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020). The specific role of education is also shaped by differing conceptualisations of the exact nature of the problem, as captured by the differing emphasis in definitions of radicalisation evident in different national policies (Hardy, 2018).

It appears that the actual government sector/ministry (or combined sectors of government) that are involved in P/CVE depends on the concerns that country has within the area of P/CVE, as well as perceptions and realities of risk and threat there. For example, the UK Prevent policy, with its primary emphasis on the role of ideology in radicalisation (Hardy, 2018), focused in 2015 on the role of education in building resilience by ‘promoting fundamental British values and enabling these to challenge extremist views’ (Department of Education, 2015, p. 5). Given its different context, Germany’s PVE-E approach has evolved from a primary focus on right-wing extremism and places emphasis on promoting democracy among young people (Glaser & Soyler, 2021).

In the Netherlands, preventing radicalisation became a distinct and prominent element of the national policy agenda. In 2005, a government-wide approach to prevention was introduced, calling not only for government but also for society to be involved in ‘preserving and creating an open,

tolerant, and peaceful society’ (Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2021). As a result, local action plans were drafted in which educational/pedagogical organisations such as schools, family support centres, and youth work services were mentioned as critical partners in keeping local communities safe. In 2015, schools became legally obligated to institute social safety policies, including the prevention of radicalisation. This work in schools is supported by the ‘School and Safety’ organisation, which serves as a national platform and knowledge base. The role of educational professionals towards radicalisation is given shape largely in three related areas: first, as having a responsibility to be alert to and identify signs of radicalisation; second, as creating a safe environment for the discussion of difficult topics to diffuse their power; and third, as fostering citizenship and promoting democratic values (Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2021).

Preventive interventions are generally called for at the local level in areas deemed ‘at risk’. These interventions involve strengthening social infrastructure and local networks while applying the ‘personal approach’, which involves creating an alternative for young people at risk, such as a job, school, or sport (Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2021; van Heelsum & Vermeulen, 2017). In the Belgian city of Mechelen, for example, a policy programme called ‘Positive Identity and Society’ (PiM) became operational, in which social alienation is seen as the core problem underlying ideological radicalisation (Vergani et al., 2021; Van Leuven, 2023). In this programme, radicalisation is seen as a process of negative identity development, and this insight leads to practices that transcend the security domain. The programme looks for important key figures around youth and supports those people to help the young person find his or her place. They coach and empower social workers, schools, families, and other organisations, such as martial arts clubs, to prevent alienation. PiM coaches reinforce or build up the social safety net. In doing so, they support both the young people and the institutions. In this way, they aim to reverse the process of social alienation and focus on a positive identity in the young person. When asked if PiM effectively prevents extremism, a youth worker involved in the programme is ‘not sure whether we help prevent attacks, but we do help to transcend the dividing lines that terror creates’. By embedding a social-educational mindset in the municipal system and maintaining balanced contacts with the police and services, Mechelen works on an integral inclusive policy that helps tackle polarisation and radicalisation.

In sum, education has been positioned at all levels as one of the key means through which the government can shape actions in order to prevent extremism, positioned within a wider apparatus of prevention measures. The specificities of PVE-E policy are shaped by national and local differences in problem framing; however, broadly, education is positioned as a prime means for ‘building resilience’ and promoting and developing democratic attitudes and competencies. This framing of the role of education raises important questions about the instrumentalisation of education for prevention in a manner that can undermine broader educational goals (O’Donnell, 2016; Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020) and, as we will unpack further, may fail to realise the true potential of a pedagogical, developmental response to the issues underlying and surrounding extremism. First, however, it is instructive to turn attention to the range of practices that have arisen, some of which are direct outcomes of government action and others that have emerged from grassroots initiatives, albeit within the prevailing PVE-E milieu.

PVE-E in practice: mapping the heterogeneous field

As a result of the contradictory national and international dynamics of counter-radicalisation in the education sector, the range of practices is broad. Ragazzi and Walmsley (2021) divide practices into two categories: (1) projects aimed broadly at raising awareness around key societal issues such as nationalism, racism, and discrimination; and (2) projects aimed at dealing with individual cases that are

deemed to need special attention. The first category of awareness-raising projects is generally in line with the principles and philosophy of education for democratic citizenship (EDC) and human rights education (HRE), and the core values of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC).³ The authors conclude that: ‘such projects generally emanate from NGOs that are themselves at the core of the conversation on citizenship education. The second category of projects, which they refer to as “casework based”, poses a different set of ethical and political questions’.

