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NEITHER VILLAINS NOR VICTIMS: TOWARDS AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON RADICALISATION

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ABSTRACT: This study questions whether the perspectives of security and intelligence serve educators well enough in the early stages of radicalisation. Assigned to signal deviant behaviour, educators are unwittingly drawn into a villain-victim imagery of their students. This imagery seems to impede a genuine educational outlook on radicalisation. Key notions of this outlook may be ‘critically addressing ideals’ and ‘forming pedagogical coalitions’.

Keywords: radicalisation, education, schools, extremism, idealism

In the aftermath of the heinous attacks in France in January 2015 in which 17 people died, the country became divided over the case of an eight-year-old boy, Ahmed, who was picked up from school and interrogated by police forces for both refusing to take part in a nationwide two-minute silence and saying: ‘I am not Charlie. I am with the terrorists. The Muslims were quite right. The journalists deserved to die’. Under questioning, Ahmed said that he did not know what the word ‘terrorist’ means. His father denounced the content of what the boy allegedly had said but filed a formal complaint about the decision to question his son. In response, France’s education minister Vallaud-Belkacem stated that the boy’s school had reacted ‘totally correctly’ by bringing his behaviour to the attention of the police. She said that there was no question of legal action against the child, but that a complaint had been registered against the father for his ‘brutal’ attitude towards school staff.

The case is only one of numerous telling examples around Europe of changing landscapes of education, security and intelligence. It illustrates the dilemmas that occur when educators run out of educational options to impact young people’s behaviour and ideas. The school’s action can be understood against the backdrop of the recent heightened security policy agenda in which nations are struggling with the limits to freedom of speech and, more specifically, school teachers are confronted with a considerable number of pupils who hold conspiracy theories and blame the tragic events on everyone except the real culprits. Still, the decision of the school board – approved by the national education minister – to refer the case of an eight-year-old to the police is highly remarkable, as the school’s safety appears never to have been in danger. Neither has – to our knowledge – an intelligence service ever shown interest in shadowing an eight-year-old. This case concurs with the findings of our field research on the
educational responses to young people’s developing radical ideas and ideals: schools, more frequently confronted with the challenging views of their pupils than before, show an urgent need for an educational perspective. Hence the question of this article: why is it difficult to define an educational perspective and what could such a perspective look like?

To get a clearer view of the landscape, we carry out this investigation by examining academic studies and media sources, some of which directly represent the voices of young radicals themselves, others scrutinising their opinions and behaviour from a larger distance. By no means does this position imply a perspective in which the eventual violent outbursts of some of the radicalised youth are tolerated or condoned in any sense. However, an analysis of the constructs that guide the assorted approaches of these young people and the oppositional positions in a society still deeply marked by competition and inequality of opportunities serves the purpose of gaining more insight into the motivations that steer young citizens in the direction of radical groups. These insights are, ultimately, conditional on realising a defendable educational outlook on radicalisation.

The essentially contested concept of radicalisation is usually understood as a process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo (Wilner and Dubouloz, 2009). But according to Sedgwick (2010), the concept of radicalisation focuses on the individual, and to a lesser extent the group and the ideology, omitting the wider circumstances and root causes. In Kundnani’s analysis of the concept (2014), the notion of radicalization has undergone a multitude of remarkable transformations since its birth, mainly in the direction of practical usefulness in order to prevent violent extremism. The discussion demonstrates how the usage of the term ‘radicalisation’ should never be taken for granted in any context.

From 2009 onwards, we have been conducting field research on the different routes of radicalisation in the Netherlands and in Flanders (Belgium) by undertaking interviews with young persons who held radical beliefs and their families. Principal topics of conversation were their upbringing, their school career and their hopes and dreams. These encounters were held with adherents to various strong ideologies ranging from peaceful squatters to animal right activists to far-right Nazi-sympathisers and to those who would turn out to become foreign fighters in the name of their version of the Islamic faith. It should be noted that these research activities were not limited to individuals who engage in violent radicalisation, but extended to groups and individuals who have yet remained (and will remain in most instances) non-violent in their radicalisation process (see also Bartlett & Miller, 2012).

