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CREATING CARING AND JUST DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS TO PREVENT EXTREMISM

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ABSTRACT. Secondary schools are well placed to avert radicalization processes toward extremism because such trajectories often begin in adolescence. Adolescents are in the process of forming their identities, and most adolescents are idealistic, which makes them susceptible to groups that passionately pursue utopian visions. To avert the path toward extremism, Doret de Ruyter and Stijn Sieckelinck propose to balance a prevention approach with a positive educative ethos that is sensitive to the emotions involved in students' quest for meaning in life and identity formation. This involves schools being places where *all* students experience that they matter and where they can express their passion for their ideals and experiment with their identities without being ridiculed; at the same time, schools must guide students in learning that not everything they value will be accepted and that they must also take into account the interests and rights of others. The schools' role is thus complex and precarious, and teachers are in a position of navigating a politically sensitive minefield daily. Therefore, any theoretical proposition regarding what schools can realistically do to prevent extremism must be informed by everyday educational practice.

KEY WORDS. radicalization; extremism; identity formation; meaning in life; whole-school approach; democratic ethos

INTRODUCTION

Violent and nonviolent extremism is relatively rare in the Netherlands and Belgium, as in most European countries, but its broader impact on society and its inhabitants is so profound that many efforts are underway to diminish the radicalization of (young) citizens. Schools are also expected to contribute to averting the radicalization processes that lead toward extremism. This makes sense, since radicalization trajectories often begin in (early) adolescence.

Many adolescents, on the brink of adulthood, tend to be idealistic, highly optimistic — and somewhat unrealistic about their abilities to be successful in realizing their ideals.¹ These ideals, as well as the ways in which adolescents pursue them, are diverse: some are focused on their own career and happiness, some are uncertain about what they want to realize, some are playing around with ideas they encounter, and some passionately pursue utopian world-changing visions. In the last category, Greta Thunberg and Malala immediately come to mind, but also the anti-globalists or adolescents who ardently defend and pursue

1. Stijn M.A. Sieckelinck and Doret J. de Ruyter, "Mad about Ideals? Educating Children to Become Reasonably Passionate," *Educational Theory* 59, no. 2 (2009): 181–196; and Marion van San, Stijn Sieckelinck, and Micha de Winter, "Ideals Adrift: An Educational Approach to Radicalisation," *Ethics and Education* 8, no. 3 (2013): 276–289.

ultra-religious, ultra-right, or ultra-left political ideas. This “normalizing” idea of passionate utopianism has its merits, as it helps in dealing with moral panic and fear among educators. And it is true that there are various types of extremism, ranging from extremely awkward but hardly harmful forms to extremely vicious and violent forms. But it would not be correct to view the extreme idealism and radicalization of adolescents through rose-tinted glasses.

Adolescence is the period in which a person’s identity begins to take shape,² which includes redefining bonds and relations and forming new relationships. Adolescence is normally the first period in life during which youth raise existential questions in their search for meaning in life. The combination of searching for meaning, identity development, and expanding circles of social contacts outside the family is emotionally intense and also leads to feelings of uncertainty. This may attract young people to unambiguous ideals that give them a clear sense of meaning and purpose in life. This is particularly the case when they experience (perceived) exclusion and personal or group threat,³ or when they grow up in a society characterized by polarization in which *they* are regarded as the problem. The strength of these negative emotions may lead them to disengage themselves from the people who give them these feelings and move them into the arms of extremist organizations that positively enforce who they are.

Both types of radicalization — the one in which adolescents explore the world, discover ideals they want to pursue, but pursue them too passionately, and the one in which adolescents distance themselves from people who do not belong to their in-group in response to being avoided, overlooked, or rejected — will be addressed in this paper. What both types share is that they draw our attention to the affective or emotional dimension of extremism. Strong feelings of discontent, alienation, disengagement, and resentment are central to radicalization processes and seem to precede⁴ the intellectual vices, such as closed-mindedness or prejudice, associated with hardened extremism. Still, this affective dimension of extremism seems to be neglected in schools.⁵ Why schools should take responsibility to become caring and just places of education is the central topic of this paper.

2. Eric Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

3. See, for example, Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161–169.

4. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 52–59.

5. Matthew D. Lieberman, “Education and the Social Brain,” *Trends in Neuroscience and Education* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3–9.

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In the second section of the paper, we introduce our interpretation of extremism and radicalization. To explain our interpretation of extremism, we make use of Quassim Cassam's idea of an extremist mindset.⁶ However, as the paper aims to explore how schools can prevent extremism, and because adolescence is a period of development, we also look into the radicalization processes toward extremism. While extremism cannot be predicted, empirical radicalization research suggests that there are some distinctive and recognizable pathways to radicalization.⁷

The third section explicates and discusses our view of the schools' attention to the affective dimension of the process toward extremism: a positively oriented educative ethos. Instead of primarily focusing on the wrongs of radicalizing youth or merely inculcating moral and political norms and values, we suggest that schools are well-placed to attend positively to students' emotions involved in the two types of radicalization processes just mentioned. Our proposal is not that the schools should handle the students with a soft touch ensuring that they always feel good about themselves and that negative experiences have to be avoided, nor that students should only be focused on their own identity development and self-esteem. But we do suggest that the schools' educational responsibilities regarding the identity formation and citizenship formation of students include caring for the emotions that play a role in these processes. Furthermore, in contrast to a therapeutic approach,⁸ an educative approach also addresses the moral and political dimension of radicalization processes. Thus, we call our proposed ethos a *democratic educative ethos*.

