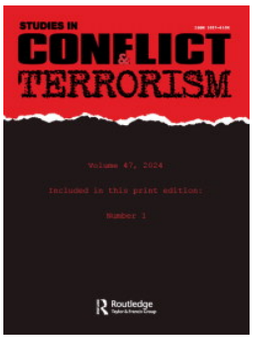

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RESEARCH NOTE

Discussing Terrorism in the Classroom – Adopting an Empathizing and Historical Perspective: A Research Note

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the pre-existing state of knowledge, attitudes and sentiments that pupils have and display in relation to terrorism and violent extremism. Based on our experiences with our historical-pedagogical TerInfo project, we propose a new approach for dealing with these topics in the classroom: the adoption of an historicizing approach in teaching about terrorism in class. This approach relies on the creation of a historical framework that serves as a tool to both deal with emotions of shock and panic, and to help teachers and pupils find an objectified ground to discuss terrorism on a knowledge-informed base.

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The attacks in Nice and Vienna, and especially the murder of Samuel Paty, a middle-school teacher of history, geography and civics in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine on 16 October 2020, sent shockwaves through Europe and beyond. The fact that a teacher was beheaded for having discussed and showing cartoons of the Islamic prophet Muhammad was perceived as an attack on the core values of the Western world: freedom of speech and freedom of education – according to the French anti-terrorist prosecutor, Paty was "assassinated for teaching."[1] This makes terrorism a topic inevitable to avoid in the classroom, and even more important: it also compels schools, teachers, researchers, and counterterrorist experts alike to reconsider the nexus between radicalization, terrorism, and education. Schools are no longer safe spaces. Teachers therefore need to be informed and supported in responding to a climate where violent sentiments, anxiety, and fear captivate pupils as much as it polarizes society at large. Amongst scholars in the field of pedagogy, it is well known that teachers struggle with teaching controversial topics in class; and that terrorism is an exceptionally sensitive issue, likely to cause anxiety amongst pupils.[2] That is why a bridge between pedagogical insights on teaching controversial issues and understanding amongst terrorism experts on how to translate their ideas and findings into the classroom should be built. With this paper, we take a first step in creating such a synthesis between (historical) terrorism and (de)radicalization research on the one hand, and pedagogy on the other.

This nexus is of particular importance, since the terrorist threat countries in the West are facing is likely to be homegrown, stemming from self-radicalised, small,

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fractured groups, and from individuals that are acting bottom up – sometimes starting at a very young age, contaminating the school space as well.[3] From 2002 on, scholars and policymakers have paid special attention to the individual's trajectory before turning violent: the process of radicalisation.[4] This has invoked a so-called "broad approach" in different countries, in which combatting terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism shifted from solely a security perspective into becoming a wider societal responsibility, leading to all sorts of road ranged preventative, repressive, and reintegrative programs.

"Prevention" became part and parcel of almost every European counterterrorism strategy, cooperation with schools, sport clubs, and social work included. Over the last years, schools and teachers around the globe have worked with various educational programs, focusing on building resilience (e.g. Bounce, ACT Building Resilience Project, Building Resilience Against Terrorism), combatting prejudices (e.g. Shattering Stereotypes), evoking citizenship (e.g. Generation Global) or paving the way for moral disengagement (e.g. Beyond Bali).

Terrorism causes anger, fear, confusion, and vulnerability, not just with people confronted with attacks in their vicinity, but also for those watching the media.[5] Talking to children about terrorism is a necessity because feelings of fear can stay with them for decades. Research has demonstrated that children who grew up during the Cold War had long-lasting fears that they would experience a nuclear attack in their lives.[6] However, teachers and school staff often do not feel prepared to address the topic of terrorism and violent extremism in the classroom and tend to struggle with a lack of knowledge on the topic.[7] Educational programs that address terrorism and political violence have often been criticized for their shortcomings and unwanted side-effects.[8] This is hardly surprising, since many of these educational responses have been developed and tailored while very little has been known of what children and youngsters think, believe and feel when it comes to terrorism and violent extremism.

With the murder of Paty and the tensions surrounding freedom of speech at school, it is all the more important, to know how to create a context where information regarding terrorism and radicalization can be taught in a solid, democratically legitimate, and informative manner. To be able to do so, this article first of all examines the pre-existing state of knowledge, attitudes, and sentiments that pupils have and display in relation to terrorism and violent extremism. On pupils' reactions after "9/11" in the US, and after the Breivik attacks of 2011 in Norway, some research has been published. But there is still a great gap to cover on the general amount of knowledge amongst teachers and students pertaining to terrorism – here, we rely on research done amongst Dutch middle-school pupils (see below). These findings are considered transferable to other school situations in the open democratic countries of the West, where attacks do happen, but not in a protracted and persistent form as to render society in a permanent state of emergency (such as Israel, where much more research on trauma and controversy amongst pupils has been carried out, for example).[9]

Secondly, based on our experiences with our historical-pedagogical TerInfo project, we outline a new approach for dealing with these topics in the classroom: the adoption of an historicizing approach in teaching about terrorism in class. This approach relies on the creation of a historical framework that serves as a tool to both deal with emotions of shock and panic, and to help teachers and pupils find an objectified

ground to discuss terrorism on a knowledge-informed base. With this framework, an urgent moment of shock (attacks, other types of terrorist incidents, news on terrorist atrocities) is embedded into a narrative approach of historicizing terrorism. By adopting such a historical perspective, it is possible to give factual-informed, and knowledge-based sense and context to an incident beyond the personal experience. In this way, moreover, a sense of the self is enhanced, by connecting one's own experiences of loss and shock to other episodes in history, to other people who suffered and coped, and to facilitate the creation of a broader narrative of terrorism, as something that "comes and goes, and where we ourselves have a say in determining how we react to that."[10]