If we zoom in from the policies to the practices on the ground, we find, not surprisingly, a myriad of educational practices reflecting different points of entry. Davies (2018) has given an overview of what educational institutions are doing in different countries in a sustained way to tackle violent extremism and whether there is any evidence of the impact of these activities. In her synopsis, identifying the entry points for a wide range of programmes or projects enables some analysis of the different directions taken and what is realistic and effective in conventional educational settings. Davies justifiably categorises four main approaches based on the *topic* of engagement: Islamism, extreme right, Islamophobia, dialogue. However, there are many more, very different angles from which to approach PVE-E. A great variety can be found in the central principles of different practices, including democracy (RAN ‘labs for democracy’), integral complexity (Cambridge University), peace building (many initiatives, mostly located in African contexts), inclusiveness and empowerment (UNESCO), informing pupils about (the history of) terrorism (Ter Info), and debunking conspiracies (Think, UK). Moreover, one cannot but take note of the vast scope of issues addressed: some programmes focus on strengthening personal identity; other programmes focus on equipping youth with life skills; some programmes invest in strengthening the local city identity; others in inculcating so-called national values. Some programmes teach human rights, while others aim to tackle online threats. It is an understatement to say that the term ‘counter-radicalisation’ covers several types of practices (Ragazzi & Walmsley, 2020).

Despite this wide diversity of practices, many essentially focus on protection or detection rather than alternative mobilisation or transformation. Young people are, for example, shielded from harmful content, warned against delusional ideologies, or cautioned about the illegality of spreading propaganda. These programmes are mainly found in disadvantaged areas and neighbourhoods where victimisation is a real issue. Other programmes take a largely cognitive angle, aimed at informing youth about, for example, the mechanisms of polarisation or recruitment. Or the importance of knowing facts from fiction about terrorist attacks. But also: what do pupils know about the constitutional-democratic systems of their countries? What should they know about the religion of the ‘other’? A subcategory is formed by programmes around more deliberative epistemological questions: how to build logical, reasonable arguments. Fewer programmes work on the affective or emotional dimension of radicalisation: how do certain ideas make students feel? (de Ruyter & Sieckelink, 2023; O’Donnell, 2016). What politics trigger social pain? (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). The same is true for more mobilising programmes, relating to youth’s ideals and agency, in which youth are empowered to turn their ideas into political or creative action.

Of high importance from a pedagogical point of view is the *role of the teacher*. In relation to radicalisation many educators fall back on a disciplining role: ‘You better not, . . . or you will feel the consequences’. Or a more subtle version reminiscent of Plato’s (prob. 369 BC) warning:

You are young, my son, and, as the years go by, time will change and even reverse many of your present opinions. Refrain therefore a while from setting yourself up as a judge of the highest matters.

The problem is that many discipliners lack the informal authority necessary to be seen as credible messengers (Samuel, 2020). Other educators present themselves more as allies; they offer a mental and/or physical refuge where young people can find temporary shelter against threats or hardships. And then there are educators who try to learn from the success of extremist movements and copy some of their strategies to be active recruiters for a more inclusive democratic way of living (Niconchuk et al., 2018). Next to these variables, one can discern different kinds of activities: one-on-one mentoring projects, group activities (recommended to educate young people about peer pressure and other group dynamics), and socio-cultural or artistic activities (Sieckelinck & Kaulingfreks, 2021). In addition to the many offline programmes, there has been an increase in online programmes in which all these different approaches are transferred into the online world of youth (Jayakumar, 2023).