In an attempt to be more attentive to the meaning experienced by our young respondents, radicalisation in a pedagogical sense occurs when a child starts to develop political or religious ideas and agency that are fundamentally different from the educational environment’s or mainstream’s expectations. Based on these
interview sessions, a preliminary discourse was developed in which the process of radicalisation was characterised as a problem or a (reaction to) crisis in the upbringing or the family life (van San et al., 2013) as well as an opportunity for growing political awareness (Bartlett et al., 2010).

In contrast with this latter characterisation, security and Intelligence services, by nature, tend to approach young people with radical ideas as at least suspect and – since anti-terrorism legislation was passed unequivocally – even as guilty before charges. This reflects the public opinion that the youngsters who dare to show any sympathy with a political discourse fundamentally at odds with mainstream views are not worthy of our respect and efforts, let alone our trust: they are, in one word, suspect individuals that ought to be removed from society. Pedagogically speaking, however, judging adolescents for their subversive views or activities is highly contested, as young persons, to successfully negotiate the transition from childhood to the adult world, have to perform an array of developmental tasks in which the status quo is never sacred (Erikson, 1968; Sieckelinck and de Ruyter, 2009). Many young people explore modes of engaging with radical and alternative perspectives when grappling with identity issues. While adolescents already face many transitions in various domains of life (friendships, identity and in their families), ‘a crucial time of flux follows when they begin to take a view on international events and on their own socio-political identity’ (Bhui et al., 2012). Due to this developmental dimension, teachers and social workers cannot inscribe their educational efforts into the security and intelligence agenda without difficulties. While intelligence investigators look primarily for suspects, teachers aim to educate and transform their students. Although there may be an overlap somewhere, these goals are clearly distinctive. The difference is best illustrated by the way both domains approach radical youth. Intelligence and security services cannot but approach them as suspect and dangerous, whereas educational institutions approach their students at least as worthy of education, which in Biesta’s view (2015) consists in socialisation, qualification and individuation. The difference between both agendas can also be demonstrated by applying the four stages model of Silber and Bhatt (2007). In their well-known model, developed for the New York City Police Department, four stages in the journey towards jihadism are discerned: (1) pre-radicalisation, (2) self-identification, (3) indoctrination and (4) jihadisation.

This model shows that in the first two stages, radical ideas are developing, while the propensity to violence may still be very low. In this light, society’s inclination to come after these young people with a repressive agenda from the first indicator on appears problematic if not all available educational cards have been played. This reflex characterises what Ben-Porath (2006) has called a belligerent society, in which education is reduced to an instrument for public safety. A thriving democracy, Ben-Porath argues, requires expansive education, in particular when public safety is at issue. This article will argue that when landscapes of security, intelligence and education start to shift, this may reduce educational possibilities to counter radicalisation unless a feasible educational outlook is developed that
can inspire professionals, citizens and families to deal with the early stages of radicalisation.

1. Villains

A first obstacle for this agenda is the symbolic characterisation of youth with radical sympathies. For many citizens and professionals, it is hard to resist approaching radicalising youth as moral failures. More often than not, radicalising individuals show a profound disrespect for the norms and values that characterise a moral way of life as the majority of people in our society would define it. This leads to a perception in the media and public debate of such youth as morally astray at best, and purely evil at worst. Illustrative in this respect are the reactions of politicians, such as Dutch vice-president Asscher, on the problem of radicalisation, which feature highly symbolic language indicating the battle between good and evil, picturing young jihadis as ‘poisoned by a snake’. This choice of words illustrates a wider shared tendency to decry unequivocally youth who show any sympathy with the political or religious agenda of violent jihad.

It is not only the moral denunciation of the extreme convictions of young jihad sympathisers that leads to the depiction of these adolescents as villains. In fact, they do often master an ample repertoire of unlawful or immoral actions, consisting of lying, cheating, blackmailing, systematic provocation, illegally demonstrating and so on. In public opinion, many young radicals are considered thugs and criminals, no different than their peers who have a reputation for behaving as ‘street terrorists’, because they cause nuisances and are involved in crime, violence and rioting in deprived neighbourhoods. This impression is nurtured by singular high impact cases. Turns to jihad can be understood as a continuation of criminality, yet by other, spiritually justified means (see, for example, Andre and Harris-Hogan, 2013). As could be expected from the overall overrepresentation of young immigrants in the crime statistics, a significant number of youngsters with jihad ideals have an impressive criminal record.