Larger Ongoing Educational Project

This research was carried out in the context of a larger ongoing educational project, carried out by the Department of History and Art History, with the help of scholars and experts from pedagogical studies, information science, and social studies. TerInfo is an online and mobile learning platform ran by scholars and students (peer-to-peer approach) that helps teachers in primary schools, secondary schools and intermediate vocational education to discuss terrorism and violent extremism in the classroom on a knowledge-based and factual-informed way.[11] We support teachers at around 110 (110 schools in 2019, in 2023 we work with over 320 schools) primary-, secondary schools and vocational educational institutions in the Netherlands by offering them multimedia material, factual knowledge, historical context, and pedagogical tools for students from 7 years old onwards. These materials can be used by the teachers themselves, or can be presented by us in a "train the trainers" setting; teachers can also share their accounts to our mobile platform with pupils from age 15 onwards. We provide tailored workshops at schools when asked, e.g. when in March 2019 a terrorist attack occurred on a tram in Utrecht and school children were obligated to stay inside school buildings during the hunt for the shooter, and shock and terror rippled through the city. Although it is not our primary aim (our primary aim is the dissemination of knowledge and pedagogical tools to teachers), we have seen as a side effect that TerInfo also contributes to increasing the resilience of children and youngsters vis-a-vis polarization, radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism.

TerInfo moreover explores the impact of historical education on attitudes, knowledge, and emotions towards terrorism and violent extremism. It was established after one of the authors of this paper, Beatrice de Graaf, professor of International Relations, received numerous requests from schools to give presentations and classes on the history of terrorism after incidents of terrorist attacks (from 2015 onwards) confronted schools, pupils, and teachers with a sense of confusion and a thirst for knowledge on this controversial topic. Within this context, the aim of TerInfo is two-folded: (1) it explores what children and youngsters think, know, and feel about terrorism, and (2) it develops and conveys an historical framework that helps pupils and teachers alike to put recent events into perspective.

What makes TerInfo unique, is that it aims at equipping children and teenagers with factual knowledge and an historical framework, offering more insight on terrorism and political violence as a phenomenon. For example, studying the four waves of

modern terrorism; one of the main tenets of our historicizing approach) in the classroom, gives school students a notion how terrorism has been a longer-existing phenomenon, how its perpetrators do not always have a religious background and how terrorism comes and goes in waves.[12] This historicizing approach also offers the option to explore the impact of terrorism on society, and to have a closer look at terrorist statistics, such as the number of attacks, the general brevity of terrorist organisations' life spans, or the very tiny change for children in the West to experience an attack themselves. It also helps us to address media exposure then and now, and discuss media literacy with and amongst the students. By discussing similar attacks or threats in the past, TerInfo draws away from current times and emotions (and the moral panics), after which the connection to the present can be made. A similar knowledge-based intervention has been applied in the past to university students as a course on international relations and terrorism, which caused a shift in attitudes towards terrorists.[13]

Our approach also offers the opportunity to work with testimonies (from people who have witnessed an attack) to create awareness on different perspectives and narratives. Through describing, explaining, and evaluating the threat of terrorism by using historical narratives, an interpretive and powerful framework is constructed for understanding one's own experiences, narrated from different perspectives and other people's experiences. Stories of the past provide powerful models, frameworks, and perspectives for understanding one's own experiences. These techniques have been used to help students with understanding identities and lives (and shaping of the intergenerational self).[14] We believe they are also beneficial and even pivotal for dealing with sensitive topics in the classroom. By using this approach, teachers can operate on the intersection of past and present narratives, constructing meaning from experiences, which is critical for identity development.[15] It also contributes to a more nuanced perspective when it comes to feelings of unsafety, insecurity, and moments of shock.

We often are confronted with questions such as whether it is really necessary to discuss these controversial topics in class at all. We have a firm and square answer to those questions: yes, it is. From the age of seven onwards, through various educational programs ("Nieuwsbrief" in the Netherlands, for example) students are exploring what news is and how geopolitics are intervening their lives. These topics are being discussed at home, with siblings, in the street, in the school yard or via social media. At the same time, difficult topics are not being discussed when teachers hold on to their official curricula. What children and youngsters consume is not always visible for teachers or parents. Children as young as nine already brought smart phones into the classroom and were showing each other footage on terrorism in the school yard, or in the neighbourhood. For example, in one of our workshops, several 11-year-old pupils reported to have watched or downloaded the video of the Christchurch attack on their smartphones. We therefore believe that the classroom is exactly the right and timely place where a sustainable response should be offered.[16]

During the March 18 attacks and ensuing lockdown in Utrecht, teachers had to deal with children who were receiving text messages from worrying parents all day.[17] In other words, even if we do not like it or would rather protect our children and

pupils from such upsetting news, neither parents nor teachers can be gatekeepers and completely control the influx of social media messages. It is therefore of paramount importance to turn the tables, and use the classroom to bring urban myths, suppressed panic, and confusion into the light, and facilitate an empathetic, knowledge-informed discussion of the issue in class.