What schools can do to build and maintain a democratic educative ethos in the school and the classroom is our focus in the fourth section. Drawing from two examples of such practices in our own countries, we suggest that prevention of extremism requires sustained attention to the quality of the ethos of the school rather than incidental interventions or specific programs (although they can be helpful).⁹

Not surprisingly, we end by concluding that the schools' role is complex and precarious, asking teachers to navigate the politically sensitive minefield of tackling extremism. Therefore, to keep our expectations realistic, a theoretical proposition should be informed by everyday educational practice. We primarily

6. Quassim Cassam, *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2021).

7. Stijn Sieckelinck, Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Sita Kotnis, and Micha de Winter, "Transitional Journeys into and out of Extremism: A Biographical Approach," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2019): 662–682; and Stijn Sieckelinck, "Towards a Pedagogy of the Radicalised," in *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Paul Smeyers (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Verlag, 2018), 1380.

8. Kathryn Ecclestone, "Learning or Therapy? The Demoralisation of Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52, no. 2 (2004): 112–137.

9. To be sure, this ethos is better understood as a desirable ethos of the school *per se* rather than one that is specifically focused on extremism.

address theoretical questions (conceptual and normative) but want to relate these to existing practices and questions that teachers actually face. Thus, we will make certain claims for which we rely on the outcomes of empirical research. Furthermore, we will give various examples of practices in schools. This is not only to illustrate our answers, but also to check whether the theoretical proposals are practically realistic (to paraphrase Owen Flanagan's idea of a theory being psychologically realistic¹⁰). The examples we draw on are from European countries. Although even within Europe there is diversity in types of extremism and radicalization processes and while school systems vary, we believe it is possible to identify sufficiently similar characteristics of the societal climates (and political systems) to justify that we take this continent as our focus.

EXTREMISM AND RADICALIZATION DESCRIBED

In this paper we use the term "extremism" for a mental state or mindset and the term "radicalization" for the (shorter or longer) pathway toward this state. As we described in our article "Mad about Ideals," it is helpful to distinguish three ways in which people can be extreme, although they often tend to be so in more than one way: (1) they can have extreme idea(s), (2) they can be too attached to their ideals, and (3) they can be too zealous in the pursuit of their ideas.^{11,12} *Extreme ideals* are ideas of perfection. These can be ideas about characteristics of people or a state of affairs (of a community, country or the world). The perfectionism means that nothing can be added to improve the idea; it is the best imaginable and every addition or change would be a dilution or implies desecration.¹³ *Extreme attachment to ideals* means being too passionate about ideals. Extremists are too certain about their ideals and they are too easily offended or respond too strongly when their ideals are endangered. *Extreme pursuit* means that the extremist believes it is justified to use all the means it takes to realize the situation or state they are longing for, although there are differences in whether or people believe that violence is justified in the pursuit or not. For example, while most anti-science movements and anti-vaxxers remain peaceful in their protests, some use violent means (against scientists or officials).

10. Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

11. Sieckelinck and de Ruyter, "Mad about Ideals." A distinction between types of extremism is made by other authors too. See, for example, Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and Cassam, *Extremism*.

12. Note that the third form of extremism, being too passionate about one's ideals, is what Cassam calls modal extremism — the *mode* of commitment to an idea. As he says, "Extremists in this sense are dogmatic and unwilling to compromise or entertain the possibility that their beliefs might be mistaken" (Cassam, quoted in Mitja Sardoč, "Radicalisation, Violent Extremism, and Terrorism: An Interview with Quassim Cassam," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 [2020]: 168).

13. This often, though not necessarily, also involves extreme negative perceptions of those who are not included in the utopian image or who endanger realization of the image. This in turn means that extreme ideals can have extreme consequences for others.

Our focus on the affective dimension of radicalization toward extremism has many similarities with Cassam's recently developed idea that extremism should be defined in psychological terms.¹⁴ As he puts it, "to be an extremist is, first and foremost, to have an extremist mindset,"¹⁵ which consists of particular preoccupations, attitudes, thinking styles, and emotions. None of these four aspects are sufficient or necessary in themselves; the extremist mindset is always a combination. And if we have understood Cassam correctly, it is primarily when the four aspects are dominated by irrationality that they are characteristic of an extremist mindset.

Key *preoccupations*, according to Cassam, are victimization, sometimes more specifically humiliation, and purity: Extremists are extremely focused on the belief that they are victims of oppression or a lack of recognition (primarily in society), and at the same time (maybe in response to this felt victimization or humiliation) believe themselves to be superior because of their striving for moral, ideological, or racial purity. Characteristic of an extremist *attitude* is that they are unwilling to compromise,¹⁶ reject pluralism, and are intolerant and indifferent to the consequences of their actions for "the others." In other words, there is a strong in-group and out-group identity, and those who identify with a given group have an oppositional attitude to anyone outside it. This identity is accompanied by what the social psychologist Albert Bandura calls selective social and moral disengagement,¹⁷ which makes it easier to use violence against those not in one's group, as one no longer feels a moral relation with or obligation to them. The third characteristic of the extremist mindset is an extremist *thinking style*, characterized by utopian thinking or conspiratorialism. Finally, extremists have typical *emotions*. Cassam primarily mentions negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and self-pity. He believes that these emotions have to be related to the extremists' preoccupations, because anger may also be justified and resentment may be an appropriate emotion to have against others. Only when these emotions are irrational or based on a misinterpretation of reality are they characteristic of an extremist mindset. Although we agree with Cassam that these negative emotions

14. Cassam's analysis of extremism is built on both psychological and philosophical insights. He often notes that, given the variety of extremist mindsets that can be found in the world, his conceptual clarification is only one way of describing extremists; there are people we might also call extremists who do not have all the characteristics of the extremist mindset Cassam specifies or who may manifest the characteristics in a different way than he describes.

15. Quassim Cassam, "Why Extremism Is a Question of Psychology, Not Politics," *New Statesman*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2020/02/why-extremism-question-psychology-not-politics>.

16. See also Michael Hand's contribution to this symposium, "Education, Extremism, and Aversion to Compromise," in this issue. In it, he discusses precisely this characteristic of extremists.