In addition, an extra threat is felt as contemporary radicalisation is most likely to have a home-grown character (Sageman, 2007). When someone who grew up in a Western country turns against his own citizens, it has an enormous impact on the social fabric, the trust within a society and the way people look at radicalisation and judge the individuals who turn to radical opinion. Radicals are portrayed in the debate as individuals who failed to grab the chances that were generously given to them by society. The turn against the existing society is seen as an expression of cowardness and ungratefulness towards the community that offered opportunities. As the Dutch Secretary of State of Security and Justice, Dijkhoff, stated: ‘look how they spit in the well of opportunities and freedom’. Furthermore, the emergence of radical individuals in democratic societies provokes a particular form of ‘stranger danger’ (van Ginneken, 2011), a fear of citizens with a non-western background or of Dutch converts who live secretly among us (and who were erroneously seen as ‘one of us’ before).
Security and intelligence agencies have good reasons to approach youth who become attracted by jihad as ‘villains’, as they explicitly and deliberately push the boundaries of morals and laws. Educational institutions, however, may hold that focusing on the possibly criminal nature or moral inferiority of the young person is counter-productive. Take, for example, the characterisation of young radicals by Silber and Bhatt (2007) as ordinary young people. They are often high school graduates if not university students, second- or third-generation immigrants or recent converts and are not likely to have a criminal history. Hence, one should consider the possibility that a large part of young jihad sympathisers has not been involved in criminal offenses before. In many cases, we lack any proof of actual law breaking, let alone criminal intentions, as motives behind sympathies with the global jihad movement.

Moreover, we learn from our own interviews with a number of young jihadis and especially with former extremists that indiscriminate violence against ‘non-believers’ is regarded as illegitimate except in a highly particular conflict situation (van San et al., 2013). Some would quote from the Quran (2:190): ‘Violence is only allowed, in defense against an attack’. Similarly, the Banier-manifesto\(^2\) states: ‘violence as last resort, when the last democratic option is foreclosed’. In this pamphlet, violent jihad is justified only as a defensive act against attacks on their fellow-believers. Based on these arguments, the youngsters who feel attracted to jihad for defensive reasons may be at least guided by solidarity and selective empathy as well.

Notwithstanding these qualifications and nuances, many of these youngsters seem a priori convicted by public opinion because of the association and/or identification with the utterly violent campaign of the terrorist group of Islamic State. This is understandable given the seriousness of the hate crimes committed by this collective, but, again, it may not be altogether productive from an educational point of view. The villain perspective does not seem to inspire teachers in this respect as it focuses solely on signalling and may betray the trust relationship of vital importance in educational environments (Davies, 2008; RAN, 2015). What are the alternative outlooks available? On the other end of the spectrum lies what we call the victim approach. Could this alternate perspective by any chance serve educational institutions better in their struggle with radicalisation?

2. Victims

In a reaction to the tendency of portraying young sympathisers for jihad as criminals and villains, an important group of scholars has explored a widely overlooked dimension in times of ‘war on terror’: the victimisation of young people leaving for jihad. Illustrative are the publications by Weine et al. (2009). The authors, an interdisciplinary group comprised of psychiatry, nursing and public health professionals, defend a psychosocial perspective towards radicalisation as they identify ‘a lack of adequate conceptualization of family and
community processes impeding progress in the development of effective prevention strategies’ (Weine, 2009, p. 2) against extremism. Their basic assumption originates in a range of public health interventions concerning violence, drug use and HIV in highly adverse conditions: based on patient-oriented research, strategies are proposed for ‘managing the risks of violent radicalization that focus on ways to enhance community and family protective resources for those at risk’ (Weine, 2009, p. 2).

There are some arguments to take this psychosocial approach seriously. Some notable exceptions aside, the children that grow into adolescents with radical opinions are likely to have experienced a more difficult childhood than the average teenager. Whilst the impact of the socio-economical level is highly debated in radicalisation research, many were raised in large families by single mothers in not so strong or weak communities. According to Weine, Somalian children in his sample in the United States show a rate of 70% in this respect (Weine et al., 2009). For other groups, the figures are not at hand, but in our own database as well (van San et al., 2013), more than half of the interviewees were raised in a single-parent household. Secondly, regarding schooling, many were educated in public schools with lower than average school results. Thirdly, radicalisation is more likely to appear among immigrant or refugee adolescents, which is probably due to community violence or traumatic histories as well as to cultural stressors. Whereas this psycho-social perspective may push the protective factors and possibilities for agency somewhat to the background, these risk factors, indicating a social problem underlying the problem of violent radicalisation, justify a need to work with communities and families to counter radicalisation and recruitment (see also Spalek, 2013).