Research & Method

Our initial goal was to carry out both a zero measurement and an effect measurement. However, with the schools on lockdown due to COVID-19, we had to turn our research around. The analysis is therefore based on data drawn from three sources. First, we used a survey to carry out an inventory on the emotions, attitudes, and knowledge of children and youngsters when it comes to terrorism and violent extremism. Secondly, we conducted interviews with 13 respondents to get more additional insight on how their views have been shaped and how they evaluate an historicizing approach within the classroom. And thirdly, we based our findings on our large collection of observation notes we collected during lessons and workshops we provided within schools since we started in 2018.

Survey

Since COVID-19 and homeschooling prevented us from doing a survey series on our project in the classroom, we decided to first make an inventory of what youngers think, know, and feel about the topic by using an online survey that was being sent out to secondary schools and adult educational schools we have worked with in the past. Our online survey got a total of 305 responses. Out of the 305 responses, 68 responses were incomplete and these responses were therefore excluded from the final sample. Because some of our respondents got their education at a school for adult education, there were 5 cases with an age of 30 or above. These have been excluded from the sample as well. Therefore, the sample in this study is 232 (N = 232). The average age was 17,01 years old, ages ranged from 11 to 25 years old. 47,4 percent of respondents defined as male (N = 110), 52,2 percent defined as female (N = 121), and one respondent defined itself as "different." From the respondents, 24,1 percent defined themselves as "religious" (N = 56), mostly as "Christian" (N = 31) or "Muslim" (N = 21). 8,2 percent of the respondents stated to have a double ethnicity (n = 19) and their educational level ranged from preparatory secondary vocational education (vmbo) to pre-university education (vwo). In a city where 10 percent of the population reports a Muslim background, and 39 percent reports a religious affiliation, this feedback from the pupils does match the overall city population, with only a notable digression from the percentage of pupils reporting a religious background (24) compared to the city population at large (39). This may have to do with the fact that our survey comprised quite a larger number of public schools, whereas the number of religious schools participating in our survey was smaller than their overall distribution in society.[18]

Data

The survey had multiple choice questions where respondents could select more than one answer, for example when it comes to how they encounter and retrieve information on terrorism (via traditional media and news websites, social media, parents and relatives, friends, teachers, fellow class-students, etc.). For the larger part of the survey, we used the Likert Scale (strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4), strongly agree(5)) to indicate how much respondents agree or disagree with a particular statement, such as "I know a lot about terrorism," or: "In the future, I think more attacks will occur in the Netherlands."

After having indicated frequencies and the mean score, we conducted a One Sample *t* Test to determine whether the sample mean was statistically different. Since this is an exploratory study, there is no hypothesized value from previous research. Therefore, we used the score of 3 as a hypothesized value/benchmark because this represents a neutral answer (undecided).

Gathering and Valuing Information on Terrorism

In the first section of our survey, it was our aim to find out where respondents encountered and retrieved (deliberately or accidentally) information on terrorism and terrorist attacks. Traditional media outlets (91,4 percent, n = 212) and parents and other family members (53,9 percent, n = 114) proved to be the most popular sources of information, followed by social media (49,1 percent, n = 114). When asked with whom they talk about terrorism, pupils mainly pointed to friends and peers (69,4 percent, n = 161), followed by parents and other relatives (68,1 percent, n = 158) and teachers (32,3 percent, n = 75).

Although 40,9 percent (n = 97) claimed to talk about terrorism inside the classroom and 15,1 percent (n = 35) used to discuss these topics at school outside the classrooms, respondents overall indicated that they do not receive a lot of education on the topic of terrorism (M = 2.81). Moreover, respondents overall indicated that they did not find information trustworthy when received from friends (M = 2.86) or via social media (M = 2.34). This did not apply for traditional media outlets and their news websites, those were overall being regarded as trustworthy (M = 3.69).

Emotions

When asked about their emotions, overall respondents indicated that they were not afraid of experiencing a terrorist attack (M = 2.27) or that family or friends would experience a terrorist attack (M = 2.73). However, 18,1 percent either chose "agree" (N = 42) or "fully agree" (N = 5) on the statement: "I am afraid I will become a victim of a terrorist attack." When they had to respond to the statement: "I am afraid my family or friends will become a victim of a terrorist attack," 38,7 percent chose "agree" (N = 73) or "fully agree" (N = 17). Although the overall scores do not indicate any fear, still a considerable part of the respondents did worry about attacks. Also, respondents overall did believe there would be an increasing number of terrorist attacks in the Netherlands in the future (M = 3.20).

Attitudes

Overall respondents believe that terrorism causes more and more deaths (M = 3.43) and most terrorists attacks are being carried out in the name of religion (M = 3.69). At the same time, respondents are aware that terrorism is not mainly perpetrated against Western countries (M = 2.52), and strongly believe that the use of violence that terrorists employ is never a justified mean in order to achieve their goals (M = 1.75). They also believe that terrorists are mentally ill (M = 3.57).