Another typology can be made on the basis of time and age: apart from the incidental and rather absurd pre-school initiative against radicalisation (Belga, 2017), most programmes target pupils in secondary school and students in higher education. However, some call for more attention to be given to primary schools, not addressing extremism as such but, for example, the ability to deal with conflict (Macaluso, 2016). Because education is ‘paramount to shape values and behaviour and to favour identity formation’, Macaluso advises shifting the focus of such preventive policies from secondary to primary education. And indeed, there may be compelling reasons to pay attention at younger ages. Not because 12-year-olds might become terrorists overnight. But because in vulnerable situations, young people from this age already start consuming unchecked or fearmongering political and religious messages, hear the same conspiracy theories, and watch the same propaganda videos as their 16-year-old siblings (Howard et al., 2021). For many parents and educators, attending to how these messages impact youth’s ideas, emotions, and feelings of belonging is very demanding.

It is fair to say that this last decade has witnessed the emergence of educational practices framed in terms of their potential to prevent radicalisation. Some of these, such as teaching how to debunk conspiracies or engage in discussion on issues around terrorism, are explicitly and directly developed for this purpose. Others, such as education in democratic citizenship, can be seen as broader educational projects that are reframed in terms of their potential for preventing radicalisation. These face the same challenge as most PVE activities, with the extent to which they actually contribute to preventing extremism being notoriously hard to demonstrate (Gielen, 2020). Yet, as educational practices they have another test to live up to: the extent to which they are coherent with the broader educational goals being pursued. It is simply not enough to assess an educational practice on its ability to prevent extremism alone (Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020).

An educational/pedagogical perspective to (preventing) radicalisation

Theoretical debates on the (questionable) value of education in countering radicalisation have long drawn from empirically based theories on the process of radicalisation on the one hand (Borum et al., 2003; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005) and philosophical and sociological examinations on the other hand (Jackson et al., 2011). Only recently has a more pedagogical line of investigation been initiated towards a more comprehensive pedagogical or educational account of what extremism is and what schools and youth work might do to pre-empt and counter it. This educational account requires drawing not only on theories of radicalisation but also taking seriously broader educational theories. In this section, we make a modest attempt to advance a line of thinking in this regard by both drawing out the educational implications of radicalisation theories and drawing on pedagogical theory to identify features of a truly educational response to extremism.

From an educational perspective, the influential social psychological work on the role of the quest for significance among extremists raises important considerations. In ‘The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks’ Kruglanski et al. (2019) propose that radicalisation is enabled by the coming together of three factors (‘three Ns’): the need for significance – to matter and have respect, a narrative that identifies extreme violence as a means of achieving significance, and a social network that reinforces, validates, and rewards this narrative justification for the use of extreme violence. The educational significance of this theory of radicalisation is twofold: on the one hand, sites of education can contribute to the conditions in which young people experience a loss of significance, and on the other, we can view the role that education can play in *fulfilling* this quest for significance. A loss of significance, it is proposed, can be brought about by a sense of failure or an affront to one’s social identity. Schooling can easily become a site of failure; indeed, it is inherent in some modes of educational organisation, and schooling can certainly be a setting in which dominant narratives and values can lead to experiences of exclusion and marginalisation of various social identities (e.g. Keddie, 2014; Valenzuela, 2010). This is to say, flawed education may contribute to feelings of insignificance, frustration, and exclusion.

Yet education in assisting pupils to become at home in the world (Arendt, 1994), has the possibility of creating the conditions in which significance, narrative, and connection arise. Education *can* bestow meaning and respect when talents are nurtured, difference is held with regard, and space for the exploration of social identities is provided. Without going further at this point, what becomes clear is that an educational response to extremism cannot be reduced to developing skills to deconstruct narratives or becoming committed to ‘national values’. An educational response in its fullest sense involves tending to this legitimate need for significance and, at the very least, being attentive to those situations that can occasion a loss of significance.