The influence of the environment on the radicalising individual is also stressed in the alleged role of jihad recruiters, which was brought up by the families of several youngsters who departed to fight in Syria. Worried parents portray their children as victims of human traffickers and hate preachers. Their sons and daughters did not voluntarily join the jihad, but were lured into an adventure under false pretences. There is a powerful imagery at work which portrays these radicalised youth as victims of malign recruiters who hunt the streets for impressionable boys (and girls) to join the forces of jihad abroad. Notwithstanding the power of these stories, a lack of proof about the recruiting mechanism still exists in the majority of the cases in which the jihad was joined. Without any doubt, some youngsters are lured into radical groups, largely unaware of what is really going on and more for the thrill, to save their face, to impress their peers or to scare their parents. In addition, we are confronted with a real problem of recruiters who come and visit our poorest neighbourhoods (offline and online), trying to find soldiers for a battle thousand miles away: ‘Find me the sad guys’ is what Davies (2008) wrote to epitomise the recruiting process. We do know that this happens and we should invest in innovative projects to stop this form of reversed human trafficking. But in the words of
Weine himself: ‘at this point, not enough is known to more definitively clarify the issue of whether mobilization [is] more top-down or bottom-up’ (2009, p. 6).

For educational institutions, the psychosocial perspective seems a welcome alternative to the law enforcement focus. But it is not without conceptual problems. When radical youngsters are called victims of their environment, of the poor (urban) neighbourhoods they are packed in together and from which there seems to be no escape, or when they are – more specifically – portrayed as victims of aspensive recruiters hunting the streets, a particular conceptualisation is made in which the radicalisation of the young person is regarded as the result of brutal external forces that cause the receptive behaviour of the person affected.

However, to improve our understanding of the active process of radicalisation, this point of view shows a weakness, as it overlooks the fact that the people involved are active agents themselves. These agents may actively decide that they do not want to belong to a certain group. People construct, maintain and transform their identities actively. Therefore, the portrayal of radical youngsters as vulnerable city children brainwashed by malign recruiters or the frequently found reference to ‘bumping into the wrong friends’ somewhat dismisses this active dimension.

Since the emergence of the social perspective, various authors have suggested that the concepts used in this paradigm require caution. Richards (2011) considers the characterisation of those presenting a terrorist threat to the UK as being ‘vulnerable’ to violent extremism. He cautions that ‘the impetus towards viewing terrorism as the product of vulnerability should not deflect us from what has generally been agreed in terrorism studies – that terrorism involves the perpetration of rational and calculated acts of violence’ (p. 150). In the same vein, Furedi (2009) argues on his website: ‘Unfortunately . . . extremism is seen as a kind of psychological virus afflicting the vulnerable and those suffering from a psychological deficit. This depiction of radicalisation as a symptom of vulnerability overlooks the fact that, frequently, “Muslim anger” expresses confidence and self-belief’. A case in point is this quote by Nourdin (16 years) in our field research:

What do they want? They cannot change me. They cannot do anything. I am convinced. I won’t allow my thoughts to be altered. As soon as you become embraced by something, you are there and you stay there. I got embraced by this religious truth, by Islam and no one can lead me away from this.

While the victim approach obviously offers educational institutions some promising viewpoints and a necessary counterweight against the villain perspective, this paragraph has also revealed some arguments to remain cautious about a straightforward victim perspective on radicalisation. Not only Nourdin, but many more of the youngsters at whom we and our colleagues spoke appear not to be mainly brainwashed, blackmailed or driven by other individuals or groups, but disaffected and deluded, intrinsically motivated to play an active role in the struggle against perceived injustice and personal frustration. Even the girls who
express themselves as female sympathisers are often not just victims of a male-centred religious sect-like organisation, but active agents who make individual decisions in an attempt to make sense of their young lives in our complex societies (see, for example, Casutt, 2013).

It appears that the villain–victim imagery has limited application when it comes to the motives and the agency of these adolescents themselves. If the social sciences want to understand these motives, they will have to relate attentively to the position of the young people involved in these processes (see, for example, Breen Smyth, 2007). To get an idea of what an educational outlook may look like, we need to relate to the identity formation of the youngsters involved.