Interviews

In addition to the quantitative survey, we also conducted qualitative interviews to get a more in depth understanding on pupils' attitudes, knowledge, and emotions regarding to terrorism, and on the way they narrated their feelings and ideas in conversation. At the end of our questionnaire, we asked respondents to share their contact details if they would also like to be interviewed. Seven of them responded positive. From our own network, we were also able to interview six class students from a high school that just finished a school project on terrorism. They represent a diverse collection of individuals, in terms of age, educational level and the amount of education they enjoyed on the topic of terrorism: a project provided by their school that had an historicizing approach (n = 6), one or two workshops from TerInfo (n = 5) or none (n = 2). In this respect, this part of our research, the qualitative interviews, is purely explorative, since as a control group, it is plainly to small. Yet, the interviews do open interesting and important leads for further investigations and interventions (Table 1).

The interview was semi-structured and consisted of three different sections: (1) what do you know about terrorism, (2) attitudes and emotions towards terrorism, (3) what are your sources of information and which sources do you trust the most? Interviewees were asked open questions and were not exposed to images of terrorist attacks or violence. They could draw back from the interview at any time. All interviews were conducted by a minimum of two interviewers and recorded (audio only). In order to respect their privacy, names have been removed and identifiable characteristics have been coded in the transcript.

Knowledge

When it came to knowledge on the topic of terrorism and political violence, all interviewees were able to name examples of individual terrorists and terrorist organisations in the broadest sense (see Table 2). From the table it follows, that at the time of our interviews, the Islamic State was still very high on their minds, even when the most gruesome atrocities were already 2 or 3 years back in time (which is a long time for young people). Attacks with a specific historical significance[19] for the interviewees were mentioned more frequent (Utrecht, Christchurch, Berlin), including attacks that have not reached mainstream media and public discourse, but feature in the collective memory of students through their ethnic or religious background (the reference to attacks in the MENA-region, for example). Yet, attacks and terrorist groups from a more distant past were also brought up by some pupils, indicating that some of them are aware that terrorism as a long pedigree (Ku Klux Klan, ETA, FNLA).

Table 1. Interviewee background information.

	Age at time of interview	Male / Female	Educational level at time of interview	Had education on terrorism
Interviewee A	17	Male	Senior general secondary education (havo)	Yes, school project
Interviewee B	15	Male	Pre-university education (vwo)	Yes, school project
Interviewee C	15	Female	Pre-university education (vwo)	Yes, school project
Interviewee D	16	Female	Pre-university education (vwo)	Yes, school project
Interviewee E	16	Male	Senior general secondary education (havo)	Yes, school project
Interviewee F	16	Female	Senior general secondary education (havo)	Yes, school project
Interviewee G	22	Male	Secondary vocational education (mbo)	Yes, two workshops from TerInfo
Interviewee H	18	Male	Secondary vocational education (mbo)	Yes, two workshops from TerInfo
Interviewee I	17	Male	Secondary vocational education (mbo)	Yes, one workshop from TerInfo
Interviewee J	18	Male	Secondary vocational education (mbo)	Yes, one workshop from TerInfo
Interviewee K	16	Male	Secondary vocational education (mbo)	Yes, one workshop from TerInfo
Interviewee L	20	Male	Pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo), adult education	No
Interviewee M	21	Male	Pre-university education (vwo), adult education	No

Table 2. Examples of attacks, terrorists and waves of terrorism, given by interviewees when asked for examples of "terrorism."

Attacks	Terrorists / terrorist groups	Waves of terrorism
9/11 attack (7x)	Islamic State (12x)	Anarchist terrorism (2x)
Utrecht attack (7x)	Anders Breivik (6x)	Anti-colonial terrorism (2x)
Christchurch attack (7x)	Al Qaeda (4x)	Right-wing extremist terrorism (1x)
Manchester attack (4x)	Osama Bin Laden (3x)	Left-wing terrorism (1x)
Charlie Hebdo attack (4x)	Taliban (2x)	Religious terrorism (1x)
Berlin attack (4x)	Soleimani (2x)	
Brussel attack (3x)	Boko Haram (2x)	
Paris 2015 attack (3x)	Ku Klux Klan (2x)	
Nice attack (2x)	Hezbollah (1x)	
Attacks on Israel (1x)	FNLA (1x)	
Enschede Attack (1x)	FARC (1x)	
Halle Attack (1x)		
Attacks in MENA region(1x)		
Madrid Attack (1x)		
Bomb letters Amsterdam (1x)		
Attack Amsterdam (1x)		
Attacks in Somalia (1x)		
Apeldoorn Attack (1x)		
El Paso Attack (1x)		

Addressing the definition, all interviewees had some understanding that terrorism is related to ideology and/or politically driven. But when discussing this, interviewees who had enjoyed a level of education on the topic, displayed a better understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Interviewee L (20, Male), who did not have any education on the topic, stated what came to his mind when he was thinking of terrorism:

"I notice that the first thing on my mind – yes, then I think about Muslims or something. Or… You know, what you see on the news over the past years. But when you asked the question, the first thing on my mind was Anders Breivik. So yes, when it comes to that, yes, there are different forms of terrorism. But what it entails, I believe, is just an individual or a small group of people that are trying to do as much harm as they can to make a point." When Interviewee C (15, Female) was asked the same question, she told the interviewers that she thought "about different waves, religious and right-wing terrorism, right-wing extremism and the different forms and different groups." And when she talked about the different waves of terrorism: "How it begins and how a wave kind of goes down. I thought that was really interesting. (…) Because it is such a big issue and it is kind of special how it goes down – how it, sort of, stops…"

Interviewees that had historicizing education on terrorism said it changed their own perspective, and the perspective of other class students. Interviewee D (16, Female): "I think it also had a lot of influence on other class students, because you could really see the process where you start with the lessons and the debate we finally held. When debating, you really see so much information being used you didn't have initially. So yes, I think it has had a lot of influence on other class students. Like me, they now really understand what is going on."