17. Albert Bandura, "Selective Moral Disengagement," *Journal of Moral Education* 31, no. 2 (2002): 101–120; and Albert Bandura, "The Role of Selective Moral Disengagement in Terrorism and Counterterrorism," in *Understanding Terrorism: Psychosocial Roots, Consequences, and Interventions*, ed. Fathali M. Moghaddam and Anthony J. Marsella (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004).

are most characteristic of the onset of extremism, extreme activism or idealism can also arise from positive emotions, like longing for a better society or a more just world that is not here yet. In reality, radicalization tends to be a mixture of extreme negative and positive emotions.

Taking Cassam's philosophical work on the extremist mindset as inspiration for an educational response to extremism of adolescents is potentially very productive, as his interpretation is comprehensive and gives ample attention to the affective dimension of extremism. Yet, while in everyday school practice students often use extreme phrases, it would be a mistake to label all of those students as having extremist mindsets. The majority of extreme utterances should be qualified as provocative or ignorant; students explore and experiment with all sorts of identities, even outrageous ones. When students do seriously defend an extremist position, this can be an indication of a radicalization process, but it does not necessarily mean that they have already developed an extremist mindset.¹⁸ It is more likely that such students are moving toward an extremist mindset rather than that it is already a fixed position. Averting a radicalization process requires a different approach than changing a (fixed) extremist mindset does; here, it is useful to turn to empirical radicalization research.¹⁹

Although "radicalization" is given various meanings, it 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."²⁰ Radicalization is, more specifically, understood by many as the *process* by which a person becomes increasingly oppositional toward a part of

18. *EDURAD: Educational Responses to Extremism* (2020-2022) ISF-P Funded. Partners: CSI (Cyprus), University of Linz (Austria), Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences (Germany), Stichting VU (Holland). For more information about this project, visit <http://edurad.eu/>.

19. In their policy paper for the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Götz Nordbruch and Stijn Sieckelinck distinguish between (1) generic or primary prevention, (2) targeted or secondary prevention, and (3) indicated or tertiary prevention; each form of prevention asks educators to perform different roles and tasks. Generic prevention refers to actions oriented toward improving the (democratic) quality of life at school and the social well-being of students in general. This form of prevention boils down to any intervention deployed to keep youth on the right track and away from hazardous thinking and action. Targeted prevention "aims to reach young people who show tendencies towards or are interested in anti-democratic, extremist ideologies (or fragments of these ideologies) and propaganda, are close to extremist groups or have already been in contact with such groups." Finally, indicated prevention targets "young people who are already engaged in an extremist group and want to drop out." Such indicated prevention should only be carried out by experts or educators who are specially trained to perform this type of prevention. See RAN, *Transforming Schools into Labs for Democracy: A Companion to Preventing Violent Radicalisation through Education* (October 2018), 11; [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files_en?file=2019-04/ran_edu_transforming_schools_into_labs_for_democracy_2018_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/en?file=2019-04/ran_edu_transforming_schools_into_labs_for_democracy_2018_en.pdf).

20. Alex Wilner and Claire Jeanne Dubouloz, "Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22, no.1 (2009): 33–51.

society and anyone who defends the status quo.²¹ We agree with this observation — radicalization is always a response to what is no longer or not yet present. One will not be(come) an extremist if one is content with the current state of affairs. Therefore, radicalization is always ignited by a negative evaluation of one's society, the world, or (a particular group of) people, but as said, we do believe it important to realize that radicalizing youth may also have very strong positive emotions.

Empirical research into radicalization processes has shown that there are a wide range of pathways toward extremism and violent extremism, many of which do not start with ideological affinity/attraction²² and do not even necessarily lead to extremist attitudes or an extremist mindset.²³ In many cases, young people join extremist groups without becoming ideological extremists.²⁴ Radicalization is the result of a multitude of political and societal conditions, troubled relationships, and behavioral antecedents. For instance, a study among former extremists revealed three “journeys,” grouped according to their prevailing *leitmotif*.²⁵ The majority of former extremist respondents described a journey in which they were pushed away from problems in the private sphere toward a surrogate family. A second group described being pulled toward the magnetic force of extremist movements by a desire for depth, meaning, and a clear goal in life. A third group consisted of people having very passionate personalities; these people were drawn toward special and extreme challenges of whatever nature. It has been found that far-right movements, for instance, are complex social entities where underneath the surface a greater diversity is found than expected. Where some extremists are thirsty for power, a large part of the movement is actually looking for protection. The strength of these movements often depends on how the former succeed in creating a “safe” space for the drop-outs.²⁶ Differences aside, what connects these journeys and also

21. See Arun Kundnani, “Radicalization: The Journey of a Concept,” in *Counter-Radicalization: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Baker-Beall, Charlotte Heath-Kelly, and Lee Jarvis (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 14–35. In Kundnani's analysis of the concept, “radicalization” has undergone a multitude of remarkable transformations since its conception, mainly in the direction of practical usefulness in order to prevent violent extremism. The discussion demonstrates how use of the term “radicalization” should never be taken for granted in any context.

22. See, for example, Preben Bertelsen, “The Fight against Violent Extremism: The Aarhus Model,” in *They Have No Plan B: Radicalization, Departure, Return — Between Prevention and Intervention*, ed. Jana Kärjel (Bonn, Germany: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2018), 154–169.

23. Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

24. This claim is supported by the work of John Horgan, whose social-psychological approach to studying the radicalization process revealed the diverse motivations for becoming involved in terrorist organizations. See John Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94.

25. Sieckelinck et al., “Transitional Journeys into and out of Extremism.”

26. Raphael Ezekiel, “An Ethnographer Looks at Neo-Nazi and Klan Groups: The Racist Mind Revisited,” *American Behavioural Scientist* 46, no. 1 (2002): 51–71.

seems to be a central characteristic of the radicalization processes in adolescence is that they can be understood as a derailed quest for identity and meaning. In very different ways, every “radical” is intensively searching for answers to existential questions: who or what am I, what is my role in life, where do I belong, what does really matter to me, and whom can I matter for? So, averting a radicalization process should in our view take into account the adolescents’ quest for meaning and identity development.