3. Beyond the Villain–Victim Imagery?

Adolescents who are eager to find a stronger self-esteem and sense of purpose and community may adopt an extreme ideology because it is an escape from their everyday life world in which one becomes almost automatically victim or villain with often little in between (Mythen et al., 2009). This agency emerges in a specific context. To put it concisely, many young Muslims who were born and raised in Europe feel that they have no respected place in society, and therefore experience a disability in making a valuable civil contribution (Demant et al., 2006, p. 15).

In the educational context, so-called ‘concentration schools’, schools with heavy concentrations of non-European Union, typically Muslim, immigrants, challenge policy makers (Merry, 2005). In reaction to negative attention for Islam, many of these youngsters explicitly self-identify with their religious background (Geelhoed, 2011). Experiences of injustice and a lack of equal chances within a societal context, in combination with personal insecurities, can fuel a process of religious radicalisation (Doosje et al., 2013). The appropriation of a religious identity can serve as a powerful strategy to gain self-esteem in a discouraging environment. A small group of Islamic youth develops a more oppositional or extreme strategy to gain self-esteem. For these young people, the authorities can lose their legitimacy. Since they do not expect authorities to support future changes of their situation, these youngsters turn their back and look for other options to develop a positive perspective on their agency.

In this light, the sympathy for jihad can be seen as an attempt to connect with another worldview, another place in this world, where one escapes the difficulties at home and where one can make a valuable difference as a Muslim. When asked about their opinion on the developments in the Middle East and the attraction of jihad, a majority of Dutch-Turkish respondents sees Dutch Muslims departing for the jihad as heroes (Forum, 2014). However, while many support the decision to join the jihad, they also support democratic values. The researchers conclude that Dutch-Turks hope that the armed struggle in Iraq and Syria will lead to a more
democratic form of governance in the region. In these findings, support of the jihad is not opposed to democratic values, as seems to be concluded from the villain perspective on young jihad sympathisers. Moreover, as many respondents embrace a hero-idiom to describe the jihadis, the victim perspective seems not too helpful either.

Obviously, apart from these ideologically inspired motives to sympathise with the jihad, young Muslims are often also driven by less noble spirits. As noted above, young Muslims are overrepresented in crime statistics. Indications are growing that jihad ideology is particularly attractive to individuals with a history of delinquency (see, for example, Nesser, 2014) as it promises a clean sheet in which all sins committed earlier are absolved. Global jihad is endorsed by converts and native Muslims alike as a way out of the mess that one made of his life, a goodbye also to the place one grew up in, where drugs were dealt, prostitution ruled, where gambling was the favourite game and where it was so hard not to become either victim or villain. These practices that lead to the corruption of societies and its inhabitants will be in the past, the jihad ideology promises, once the ideology is incorporated into the daily life and the Caliphate is established according to the Prophet Mohammed’s teachings.

Although the pursuit of this ideal may feel as a new start to them, we see in reality the difficulty of adopting a different style of life away from crime. To many of them, as taught from when they were very young, solving conflicts and difficulties requires violence. It seems that when they convert to jihad, they cannot but rely on what was learned on the streets; the only difference being that the lying, cheating and robbing is no longer done for material gain or gang purpose, but is presented as a contribution to the Ummah, which offers a spiritual cover to the wrongdoing. It seems that ideological motives and the wish to gain a clean sheet are often intertwined in the motivation of young jihad sympathisers. Both motives indicate a desire to take matters into one’s own hands and find one’s own moral compass, in opposition to the seemingly disciplining or oppressive effects of societal structures and expectations. This struggle indicates a challenge for educational institutions.