Attitudes

When it comes to attitudes towards terrorism as reported by pupils, we found that these were still quite unarticulated or one-dimensional. Interviewees overall did condemn terrorism, although some stated that they could understand some professed terrorist goals up to a certain point. As interviewee E (16, Male) explains: "The purpose of anticolonial terrorism, I understand it." He also states that he sees how violence can be an effective tool to achieve one's goal. "But I don't understand it [violence], I don't agree with it. I think you can use social media or something to persuade people and to attract followers, or something. If your opinion is really sound and fair, you will get a lot of followers. But the tools of terrorism won't get you any support, since people agree with you and give you support out of fear, they do that because they are scared of you."

Interviewee L (20, Male) states that he thinks the process of making sense of terrorism and give meaning to an attack is a tedious one. "I feel like my definition of terrorism is changing while we are having this interview. Guess I am still searching for what it [terrorism] really means and so." He admits in the interview that he would like to get to know more on the topic. "If I don't think about it, I'll just take over other people's opinions. When I don't think about it, you know. But if I do think about it, I realise it isn't as simple as that [opinion], it's more nuanced."

Learning more on terrorism also impacted the attitude of interviewee A (17, Male), because he now understood how his own prejudices colored his understanding of terrorism and political violence. During the lessons on terrorism, he and fellow class students talked a lot about xenophobia and how this was strengthened by their images

of the Islamic State. "We cherish certain images on what sort of people they are [who have joined IS] - images imbued in us via the media. But it is different when you hear it from people who have been there. For example, how IS also arranged drinking water (…) They also did good things, although it was in their own interest. (…) I still find it weird to say it like that. But it wasn't just brutal acts. They [IS] also functioned as an organization [that attracts followers] (…) Terrorists are often portraited as completely crazy, but there is of course always a story why they act in a certain way."

Emotions

When talking about how terrorism influences their lives, interviewees respond differently. Some (n = 2) say they hardly think about it, others (n = 6) claim that they think about it when an attack has just occurred. Five interviewees state that it has impacted their lives. Interviewee H (18, Male): "If (attacks) happen far away, and of course I see videos of it, I see stuff that makes me think: why? Or: what is this? Or: this is not good. But when, for example, it really happened in Utrecht or in the Netherlands, then I think: will there be more? It does keep me awake then, for sure."

Three months after the Paris attack (November 2015), Interviewee F (16, Female) went with her parents to the French capital. During the trip, she had a constant fear something would happen. "I was constantly thinking about it (…). Of course, it is a very scary thing that you are waiting at a metro station and suddenly a bomb could explode, and you would have to run for your life and you would see people dying." She also states that the current decline in terrorist attacks makes her restless. "Then I just get afraid for what is coming next."

Interviewee K (16, Male) says that he doesn't want to think about terrorism, but that the societal response is forcing him to be informed and have a response ready. "There's probably going to be another terrorist attack, for example (from) Islamic State, or something. And I am a Muslim myself. And then (everyone) is going to say: 'It's them again, look!' And I am just fed up." When he was still in high school, he was often confronted by his peers. "Well, they make jokes (…) Such as: 'One day, you are going to do this too (carry out an attack), right?'" This example demonstrates how terrorist attacks, even far away, have an impact on dynamics within schools and classrooms.

Use of (Online) Media

When using media, all interviewees admit that what they see and consume depends on what their smartphone offers them. They all rely on the newsfeed that smartphones are offering them. Most of them (n = 11) claim they are still actively looking for additional information when a terrorist attack has occurred, either on traditional media (n = 9) and/or social media (n = 9). When it comes to traditional media, they prefer news websites (NOS, RTL) over newspapers and news broadcasting. When asked if they trust traditional media, the larger part (n = 10) of the interviewees state they either always, or most of the time trust the traditional media.

If they wish to learn more about a terrorist attack, they rely on Google. Interviewee J (18, Male): "I just search for the topic I want to learn more about on Google (…).

And then I get a lot of websites discussing it (the topic). And then I just look at a bunch of them and compare them. And from there on, I decide what I think is true, sort of." Others trust on their timeline on social media, like interviewee A (17, Male): "It's just more applicable. Because we don't use newspapers anymore. So, it is going to be internet or social media that makes me receive the news of the day, just like that. And at least I know the basics, I'm hardly ever actively looking for news." The same goes for interviewee E (16, Male) who claims information on terrorism and violent extremism is "kind of thrown at you. But I do watch it all. I read it." He claims he is especially interested in new upcoming far-right extremism. "That is what is most prevalent in (online) groups which I am part of." He is aware that the algorithms of tech companies are showing him only a part of the scope. "I would say that I kind of ended up in some sort of bubble, after which I moved to a smaller part of the bubble. I feel like it is getting harder to hear other voices."

Discussing with Friends and Family

A large part of the interviewees talks about terrorism with friends (n = 9) or their parents (n = 8). Interviewee C (14, Female) states that she is more open with close friends and family about her emotions, than she is at school. "You probably won't say out loud in the classroom: 'I'm terrified'. That is something you rather share with family or good friends." But, when terrorism and extremist violence is addressed in the classroom, she describes the situation as an explosion of opinions. "When the teacher starts talking about it, it erupts. Then everyone shares something they have seen on the news or (their own) opinions."