We distinguish four aspects of meaning in life.²⁷ The first is the cognitive aspect of understanding the world and one’s life. People experience meaning in life when they can make sense of their own lives and the environment they live in. While this *descriptive* cognitive dimension may play a role in the radicalization process, this paper focuses on the three aspects of the *valuative* cognitive-emotional dimension of meaning, namely having purpose, having a sense of being engaged in something significant, and mattering to others. Having purpose means that people have aims in life that are meaningful to them and that they are able to pursue those aims. And this is what makes extremist ideologies or groups so attractive — their clear and powerful ideological aims provide a profound purpose in life; they give people reasons to live for. Furthermore, people only experience meaning in life when they are predominantly engaged in activities or relationships that they believe to be significant, i.e., that are worthwhile to them. Being a member of a group of like-minded people who develop activities to realize the ideals they deeply value is a paradigmatic example. But people also need to experience that they are worthwhile to others, that they matter. People who believe that their existence does not make a difference, that it does not matter to others what they do, normally also believe that their life does not have meaning. And particularly this last aspect of meaning in life is challenged when adolescents live in a society in which they are not recognized or are discriminated against.²⁸ Various empirical studies indeed show that there is a relation between real and perceived deprivation, feelings of powerlessness, and low self-esteem on the one hand, and radicalization on the other hand.²⁹

27. Our description of the dimensions of meaning here is based on Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger, “The Three Meanings of Meaning in Life: Distinguishing Coherence, Purpose, and Significance,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 11, no. 5 (2016): 531–545; and Login S. George and Crystal L. Park, “Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering: Toward Integration and New Research Questions,” *Review of General Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 205–220. See also Doret de Ruyter and Anders Schinkel, “Education and Meaning in Life,” in *Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, ed. Iddo Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

28. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism”; and Andrew Silke, “Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization,” *European Journal of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2008): 99–123.

29. See, for example, Frank Buijs, Froukje Demant, and Atef Hamdy, *Strijders van eigen bodem. Radicale en democratische moslims in Nederland* [Homegrown Warriors: Radical and Democratic Muslims in the Netherlands] (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); and Hans Peter Kuhn, “Adolescent Voting for Right-Wing Extremist Parties and Readiness to Use Violence in Political Action: Parent and Peer Contexts,” *Journal of Adolescence* 27, no. 5 (2004): 561–582.

Battling against the mindset of extremists and hardened terrorists often seems (and is) futile and it is therefore easy to lose hope. Still, in almost any biography of (former-)extremists, one or more opportunities were missed that could have helped to steer the adolescent into a less harmful direction. The problem is that many parents and teachers feel deeply insecure and utterly incapable of playing a significant role in countering extremism. We believe this predicament can be approached by reframing the role of education. While teachers will meet few extremist mindsets in their classrooms, they are much more familiar with the existential questions their students are dealing with in their quest for meaning in life and identity development.

SCHOOLS' RESPONSIBILITIES REGARDING THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF RADICALIZATION

In our view, schools are educative institutions, not merely learning institutes in which students acquire knowledge and skills to be able to live independently and become qualified to pursue a professional career. Teachers also have a function in socializing students into moral standards and values as well as the culture and cultural mores of a country or a community (which may depend on whether it is a religious school or not), and a wider role in guiding students in their identity development in interaction with their peers, the teachers themselves, the contents of the curriculum, and society at large.³⁰ Thus, in developing our ideas about the prevention of extremism or bending the radicalization process toward reasonably passionate idealism, we presume that teachers have a responsibility with regard to the identity development and moral citizenship development of their pupils. Moreover, we think it is important to reflect on the systemic dimension of schools as well; schools are a (learning) community in which students have to interact with peers and adults who they have not freely chosen and therefore may have different ideas, ideals, values, and backgrounds. What happens in the lunchroom or playground and the atmosphere or ethos of the entire school community has an influence on the moral and personal development of students, and this influence can also be employed by teachers and school leaders to prevent extremism. The combination of the teachers' educational responsibility and the ethos of the institution in which students spend many days of their adolescent life places schools in a relatively unique position to provide a space in which to experiment with ideas and identity and at the same time practice virtues like open-mindedness, care, and justice.

Of course, the responsibilities given to the school need to be realistic: in daily life adolescents spend more time outside the school than in it, and even when they are in school, that does not mean they are fully engaged with what is happening in it. Furthermore, schools may not be very diverse, and within schools students can form like-minded groups who primarily interact with each other and avoid other groups. Moreover, teachers may argue that in a class of thirty pupils

30. See also Gert J. J. Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010).

and a demanding curriculum, they have neither time or opportunity to follow and positively contribute to the identity development of students who might be prone to the influence of extremist groups. Although all these arguments contain a grain of truth, the educational responsibilities of schools nevertheless entail that teachers and school leaders should aspire to offer students a space to experiment with ideas and identity and where they encounter examples of adults who contribute to the livability and livelihood of a diverse community. At minimum it can be expected that teachers and school leaders do what they reasonably can to ensure that students are not drawn toward extremism because of what happens in school.³¹ Thus, the responsibilities that we describe are part of what we consider to be the general educational function of schools and the pedagogical role of teachers, but these gain special significance in the context of preventing extremism of adolescents.