4. TOWARDS AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

An alternative point of view starts from the simple – though often overlooked – question: ‘What does it all mean to them?’ In an online interview, Susan Neiman qualifies the jihadist as an idealist, ‘rising above the extant mire of consumerism and Western decadence’ (Black, 2009). Sageman’s continuing research into Islamist extremism shows that these individuals are ‘idealistic young people, who seek glory and thrills by trying to build a Utopia’ (2007). Sympathising with jihad offers the opportunity to develop and endorse a religious and political subjectivity with a strong purpose, and with a perspective on a liberating agency. The quest for personal significance constitutes a major motivational force that
may push individuals toward violent extremism. ‘The road to radicalisation begins with arousal of the quest for significance …’ (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

The recognition of radicalisation as ideal-driven does not exclude notions of selfishness, thrill seeking and other less idealistic motives. Many youngsters become interested in the jihad for their own profit (be it emotionally or in terms of social capital). However, radicalisation, which is motivated by ideals, differs from other, possibly associated, transgressive phenomena like plain crime or murder, because it aspires to transform society for the better according to the ideology of the ones involved. Radicalisation which is endorsed by ideals is primarily focused on public interests, apart from the personal interests which may also play a role in the process. Unlike many gang activity or hooliganism, it is always value loaded, politically oriented, historically situated and driven by ideals.

Neiman (2009), in the aforementioned interview, proposes a battle of ideas: ‘If the yearning for idealism drives people to fundamentalism, they could be satisfied by other kinds of idealism as well’. From an educational point of view, it is important to note that this battle of ideas requires a specific ‘safe’ environment, here understood as an educational setting that could help students find another, more inclusive and less rigid expression for their ideals. As in every optimal educational setting, this environment should offer space and limits in combination with warmth and professional engagement. Especially in the first two stages of radicalisation, schools can fulfil an important role in making our societies more secure. Success is unlikely, however, if this role is considered from an exclusively security perspective, i.e. as a matter of intelligence gathering in disguise. Success factors are to be found in the educational attention to the issues that trouble pupils and students deeply. Osler (2009) argues that we need to recognise these pupils as ‘emergent cosmopolitan citizens living in an age of globalization and human rights’ (p. 65). Consequently, the notion of ‘safe’ environments requires some clarification. Many schools want to provide a safe learning environment for their children by employing anti-bullying programs or zero tolerance strategies on physical aggression. From an educational perspective on radicalisation, though, it is problematic if a safe environment would mean that no sensitive political issues could be addressed out of fear for offending a person or a group. On the contrary, what is needed are school environments where it is safe to talk about politics and ideals. In Davies’ words: ‘In safe spaces, turbulence has to be created, in order to investigate how it can be resolved – and whether even more or different sorts of turbulence are called for’ (2014, p. 160). When students practice hate speech they are better approached, not as villains or victims, but as political agents in spiritual and educational need. As Miller (2013) puts it,

Young people (and perhaps some of their teachers) may be attracted to radicalism and they may hold extreme views but this is the very stuff of [Religious] Education. To fail to address such issues in a way that will lead to dialogue, disagreement,
investigation, analysis and criticism is to fail those young people and to fail to promote their moral development. (p. 197)

In the curriculum, this may involve teaching children explicitly the mechanisms behind radicalization and conspiracies; showing them how and when they are seen as easy targets by extremist groups; teaching resilience against black and white views and demonstrating the seductive character of a Utopian worldview, while not discouraging ideals for change. An educational perspective allows us to approach these youth in the classroom as emerging political agents who may adopt an extreme ideology to escape from their everyday life world in which one runs considerable risk ending up victim or villain, with often little in between. Unlike the intelligence and security perspective, an educational outlook allows youth, through extensive educational interaction, to probe identities that differ from the expectations and demands by the mainstream environment.

But schools will be even more effective in countering radicalisation if these efforts are combined with social education directed at empowering relationships and if, wherever possible, strong connections with the educative civil society. As de Winter (2012) writes,

More cooperation between parents, better links between parents and schools, more equal relations between parents and parenting experts and a preventive surveillance state that behaves in much less top-down manner . . . We are talking, in fact, about strengthening civil society (the community of citizens), especially where this relates to the socialization of children and adolescents, but also to the active role that young people themselves play in the society. (p. 47)

More specifically, with regard to the radicalisation problem, we want to use the concept of pedagogic coalitions. We believe that a pedagogical coalition is always a moral coalition of all educational stakeholders involved, confidently addressing issues that relate to the young person’s identity crisis and moral quest.