She also states that at home, she has to bring the topic up herself. "As soon as I share it and get it off my chest, it becomes less. Then it's less prevalent for me, sort of. Some kind of redemption, so to speak, by just sharing it with someone else. If you are talking about IS at school all day and at home they are talking about new apples that have been bought… (…). But to be frank, this [terrorism] is not something my parents are really bothered about."

Interviewee D (16, Female) tells us that she talks about terrorism with her school friends during lunch breaks. "About the bombings itself. So, for example, if an attack would happen in Amsterdam right now, we would talk about it. Like: so many casualties, this is intense, and this has happened."

After the Christchurch attack, Interviewee I (17, Male) looked for the video after his friends were talking about it on social media. "I've seen a part of it. (…) Halfway, I shut it off… (laughs). I thought something like: I don't need to see this. It was really… It hurts to see it. It's awful." When an attack has happened, images of it are being spread rapidly. Interviewee J (18, Male): "As soon as something happens in England, you'll get (a message) on your phone (from your friends): 'O (look), someone is being stabbed with a knife.'"

Importance of a Historical Narrative Approach

When interviewees that enjoyed some level of education on the topic of terrorism and political violence (n = 11) were asked on how they evaluated the historicizing approach,

they responded very positive. Interviewee B (15, Male) stated that more people should become educated on the history of terrorism in this way: "Most people probably don't know that there have been waves of terrorism. Or that terrorism has happened in the past. I think that because of this [education], I have a better understanding and am able to put things in perspective." Interviewee D (16, Female): "I think it has had a lot of influence on how I think about terrorism. (…). Now I understand why they do it. Of course, it's not good how they [terrorists] handle things, but I understand why." Interviewee K (16, Male) told us he thought the lessons were interesting, but thinks they are more relevant in a time period when attacks are more prevalent. And interviewee E (16, Male) appreciated the different perspectives: "What I thought was good, was that it wasn't selective per se. Because often I expect from our school to specifically discuss a more left-wing approach, but that wasn't the case with this topic (…). The good thing was that you had to look at the topic from all sides. I liked that the information wasn't selective, but just complete."

Observation

From our first workshops in 2018 on, we have a large collection of notes we made through observation when we were giving workshops and lessons. Although these notes are anecdotal, they are representative enough (spanning over two years, and containing more than 30 reports on workshops and classes) and do represent the challenges we encounter when providing workshops.[20]

For example, we worked with one school from a town where teachers were considerably concerned over one of their pupils who had had put a video on Instagram showing weapons and tagging the name of the town. When we visited the school (June 2019), school students shared their experiences with us. "I didn't feel safe because of how the teachers responded. They were indifferent. It was very unclear: some teachers said we had to go home, others said nothing." The same response also happened after the Utrecht attack (March 2019). During one of the workshops we gave (June 2019), students of the same school, some 15 km away from Utrecht, told us that most teachers did not talk about the attack and the ongoing manhunt. As one student mentioned: "They said that it was in Utrecht, so that it wasn't relevant for us. But my parents are both working in Utrecht and I wasn't allowed to check my phone to see if they had sent me a message that they were okay. Or to check the news if they had already caught the shooter. Our teacher was constantly reading news websites via the computer, but he expected us to do our assignments and be silent."

After working with more than 110 (110 schools in 2019, in 2023 we work with over 320 schools) schools, our general conclusion is that especially children and youngsters with a migrant background have more knowledge on (religious) terrorism than white children have. Moreover, we reported a wide variety on the level of knowledge and historical awareness amongst pupils. Most high school students know about "9/11" and about what happened that day. But many of them have never heard about traditional terrorist organisations such as the RAF, IRA and ETA from previous decades. Also, the July 22 2011 attack in Norway by Anders Breivik or the attack on Charlie Hebdo in 2015 is not common knowledge anymore among pupils who were very

young at that age still. Hence, talking about different waves of terrorism has led to many fruitful discussions, especially when it comes to the prejudice that attacks are in general "inspired by Islam."

Our workshops also led to many questions from children and youngsters, such as if the policy of China towards the Uyghurs is terrorism, if Hitler was a terrorist, and if the assassination of the Dutch lawyer Derk Wiersum (2019) (probably by a drug cartel) is also a terrorist attack.

Also, from the age of ten onwards, many of the children and youngsters had seen the Christchurch video. When asked how they watched it, they told us that is was being shared via WhatsApp or other platforms by friends or family. They opened it and thought it was footage from a video game or some meme. As one class student stated (December 2019): "I thought: I don't want to see this at all. I feel very bad for watching it and it gave me a weird feeling." It is therefore first of all paramount that teachers should be aware on how the media report on the topic of terrorism, secondly, they should also need to take into account that social media stories spread through the school like wildfire. Footage is being shared by almost all children and youngsters (even if they do not always download it or click on it, they pass it through). The same experience was registered during and after the shooting incident (or terrorist attack) in Utrecht, in 2019. Once an attack happens, it is already too late to influence children's views. A solid framework for making sense of such incidents should already be in place.