In the previous section we described that a radicalization process in adolescence can be understood as a derailed quest for meaning and identity that can ultimately lead to detachment from mainstream society and loss of faith in democratic means, or — even worse — utter hatred of particular groups (selective social and moral disengagement). Radicalizing adolescents can be youth who are idealistic and full of passion to pursue their ideals and who feel that the ideals they stand for are not being heard, which can lead to extreme attachment and a (violent) extremist pursuit to ensure that their utopian practice or society is realized. The group that draws most attention in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) literature is adolescents who are attracted to extremist views and collectives that show that they matter, that provide them with a strong purpose and identity, and that boost their self-respect in reaction to (perceived) negative experiences in society (a variety of extremist groups share the belief that they are worse off because of a particular injustice). Here there is a mix of positive emotions that are related to their newfound purpose in life and negative emotions against others who frustrate their ideals or who humiliate them or their group. This means that radicalizing adolescents cannot be regarded as being a villain or a victim only.³² They form a heterogeneous group that needs a mixed approach: not only should their extremist pursuit be bent toward reasonably passionate activities to realize their ideals, but schools can also contribute to the prevention of heteronomous dependency on extremist groups by providing better alternatives of belonging and moral-political ways of influencing society.

To be sure, characterizing radicalizing adolescents as youth whose quest for meaning and identity has traveled in the wrong direction does not imply that the solution lies in focusing on them only and leading them to the right path. Their

31. By defining the school's responsibility in this way, we also make clear that schools cannot be held accountable for their students' extremism in the future, unless things that happened or that teachers did while the students were in school actually contribute to their turn to extremism.

32. Stijn Sieckelincx, Femke Kaulingfreks, and Micha de Winter, "Neither Villains nor Victims: Towards an Educational Perspective on Radicalisation," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 63, no. 3 (2015): 329–343.

reasons for being angry and frustrated may be justified, so it would be problematic to presume that nothing in society needs to change or that other citizens do not have a role to play in preventing extremism. Thus, the contributions of schools, as we present them, are not only directed toward students who are (potentially) radicalizing, but also toward other students who have to contribute to forming a school community and society in which human dignity is being respected and where democratic solutions to oppositional ideas are being pursued. Instances of bullying, for example, may be part of the problem here.

We propose an educative ethos consisting of four aspects related to the emotional dimension of meaning in life and identity development that also acknowledges the quest of others. Concretely, teachers and school leaders should aim for their school to be a place where *all* students (a) experience that they matter, and in which they (b) can exchange their passion for their ideals and experiment with identities without being ridiculed, but (c) also learn that not everything they value can be accepted by the school, and thus (d) learn to take into account the interests of other students and citizens, too.

STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THAT THEY MATTER

The first and possibly most profound responsibility we ascribe to schools in preventing extremism is that they are places where all students experience that they matter. Being seen and acknowledged by others in a positive way is a basic psychological need that has to be met in order to be able to live a decent human life.³³ We therefore see it as a general educational responsibility that teachers respond to this basic need of all students. However, it is particularly important to students who encounter negative experiences of exclusion and harassment in society (both on- and offline). The majority of adolescents grow up in families that confirm that they are valuable human beings and recognize who and what they are (their identity), and who belong to groups in society that are acknowledged and valued. These students do not need their teachers to affirm that they matter, although they can be negatively affected when teachers disregard them or humiliate them. For students who are neglected at home or who live in societies in which their groups are ignored or humiliated, schools can be the single place where they feel seen and heard — where they matter. It is this educational responsibility of teachers that can provide a counterbalance to the onset of extremist preoccupations and negative emotions.

That teachers are important was confirmed in an empirical study among Muslim youth in the Netherlands.³⁴ This research showed that (perceived)

33. See, for example, Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78.

34. Diana D. van Bergen, Allard, R. Feddes, and Doret J. de Ruyter, "Perceived Discrimination against Dutch Muslim Youths in the School Context and Its Relation with Externalising Behaviour," *Oxford Review of Education* 47, no. 4 (2021): 475–494, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1862779>.

discrimination by teachers was a predictor of externalizing behavior. As we discussed earlier, violence (externalizing behavior) is not sufficient for extremism, but teacher discrimination had a significant causal relation with externalizing behavior (while discrimination by other adults outside the school or peers within and outside the school were not significant predictors). In interviews several young adults gave examples of situations in which teachers recommended higher levels of education to majority Dutch students and gave majority Dutch students easier access to internships even though, academically, they performed just as well as the majority Dutch students. A Moroccan girl described an instance in which she “wore a headscarf to school for the first time, [and] her teacher pretended not to see her when reading students’ names to take attendance. . . . [But] after class, the teacher shouted to her, ‘*It does not say in the Qur’an that you need to wear a headscarf! So why do you wear this!*’”³⁵

What we mean by “mattering” is actually quite a basic pedagogical attitude of teachers; it means that students are noticed by their teachers (and other professionals in the school) and, rather than being judged because of who or what they are perceived to be, each student is accepted as a human being. Students feel that it makes a difference that they are present and that their presence and contribution matters to their teachers — they are not merely numbers who can be exchanged for other students. Docudramas like *Entre les murs* show that teachers, even in secondary school where they do not have the same students in their classes the entire day, can make a difference in students’ perception of themselves.³⁶ Moreover, teachers also can acknowledge the grievances of students about the ways in which they are treated by others in society. Teachers should not merely teach that discrimination is morally wrong and illegal; they must also respond to the feelings of students who are victims of discrimination; they should overtly take their students’ side. For instance, a Dutch study recently showed that among students attending vocational schools, those with an immigrant background were less likely than other students to receive internships they applied for — they were systematically disadvantaged.³⁷ We call for teachers at such schools to form a coalition with their students to confront those organizations with their malpractice and to support policies that hold such organizations accountable. They do so out of true interest in their students, but doing it also allows them to show that not all people who do not belong to the in-group of students are bad people from whom students should distance themselves. Moreover, by taking a

35. *Ibid.*, 485.

36. *Entre les murs* [The Class], film, directed by Laurent Cantet (2008).