Where social psychologist Kruglanski and his colleagues offer an intelligible theory of why people end up in extremist milieus, philosopher Quassim Cassam (2021) has made an effort to dissect the concept of extremism in a way that might be highly relevant for the debate on the role of education. He argues that we need to go beyond focusing on *what* and even *how* extremists may believe, and look rather at the ‘cast of mind’ that characterises extremism, which includes particular preoccupations, attitudes, thinking styles, and emotions. Cassam refers to this as the ‘extremist mindset’. This mindset involves a preoccupation with victimhood and purity. Extremists are extremely focused on the belief that they are victims of oppression or lack of recognition (primarily in society) and, at the same time (maybe in response to this felt victimisation or humiliation), believe they are superior with their striving for moral, ideological, or racial purity. Such preoccupations are unlikely to be unfamiliar to teachers and youth workers. Similarly, many teachers have come across moments where *attitudes* characteristic of this mindset are at work: unwillingness to compromise, rejection of pluralism, intolerance, and indifference to the consequences of their actions for ‘the others’. The third characteristic of the extremist mindset is an extremist *thinking style*, characterised by utopian thinking or conspiratorialism. This problematic thinking style is not limited to students and youth, but its increase certainly impacts their behaviour. Finally, extremists have typical *emotions*. Cassam primarily mentions negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and self-pity. He believes that these emotions must be interconnected with the extremists’ preoccupations because, in a different context, anger may also be justified and resentment may be an appropriate emotion to have against others.

Crucially, for an educational perspective on extremism, Cassam carefully disentangles extremism from radicalism. While extremism is always reprehensible, radicalism is not. A radical may seem to evince some of the characteristics of an extremist mindset, particularly the unwillingness to compromise. Although for an educator the unwillingness of a student to compromise may be

considered quite concerning, when we consider, for example, the emancipation of women, we are surely thankful that there was a refusal to compromise on the assertion that women must have equal rights to men. The key consideration here is that while education may play a role in averting the development of an extremist mindset, we likely don't want education to stamp out radicalism. Indeed, the whole thrust of an important pedagogical movement – critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire – is directed towards the development of some form of radicality.

Cassam's broadening of the psychology of extremism from what and how people believe to the notion of a mindset, along with this careful distinguishing of extremism from radicalism is potentially productive as inspiration for an educational response to extremism. The account of the extremist mindset is comprehensive and gives ample attention to the oft-neglected affective dimension of extremism (de Ruyter & Sieckelinck, 2023). Yet, a note of caution is in place: many educators, with good reason, are cautious of labelling, particularly if labelling implies some fixed reality unamenable to educational intervention. It would clearly be a mistake to quickly view students as having an extremist mindset. While there may be a small few who develop a full-blown extremist mindset (O'Donnell et al., 2021b) and require specific interventions, the broader educational significance of Cassam's theory lies in directing attention to attitudes, thinking styles, preoccupations, and emotions.

We can continue to lay the theoretical foundations of a distinctly educational perspective by broadening this examination of theories of extremism to consider pedagogical theories. The work of Paulo Freire has clear relevance for the important distinction Cassam makes between radicalism and extremism. The preface to his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), makes a pivotal distinction between the radical and the 'sectarian':

On one side, there is radicalisation. Radicalisation, nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative . . . [it] criticizes and thereby liberates. On the other side, there is sectarianism. Sectarianism, fed by fanaticism, is always castrating . . . [it] mythicizes and thereby alienates (p. 37). The pedagogy of the oppressed . . . is a task for radicals; it cannot be carried out by sectarians.

(p. 39)

What is significant here is that the educational journey is not one of acquiring passivity; rather, it locates educational significance in enabling young people to engage with the world and find their ability to make an impact on the world.

Further, from a critical pedagogical point of view, it is no use trying to convince students that their political or religious ideas are mistaken. By trying to deposit her own ideas, a teacher will be less successful than by engaging in dialogue (Nieto Ángel et al., 2020). From this perspective, awareness programmes should go hand in hand with exercises and activities that help students acquire voices and skills for action. This strategy is oriented towards active peacebuilding rather than pacifying conflicts. In Freire's terms, to build on a future in which my actions matter.

A fourth strand of theory that lends itself to developing an educational response to extremism can be found within a body of work around history education. In educating students around extremism, teachers are dealing with value-laden facts in a world without a clear epistemological centre. Most claims that build students' worldviews are rather true, or rather false. The approach to historical events in which different narratives or 'versions of the same truth' are recognised is called 'multiperspectivity' and has, with the advent of the information society (Castells, 2007), gained a more important place in history education (Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). This should not lead to a relativism in which all perspectives are considered of equal merit, but students should

also be able to assess different perspectives (Seixas, 2017; Stool et al., 2017). Grever (2012) argues that multiperspectivity is important because recognising different perspectives increases awareness that there are (have been) other people with different views and promotes self-reflection. It also helps identify and articulate different perspectives, deepens knowledge and insights, and provides insight into the complexity of reality.