Discussion

In this final discussion, three points stand out that demarcate our research findings and point to desiderata for new research: 1) the importance of offering a *historicizing narrative* in dealing with terrorism and radicalization in class; 2) the timely detection of *blind spots* for other types of political and ideological violence and aggressions; 3) the necessity of engaging with a *multimedia discourse* on terrorism and political/religious/ideological violence. These desiderata are equally important for scholars in the field of pedagogy and those who work in the field of radicalization and terrorism studies. As laid out in the beginning, it is now inevitable to address terrorism and radicalization in the classroom, unfortunately.[21]

1. Overall, what stood out in our conversations with teachers and pupils alike was their positive embrace and enthusiasm of the *historicizing approach* to terrorism and radicalization. Obviously, in so-called "hot stages" of a crisis, emotions prevail, and need to be addressed safely and carefully – as the recent murder of teacher Paty and the heated discussions on cartoons and freedom of speech demonstrated not only in France, but throughout the world. Yet, once the first expressions of anguish have been shared, a historicizing frame may serve to streamline the discussion on terrorism, and offer a combination of emotional and cognitive tools for pupils and teachers to deal with and discuss terrorism in a "safe" way. As stated above, many interviewees thought that learning more on the history of terrorism helped them, and would be of similar usage to others. The "waves approach" of terrorism served

to put incidents "in perspective," and give them a "better understanding" of what was going on.

This directly ties in with literature in the field of coping and terror management. Several arguments were listed by the interviewees. For some, the historicizing approach simply helped them to understand "why they do it." For others, it helped them to reassess their current plight and fears, and "put them in perspective." For others, the historicizing approach was, on the outset, a less confrontational, political take on terrorism. As interviewee E (16, Male) succinctly put it: "I liked that the information wasn't selective, but just complete." It is therefore desirable to continue research into the effect of historicizing methods in situations of crises and stress, and also, explicitly, take the notion of "historical significance" (historical incidents resonate differently to different people) into account (De Graaf 2019). For some pupils, attacks in Casablanca may have more impact than the Charlie Hebdo atrocities; for others, the Hanau or Halle attacks may resonate more than the Manchester Arena attack. This also requires careful application of the historicizing approach.

2. Another important finding regards the danger of allowing *blind spots* to settle in, in dealing with terrorism and radicalization. A historicizing approach helps us to avoid biases towards the one or the other type of terrorism: sometimes, jihadism needs to be dealt with, other times, rightwing extremism or leftwing extremist attacks need to be discussed as well. Obviously, open terrorist attacks can be relatively easily condemned and put into the terrorism frame. Yet, other types of radicalization, or latent misogynistic aggression that are not yet tied to real life attacks, can be more difficult to discern and address. For example, children and youngsters are pretty skilled when it comes to detecting fake news. What is causing more problems, is the use of racist and violent memes within the classroom. Most memes are funny and harmless, but there are also images shared that masquerade underlying hate speech or extremist threats. For youngsters nowadays, understanding, sharing, and creating memes is a second nature. Especially controversial and provocative memes that are mocking people of color or encouraging violence are becoming more prevalent within the classrooms. Because of their insufficient historical knowledge, students might not always be aware of the message behind the provocative content they are spreading.[22] Yet, memes are attractive for extremist agents to spread, since many people do not immediately understand their meaning, and just go along out of glee or youthful provocative tendencies. Here, an historicizing approach may again be of help in discussing why and how specific memes contain highly problematic and misogynist content, could contribute to radicalization and glorification of terrorist violence, and should not be shared or spread.
3. A third and final point reflects on the more practical consideration of the modes and means of conveying knowledge and drawing pupils' attention to a highly sensitive area of debate. It is our experience that workshops and lessons have to be multimedia and interactive in order to attract the attention of most students. Moreover, popular culture may sometimes even be the key in conveying complicated or ambivalent notions of radical and extremist behavior. When is

something considered merely activist, laudable radical engagement, and when does it morph into extremism and terrorism? The differences sometimes even evade adult experts, let alone youngsters in the grip of a radical movement or idea. Here, we found that the movie *Joker* (2019) was especially useful to start a discussion on the nature of anarchism, and on the threshold between non-violent and destructive anarchism/terrorism. Here as well, more research is needed into the practical means and "tricks" to find ways to "teach terrorist history" without bombarding pupils with dry facts.