37. Iris Andriessen, Maaïke van Rooijen, Mehmet Day, Arda van den Berg, Eva Mienis, and Naomi Verweij, *Ongelijke kansen op de stagemarkt. Onderzoek naar objectief vastgestelde en ervaren stagediscriminatie in het mbo in Utrecht* [Unequal Opportunities in the Internship Market: Research on Objectively Identified and Experienced Internship Discrimination in the Mbo in Utrecht] [Utrecht, Netherlands: Verwey Jonker Instituut, 2021].

stand alongside their students, teachers can model moral and democratic ways of influencing others and empower students to do so too.

However, affirming that students matter does not mean that everything a student believes can be accepted in the school — nor that everything they stand for can be recognized. And the fact that there can be a difference between mattering, being allowed to say what one stands for, on the one hand, and what can be recognized, on the other hand, can be a source of anger and grievance. While schools should be places where students can experience this difference and learn how to deal with such mixed emotions, the good intentions of teachers can also backfire.

STUDENTS CAN EXPRESS WHAT MATTERS MOST TO THEM

The second dimension of the educative ethos is to give all students the opportunity of expressing, and thereby encountering and exchanging with others, their ideals, i.e., exploring sources of significance and purpose for themselves and others. By giving all students the opportunity to talk about their ideals (and values or profound desires), schools acknowledge that these ideals are important to the students; that the ideals say something about who they are and about their purpose in life.³⁸ Thereby students experience that they are taken seriously instead of being silenced or ridiculed. Furthermore, it gives students the opportunity to learn how they and their ideals (can) affect others — in positive and in negative ways — and also to experience how the ideals of others affect them (which presumes that they allow themselves to be affected by others).³⁹

Students' opportunity to experiment and express what they deeply care about also gives teachers the possibility of promoting reasonable passionate attachment and students' pursuit of ideals within and outside the school. It gives teachers insight into what their students actually believe and the possibility of preventing these ideas from influencing the atmosphere in school or the relations among students in a hidden way. Moreover, it may prevent students from being forced to go underground to give voice to their ideals or emotions in predominantly online echo chambers. Thus, it also means that teachers must allow students with ultra-right-wing or ultra-orthodox beliefs, who ardently believe in their all-white, communist, or religious society, to express their ideals.⁴⁰ This poses a dilemma

38. The exploration of ideals in life and how to pursue them does not have to be restricted to the ideals present in the school. As we suggested in our 2009 article "Mad about Ideals," teachers' contribution to the identity development and reasonable passion of their students also includes presenting idealist exemplars in history and around the world.

39. See Michalinos Zembylas, "The Affective Dimension of Far Right Rhetoric in the Classroom: The Promise of Agonistic Emotions and Affects in Countering Extremism," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 42, no. 2 (2021): 267–281.

40. On this point, we agree with Zembylas in "The Affective Dimension of Far Right Rhetoric in the Classroom," 276. However, we make a distinction between allowing the expression of ideals versus recognizing or accepting those ideals (which Zembylas seems to do, too), and we note further that this distinction is based on moral criteria, which should also be expressed in the classroom.

to teachers, for the consequence is that other students may be deeply hurt and offended by such comments, which means that *their* latent radicalization may actually be fueled. Hence, teachers need to make a special effort to ensure that when students express near-extremist ideas this has the educative influence we mentioned before: students closely experience that what deeply matters to them can be extremely painful for fellow students and teachers, which may incite a reflection about their ideals. While it is awkward to phrase it like this, it may actually be one of the important aspects of schools' attention to the affective dimension of radicalization, because when this happens in class, witnessing and experiencing the impact of such comments cannot be ignored or avoided — and therefore the radicalizing students have to respond. This is highly challenging for teachers: it takes a teacher with pedagogical tact, as Max van Manen calls it,⁴¹ to deal with such a highly sensitive situation in a way that benefits all students. Ignoring such conflicts only pushes them underground; teachers need to be able to guide encounters between students in such a way that negative emotions do not undermine the self-respect of students nor the just and caring space that schools aim to be.

However, proposing that schools should acknowledge that the ideals that students have are important to them and therefore should allow them to express them does not mean that the school should be morally or pedagogically indifferent. To be a caring and educative environment, schools will set limits to the ways in which students express their ideals. One way to do this is by establishing a norm that all claims need to be substantiated by arguments and relevant sources, especially if others may feel offended by a certain statement.

STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN THAT NOT ALL IDEAS OR IDEALS CAN BE ACKNOWLEDGED OR RECOGNIZED

As educational institutions, schools should also teach students that having the freedom to express ideas and ideals does not imply that everything that students are allowed to say in school can be *accepted* by the school. This runs against (promoting) the moral quality of reasonable passion.

Which limits the school should set to what can be recognized is a complicated question and has led to fierce debates in the academic literature. Probably the most well-known account is the discussion between Axel Honneth⁴² and

41. Max van Manen, *Pedagogical Tact: Knowing What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do* (London: Routledge, 2015).

42. Honneth has written about the three circles and concomitant types of recognition in various publications. We have drawn on Axel Honneth, "Recognition or Redistribution? Changing Perspectives on the Moral Order of Society," *Theory, Culture and Society* 18, nos. 22–23 (2001): 43–55; and Axel Honneth, "Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice," *Acta Sociologica* 47, no. 4 (2004): 351–364.

Nancy Fraser.⁴³ Honneth argues that people have a psychological need that others recognize their (developing) identity and that this need is reciprocal. In societies (but also in schools), citizens should aspire to recognize all of each other's characteristics, including the ideals the citizens hold dear. With this, Honneth seems to offer the solution to counter a radicalization process: for society or schools to no longer ignore groups or push them to the margins but to acknowledge them and their ideals. Fraser, however, argues that certain identities and ideals of groups can be harmful to others. She suggests that the basis of recognition should be citizens' social status as full partners in social interaction. If ideas, ideals, and values underlying citizens' identity undermine the possibility that other citizens can participate in an equal manner, they do not deserve to be recognized.⁴⁴ Given our view that schools should promote reasonable passionate attachment and pursuit of ideals and that schools need to be just and caring democratic institutions, it is not surprising that we follow Fraser as to which ideals can be recognized by the school or not. Ideals that undermine the possibility of other pupils to present themselves as they are or that seriously harm groups in school or society cannot be recognized.