In relation to the shift of a relatively static and hierarchic society into our current information society (Castells, 2007) and the difficulty of telling truth from falsehood in an increasingly complex society, the educational debate can benefit from the work on ‘multiperspectivity’. With former hierarchies of knowledge questioned or even overthrown, teachers will increase the quality of their courses by allowing for multiple stories and interpretations about the same events. In work by Wansink et al. (2018), teachers’ approaches to multiperspectivity in lessons on three topics varying in moral sensitivity (i.e. the Dutch Revolt, Slavery, and the Holocaust) were examined. Four categories of considerations for or against introducing specific subjects’ perspectives were found: functional, moral, pedagogical, and practical. However, teachers engaged in ‘normative balancing’, meaning that not all perspectives were perceived as equally valid or politically desirable, showing where multiperspectivity ends.

This rough overview of relevant theories for an educational response to extremism is far from comprehensive, but it is a modest attempt at drawing together these various threads. In the works of Kruglanski and Cassam, we find a clear broadening of the role of education relevant to extremism. It cannot be concerned with a narrow focus on disrupting engagement with extreme ideologies but must address the need for significance and the various preoccupations and emotions that extreme narratives can fuel and harness. In the works on critical pedagogy and multi-perspectivity, we find insights into the kinds of educational experiences that can foster a broader and more flexible mindset while also retaining the educational significance of the kind of radicalism in young people that refuses to be content with the perpetuation of injustice.

Resetting education against extremism

This final section will discuss how, in education, dealing with (the onset of) radicalisation requires a pedagogical point of view.

As Beelmann and Jonkman (2021) have argued:

[p]lacing the problem of radicalization and extremism in a development-oriented perspective broadens the perspective on the problem, its origin and its approach. A positive effect here is that an approach as part of a preventive youth policy is less stigmatizing. Moreover, for signals of radicalization and extremism as well as for underlying factors found, the outcome does not obviously funnel towards one specific problem, but rather keeps the broad development of young people in mind and relates it to social, relational and individual factors.

More than its focus on prevention suggests, this developmental perspective displaces ‘threat’ as the organising principle and instead puts ‘growth’ at the centre of its attention. Remember how Freire (1970) characterised education of the oppressor as ‘essentially an act that hinders the intellectual growth of students by turning them into, figuratively speaking, comatose “receptors” and “collectors” of information that have no real connection to their lives’. In this view, Freire claims that by assuming the roles of teachers as depositors and students as receptors, humans are made into objects (Micheletti, 2010). Humans as objects have no options for development or growth. When we don’t regard humans as objects, then, developmentally, we can view the potential radicality

of youth as an expression of the human urge to act upon the world. Pedagogically, then, we don't approach this urge with fear or anger but with a desire to explore, understand, and, if possible, give shape to it. This would be grounded in the view that being young is not merely a transitional period of life to be 'gotten through', but that the youth are an important segment of society with a distinct role to play in social change (Wyn & Woodman, 2006). This radicality in a youth might be part of his or her coming of age and can reasonably be expected to alter or disappear with (young) adulthood. As Kruglanski states in Greenbaum (2018):

The need for significance has to be satisfied in socially constructive ways. So, first of all, it would behoove governments not to create loss of significance by promoting prejudice and inequality against certain groups. The second recommendation is to emphasize narratives that are generally accepted, compelling and delivered by charismatic communicators who promote these constructive ways of gaining significance. . . . And finally, governments should create movements in which people will be accepted, revered and respected for counterviolence activities.