Notes

1. Kim Willsher, "Teacher Decapitated in Paris Named as Samuel Paty," *The Guardian*, October 17, 2020.
2. See for example: Burcu Pinar Alakoc, "Terror in the Classroom: Teaching Terrorism Without Terrorizing," *Journal of Political Science Education* 15, no. 2 (2019): 218–36; Tsafrir Goldberg and Geerte Savenije, "Teaching Controversial Historical Issues," in *International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*, ed. Scott Metzger and Lauren Harris (New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 503–26.; Dianne Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism: What Should Be Taught in Citizenship Education and Why* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).
3. In the Netherlands, a group of radicalized young men were arrested, who knew each other from the same school in Arnhem. Andreas Kouwenhoven, "Hoe een clubje uit Arnhem de jihad ging omarmen," *NRC Handelsblad*, 28 September 2018. Information about the school some of them attended comes from counterterrorism officials (interviews done by authors).
4. Rick Coolsaet, "Radicalization. The Origins and Limits of a Contested Concept," *Radicalisation in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 29–51.
5. See for example: Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Gallya Lahav, Charles Taber, "Fear and Terrorism. Psychological Reactions to 9/11)," in *Framing Terrorism. The News Media, the Government and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 255–80.
6. James Garbarinp and Danielle Nesi, "Children and Terrorism and Commentaries," *Social Policy Report / Society for Research in Child Development* 29, no. 2 (2015): 1–39.
7. Erika Felix et al., "Schools in the Shadow of Terrorism: Psychosocial Adjustment and Interest in Interventions Following Terror Attacks," *Psychology in the Schools* 47, no. 6 (2010): 592–605; Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism*; Götz Nordbruch and Stijn Sieckelinck, *Transforming Schools into Labs for Democracy: A Companion to Preventing Violent Radicalisation through Education* (RAN Centre of Excellence, 2018). Jerome, L. and Alex Elwick, *Evaluation Report on the ACT Building Resilience Project* (London: Middlesex University, 2016).
8. Lynn Davies, "Security, Extremism and Education: Safeguarding or Surveillance?," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016): 1–19. Paul Thomas, "Youth, Terrorism and Education: Britain's Prevent Programme," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 35, no. 2 (2016): 171–87. Anne Aly, Elisabeth Taylor, and Saul Karnovsky, "Moral Disengagement and Building Resilience to Violent Extremism: An Educational Intervention: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 4 (2014): 369–85. Burcu Pinar Alakoc, "Terror in the Classroom: Teaching Terrorism Without Terrorizing," *Journal of Political Science Education* 15, no. 2 (2019): 218–23.
9. See for example: Wayne Journell, "The Challenges of Political Instruction in a Post-9/11 United States," *The High School Journal* 95, no. 1 (2011): 3–14; Trine Anker and Marie van der Lippe, "Controversial Issues in Religious Education: How Teachers Deal with Terrorism in their Teaching," in *Researching Religious Education. Classroom Processes and Outcomes*,

ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Reinhold Boschki (Münster/New York: Waxmann, 2018), 131–44; Rony Berger, Ruth Pat-Horenczyk, and Marc Gelkopf, "School-Based Intervention for Prevention and Treatment of Elementary-Students Terror-Related Distress in Israel. A Quasi-Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 20, no. 4 (2007): 541–51.

10. See also Kees van den Bos and Beatrice de Graaf, "Situated and Historized Making Sense of Meaning: Implications for Radicalization," *Evolutionary Studies in imaginative culture* 4, no. 1 (2020): 59–62; Beatrice de Graaf, "Longread: De kunst van het weglaten - Hoe het geschieddidactische concept van 'historische significantie' historisch onderzoek verder kan brengen," *Historici.nl*, 10-01-2019.
11. See: https://ter-info.nl/home. The platform is in Dutch, but an English version is in the making. TerInfo is run by Nikki Sterkenburg as managing director and coordinator, supervised by a team of academic experts and teachers, with Beatrice de Graaf as initiator and academic director of the project. The project is financed by Utrecht University, the City Council of Utrecht and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.
12. David Rapoport, The four waves of modern terror: International dimensions and consequences. *An International History of Terrorism: Western and Non-Western Experiences* (London: Routledge, 2013), 282–310.
13. Jordan Theriault, Peter Krause and Liane Young, "Know Thy Enemy: Education About Terrorism Improves Social Attitudes Towards Terrorists," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 146, no. 3 (2017): 305–17.
14. Robin Fivush, J.G. Bohanek and Marshall Duke, "The Intergenerational Self: Subjective Perspective and Family History," in *Self Continuity: Individual and Collective Perspectives*, ed. Fabio Sani (East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2008), 131–43; See also Van den Bos & De Graaf, 2020 (above, footnote 6).
15. Robin Fivush, "The Development of Autobiographical Memory," *Annual Review of Psychology* 62 (2011): 559–82.
16. Nordburch and Sieckelinck (2018). Imra Awan, Keith Spiller and Andrew Whiting, *Terrorism in the Classroom: Security, Surveillance and a Public Duty to Act* (Cham, Palgrave Pivot, 2019), 77–94.
17. As we ourselves experienced, and heard back from the teachers at the schools in Utrecht (80 schools in total), with whom we work.
18. In the Netherlands, special schools can have any type of religious background, and are funded by the government as well; they stand on an equal footing with public schools. Since our project has many ties with public schools and their administrative umbrella organization, this led to a slight bias towards those school types vis-à-vis the special schools – which results from pure coincidence and contingency, and not from any purpose on our behalf.
19. Historical significance touches upon the question of subjective appropriation of historical events as relevant to one's own life, as opposed to historical events that may figure in text books, but are far less relevant for the person's life in question. See for a definition and operationalization of 'historical significance': De Graaf 2019 (above), Peck, C. ""It's not like [I'm] Chinese and Canadian. I am in between": Ethnicity and Students' Conceptions of Historical Significance," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 38, no. 4 (2010): 574–617, doi: 10.1080/00933104.2010.10473440
20. TerInfo-Archive, Utrecht University. Some schools prefer to use the TerInfo curriculum themselves, other schools prefer a workshop given by our team. For the purpose of evaluation and research, TerInfo has drafted reports of these workshops, containing observations of the TerInfo-team and responses from participating teachers and class students.
21. As teachers working in post-conclict contexts are already very much aware of, see for a literature overview on that: Laura J. Quaynor, "Citizenship Education in Post-Conflict Contexts. A Review of the Literature," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 7, no. 1 (2012): 33–57.
22. Jordy Krasenberg, Steven Lenos and Nikki Sterkenburg, "Far-Right Extremism in the Classroom," *RAN EDU Academy / Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2019.

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