Learning that one may express one's ideals in the school, but that some ideals cannot be recognized by the school may be painful for the students who have those ideals, and they might take this as confirmation that they (or their group) are discriminated against by others. Think, for example, of students who have ultra-right ideals that cannot be accepted in the school because they are discriminatory against certain people or groups, even though the students who have these ideals may feel that *they* are a victim of, say, immigration policies. Or, students with religious convictions that undermine the freedom of others, such as LGBTQI students, to live their lives from the inside; the students expressing their religious views may believe that *they* are the ones being discriminated against in society. Students who experience that their ideas and ideals cannot be acknowledged may actually become more susceptible to radicalization — the negative responses to their strongly held convictions may push students toward extreme attachment and pursuit of what they firmly believe in and highly value. In the literature this issue is discussed as the identity threat: in dealing with controversial issues that touch on what they deeply care about, students can develop a moral defensiveness to protect their identity — they voice their beliefs even more strongly or avoid the discussion altogether and tend to become closed-minded when they experience the views of others as an attack on who they are, which needs to be countered.⁴⁵ And, of course, students who are already on

43. Nancy Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?," in *The Culture of Toleration in Diverse Societies: Reasonable Tolerance*, ed. Catriona McKinnon and Dario Castiglione (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018), 86–108.

44. *Ibid.*, 94.

45. Hanneke Mol, "The Role of Identity Threat and Teacher Interpersonal Behavior in Discussing Controversial Issues in Class: Moral Defensiveness?" (Research Master's Thesis, Utrecht University,

a radicalization path may actually be pushed further toward extremism, morally distancing themselves from the other students who are perceived as an enemy. However, rather than avoiding such subjects, we see it as a confirmation of the educative role schools need to play in the affective dimension of radicalization — when students experience these conflicts in schools, teachers have an opportunity to guide this process, difficult as it may be.

By setting limits to which ideas and ideals can be recognized in school, schools also prepare students to deal with the limits to self-expression that exist within the wider democratic society and to learn to live peacefully with unavoidable disagreements about deeply held convictions. They can learn to see the other as an adversary rather than an enemy, as fellow citizens who, in Chantal Mouffe's terms, perceive disagreement in terms of agonistic opposition rather than viewing others as antagonistic enemies.⁴⁶

STUDENTS MUST LEARN TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE INTERESTS OF OTHER CITIZENS, TOO

We agree with Cassam and Mouffe that the moral demonization of others, and putting oneself on a moral high ground, which is characteristic of an extremist mindset, fuels antagonism and makes it easier to justify violence against other groups.⁴⁷ Schools can play an important role in explicating the distinction between the necessary conditions of a democratic society⁴⁸ that need to be respected by all and the moral justifications for a particular conception of a (democratic) society. However, in contrast with Mouffe's proposition, we do believe that moral evaluation should also be part of what can or cannot be recognized in schools, for some ideals undermine human dignity and some ways of pursuing ideals truly are harmful to others. And becoming attached to the basic moral rules of society is certainly part of the socialization function of the school. Preventing extremism, therefore, also requires that students learn to find ways to influence opinion in a morally and politically acceptable manner (which includes empowerment and resisting extremist groups). Arie Kruglanski, a psychologist with a specialization in terrorism, claims that the need for significance has to be satisfied in socially constructive ways and for this he offers three suggestions. First, schools should avoid creating a loss of significance by promoting prejudice and inequality against certain groups. Second, they should emphasize narratives that

2020); and Michael Hand and Ralph Levinson, "Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. 6 (2012): 614–629.

46. On this point, see Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political: Thinking in Action* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2005). Mouffe describes agonism as "a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents," 20.

47. On this point, see also Bandura, "The Role of Selective Moral Disengagement in Terrorism and Counterterrorism."

48. These are the basic democratic principles of liberty, solidarity, and equality.

are generally accepted, compelling, and delivered by charismatic communicators who promote constructive ways of gaining significance. An example of this is John F. Kennedy's inaugural address to the nation in 1961, which challenged and inspired young people to contribute to American society. Third, schools should allow or support the efforts of students "to create movements in which people will be accepted, revered, and respected for counterviolence activities."⁴⁹

But again, this task requires that schools and teachers also take into account the feelings of their students. Effective educational counter-extremism programs do not only warn against false claims and delusional ideologies. They also address the underlying grievances of students (who may have good reasons for not trusting the authorities' interference with what they think).⁵⁰ In presenting alternatives to extremist engagements, an educative response to societal alienation is key. Central in this line of thought is the understanding that society is held together by a social contract of rights and duties toward the state and other groups. For example: the police are paid by all citizens' taxes to protect all citizens. When students from minority groups are more frequently stopped and frisked by police officers, they may lose their faith in the social contract, and resentment and disengagement may take over. The same principle applies for the school: if the school is mainly perceived as an oppressive regime with no interest in a student's talents or struggles, moral disengagement will be difficult to stop. In contrast, if the school is a place where students feel at home, where they find support for their struggles, extremist recruiters will have a harder time disengaging them from society. In the next section, we present such a school.