Finally, it is important to understand that an emphasis on education does not imply an overall dismissal of security issues. Similar to the argument by Jones and Bhui (2008) about the new ethics needed for radicalisation research, ignorance of the behaviour of staff and students in institutions of education would open these organisations to a charge of negligence. Educational institutions of the twenty-first century cannot take a reluctant role in countering extremism. The discussion should centre on the question of how this role is taken up in way that fits an educational institution. This perspective allows schools to focus not only on signalling suspect individuals, but to consider the issue of radicalisation itself and why it deserves especially youth’s attention. In a way, an educational perspective on radicalisation invites schools to become less scared and at the same time more realistic about threats to the students.
5. Discussion and Conclusion

A first point of discussion is the amount of time and means schools have to play a central role in the educational perspective on radicalisation. We acknowledge that many teaching conditions are far from ideal to fulfil this task. This leads to the importance of the idea of the pedagogical coalitions in which teachers can share their responsibilities and tasks with other social stakeholders.

Second, the dialectical structure of the text above could give the impression that victim or villain approaches can never be of educational or pedagogical value. This is not the point we intend to make here. Some young persons or their families are in desperate need of care in which a victim perspective may be useful. Others show aggression at a young age, requiring a strategy that may benefit from the villain perspective. One may even need both perspectives in dealing with extremely problematic situations. The point of this article is that, by sticking to this imagery, one risks missing educational opportunities in the early stages of radicalisation.

A final point of discussion we would like to raise is whether the focus on ideals may be somewhat exaggerated in this perspective. This is a fair point as every focus creates a blind spot regarding other factors. However, we recently found strong indications that the discourse used is not only theoretically important, but also practically beneficial (Sieckelinck et al., forthcoming). An evaluation of a national programme aimed at familiarising professionals with radicalisation shows that professionals express a certain relief when trainers reframe young radicals as persons with strong ideals. It appears to take away certain unfamiliarity and enables empathy and a relational stance, which are two very helpful attitudes towards the complexities in the first stages of radicalisation.

We conclude with an inspirational initiative. Following the deplorable events in Paris, the developers of the Dutch initiative ‘Vreedzame School’ (Peaceful Schools) (de Winter, 2012) sent a 16-page letter to every one of their over 600 schools, in which the staff was requested to use the events as a teachable moment in the class room. The project is comparable to British initiatives such as REsilience (Miller, 2013) and The Right Respecting Schools (Davies, 2008). Peaceful Schools teach their pupils essential social, emotional and citizenship competences that we find desirable in a democratic society, such as empathy, decision-making, negotiating diversity, constructive conflict resolution, social skills and responsibility for the collective good. This knowledge, skills and attitudes are not only taught in specific courses, but also practised through daily interactions and situations. These situations appear on the micro-level (an incident at the school yard) and on much larger level (e.g., the attacks in Paris). The letter urged all teachers who work within the Peaceful School program to see the violent event as another teachable moment among others and to make use of this moment in their teaching and to enhance the experience of what it means to live in a
democracy. The letter was downloaded massively and supported the teachers in dealing with this extremely sensitive issue. Due to its ad hoc character, the educational outcome of this type of intervention is still unclear compared to similar more structured interventions. It would make for very insightful follow-up research to investigate its value in the light of the educational approach discussed.

6. Notes

This article defines the concept of ‘security’ in the traditional sense. Davies points out in her latest book (2014) that the term ‘security’ has come to be associated mostly with ‘macro level conflicts, with security forces and security departments being prominent in the public realm’. ‘The implication’, Davies continues, ‘is that solutions to insecurity are based primarily on the military and on intelligence … More recent is the concern with human security – the way we live our lives’ (Italics in original). The scope of this article, however, does not allow for elaboration of this latter definition. Moreover, it approaches security and intelligence interests as one two-jointed concept that differs from educational interests.

This manifest was published on the Dutch Islamist website dewarereliege.nl [thetruereligion.nl], consisting of 151 pages. In this document, Dutch foreign fighters in Syria present their goals, worldview and stance towards their opponents at home. De Banier is composed of seven chapters in which the ‘rotten’ state of capitalist liberalism and the ‘neo-colonial despotism’ of Western governments is explained in the light of the ‘legendary conflict’, the ‘shifting balance’ and the future in which the Califate and Shariah, at least in the Levant and in the Maghreb, is defended as the best guarantee of a decent life (offering an ‘ethical foundation’ as a weapon in the ‘ideological conflict against the non-Muslim world’. The propaganda document, which is specifically directed at the Dutch audience, is generally considered important as it is the first of its kind addressing the reasons and intentions of foreign fighters in Syria.

7. References


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