The common security angle of preventing risk in education runs counter to what education is basically about (Biesta, 2014). The educational question is also an existential question. Getting into an open conversation about one's ideas and feelings is precisely what education is about. The occurrence of radicalisation from a pedagogical point of view is an educational opportunity to teach about diversity, democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. According to Davies, CVE/PVE is more successful 'when a programme is non-prescriptive, not moralising, but leads to independent thinking and reflection on ethical dilemmas and concerns; when learners are listened to' (Davies, 2019). Young people may demonstrate an understandable preoccupation with victimhood (Cassam, 2021). Rather than dismissing these concerns, the more pupils' realities (of victimisation) are acknowledged (not necessarily solved!), the less they will be grabbed by fantasies of persecution. For example, talking to young people about the threat of terrorism will have little impact unless their own feelings or lack of protection in their lives are addressed. Especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, families have a higher chance of being terrorised by tax agencies or fearing expulsion. Hence, effective educational PVE programmes do not only warn against false claims and delusional ideologies. They also address the underlying grievances of students (who may have good reasons to not trust the authorities' interference with what they think).

Davies (2018) formulates another compelling advice:

CVE/PVE work has in fact to be wary of the notion of an 'intervention', with the implication of a one-off attempt at interrupting a negative pathway towards radicalisation and should be more about building a permanent culture in schools where resilience to extremism is just one aspect of a fuller learning of rights, history, religious and ethnic conflict, and community dynamics.
(p. 49)

In other words, prevention of extremism, rather than incidental interventions or specific programmes (although they can be helpful), requires sustained attention to the quality of the ethos of the school. As an alternative to the narrow security approach, schools may become places where *all* students can: discover a sense of purpose; share and explore their ideals and their identities without fear of ridicule; come to realise that the school cannot accept everything that they may value; and through this, learn to take into account the wide array of interests and values held by other students and in society at large (de Ruyter & Sieckelinck, 2013).

Having said this, it is important to understand that education is not just about schools. This is especially important as schools report widely that they already have ‘too much on their plate’ to prioritise PVE-E. This burden was only exacerbated by the COVID crisis. Whenever schools feel strained or pressured by requests to help counter extremism, many well-intended programmes to support them in this task will remain ineffective. To compensate for this overburdening of the school programme, it is important to take a broader view of education. To shift focus away from formal education to other domains. In most societies, educational activities are not limited to schools. Apart from formal schooling, one can think of organising informal educational support in the neighbourhood. And, mostly underexamined, many European countries have a non-formal educational work force that specialises in organised youth work/in service learning/running social movements with a training structure (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, & Culture, 2017). Youth workers who understand the lives of children and youth ‘from the inside’ can act as benign recruiters for a better future. They are the living proof that the best (primary) prevention against violent radicalisation is often not labelled as such: ‘while the term “prevent” is understandable’, Davies’ review confirms that ‘PVE has to focus less on what students should not become and more on what they actively become’.

Future research on the role of education against extremism takes the critique on securitisation seriously and builds on the proposed ‘re-pedagogization’ of radicalisation studies: if the study of (the prevention of) radicalisation is organised through a pedagogical lens, in formal and non-formal educational settings, teachers, school staff, youth workers, and citizens will contribute more to the developing knowledge base, feel more respected in their big challenges, and acquire more skills to make a real difference in the lives of their pupils and youth. It also brings to the fore the need to address in more depth support for the educator: a pedagogical response cannot be taught through the demonstration of techniques or the provision of materials alone. It calls us to ask, what forms of professional development render educators feeling equipped to make sound pedagogical choices when seeking to address issues relevant to extremism in their practice?

And lest we forget, radicality is commonly linked to fear and anger, but it may also announce hope. Crises of the environment, of public health, of democratic culture, and of humanity as a whole spread across the globe and require some radical responses that will no longer sustain the current political and financial status quo. Activism and idealism are both characterised by extreme preoccupations. So, although we share Cassam’s concern about the extremist mindset’s black-and-white worldview (lack of compromise), teachers should also leave some space for the possibility of radical change as an outcome of a learning process. Initiatives such as School strike for the climate or Black Lives Matter were only possible through a non-compromising stance. Teachers can trust that skilfully carving out space for this dialogue will undermine the growth of an extremist mindset. Seen in this light, PVE-E actions are no goal in themselves but one of the many means to help students learn and fulfil their human potential.

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