THE DEMOCRATIC EDUCATIVE ETHOS OF SCHOOLS

The original meaning of the word "ethos" denotes "home" as well as "character." To live together in one place, people need a set of values and the character to live by these values. A school ethos, then, is what "characterizes" the school in an ethical sense, for the teacher always holds an ethical relationship to her students.⁵¹ Her aim is to build a rapport with the students: they learn at least as much from *how* they are taught as from *what* they are taught.⁵² The school's ethos moves beyond the teacher-student dyad. Education against extremism is not the responsibility of individual teachers only — schools as a whole need to develop strategies. Individual teachers can certainly have a positive impact on students; as we have argued, a teacher can make a difference to the radicalization process of a

49. Arie Kruglanski, quoted in Zara Greenbaum, "5 Questions for Arie W. Kruglanski," *American Psychological Association* 50, no. 4 (2018).

50. Stijn Sieckelinck and William Stephens, "Responding to Radicalisation through Education," in *The Routledge Handbook on Radicalisation*, ed. Joel Busher, Leena Malkki, and Sarah Marsden (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

51. See, for example, Gary D. Fenstermacher, Richard D. Osguthorpe, and Matthew N. Sanger, "Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2009): 7–19.

52. Lieberman, "Education and the Social Brain."

student when the teacher sees the student or recognizes the pupil's pain because they are avoided or rejected by others. And while radicalization processes are likely to be stabilized when individual teachers in their classroom are able to form a space in which students experience that they matter and feel safe to express their views and be open about who they are, students' experiences may be overshadowed by what happens in other classrooms, in the hallways or lunchroom, where escalation is looming. Particularly in secondary schools in which students have many different teachers, it is important that teachers together with school leaders aim to ensure that the school as a community does not fuel extremist ideas, because students will feel pushed away from that community. This requires, in our view, that schools build and maintain a caring and just democratic educative ethos.

A strong school ethos fosters a truly democratic experience for all students.⁵³ According to a panel of European school staff, the democratic school ethos is the "oxygen" the school requires before it can serve as a so-called "laboratory for democracy."⁵⁴ A school with a democratic ethos offers pedagogically safe and sound spaces where students learn to express their experiences and ideas in a regulated environment. By inviting students to explore their ideas in inclusive settings, voices from the margins will be heard and provide lessons for students and teachers alike. It encourages the promotion of freedom of opinion, minority rights, solidarity, equality before the law, and the right to life and physical integrity as key principles of democracy.⁵⁵ By promoting participation as well as representation, and by searching for what binds students and teachers in their diversity, such an ethos facilitates a challenge to extremist narratives of authoritarian rule, homogeneity, and ethnic or religious supremacy. As a consequence, a democratic school ethos invests in dealing with controversial and conflicting interests. By facing sensitive issues and conflicts while seeking mutually accepted principles that facilitate understanding, students can learn that in our society conflict and compromise are the rule, not the exception. To help students learn to deal productively with this conflicted context, a democratic school ethos enhances students' need for agency, that is, "children's capacity to act deliberately, having a voice, and actively reflect on their social worlds, shaping their lives and the lives of others."⁵⁶ We suggest that there are good reasons to presume that inclusive pedagogical approaches in multi-ethnic schools, like creating a sense of community through cooperative learning and developing democratic and justice-oriented communities,⁵⁷ instead

53. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; repr. New York: MacMillan, 2008).

54. Nordbruch and Sieckelinck, "Transforming Schools."

55. *Ibid.*, 12.

56. Marjorie Montreuil and Franco Carnevale, "A Concept Analysis of Children's Agency within the Health Literature," *Journal of Child Health Care* 20, no. 4 (2016): 503–511.

57. See, for example, David T. Hansen, "Teaching as a Moral Activity," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 4th ed., ed. Virginia Richardson (Washington, DC: AERA, 2001), 826–857; and Joel Westheimer

of accentuating assimilation and control, has a diminishing effect on the onset of radicalization. Of course, the style of education in itself is not sufficient but needs to be complemented with appropriate content. By inviting young people to imagine a society in which they feel sufficiently seen and respected, the agency of young people, their own perspective for action on both a personal and social level, can be stimulated. We give two examples from our home countries.

The “Vreedzame School” is a successful initiative in the Netherlands where schools are transformed into mini-democracies.⁵⁸ Teachers are not trained to detect and manage deviancy, but to help build arenas for practicing the working through of conflict and compromise. Peaceful Schools teach their pupils essential social, emotional, and citizenship competences that are deemed desirable in a democratic society, such as empathy, decision-making, negotiating diversity, constructive conflict resolution, social skills and responsibility for the collective good. Democratic knowledge, skills, and attitudes are not only taught in specific courses, but also practiced through daily interactions and situations. These situations appear on the micro level (an incident in the school yard) and on a much larger level (talking about the attacks in Paris). Essential democratic attitudes are brought to the heart of the school’s ethos. Because of its year-round commitment to this cause, across and beyond the curriculum, Peaceful Schools help to build a democratic ethos in “peace time” and are a credible messenger when incidents or conflicts require extra attention. For example, following the series of violent attacks in Paris by the so-called Islamic State, the developers of the program sent a 16-page letter to every one of their over 600 schools, in which the staff were requested to use the events as a teachable moment in the classroom. The letter urged all teachers who work within the Peaceful School program to approach the violent event and its impact on pupils as an urgent reminder of the importance of its lessons on dealing with strong emotions and conflict. The atrocity and its repercussions for pupils were pedagogically translated into a teachable moment:⁵⁹ teachers were supported to make use of this moment in their teaching and to enhance the experience of what it means to live in a democracy.⁶⁰

Our second example comes from a Belgian school. When on September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by the extremist Islamic terrorist organization Al Qaeda, shock waves reached this school in Antwerp, where students had connections rooted in areas from all over the world. At that time, many students had parents who had fled or emigrated from Yugoslavia, which had been disintegrated by civil war. When a minute of silence followed for the nearly 3,000 victims across the ocean, it was provokingly interrupted by some students. Asked

and Joseph Kahne, “What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237–269.

58. Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks, and de Winter, “Neither Villains nor Victims.”

59. Robert Havighurst, *Human Development and Education* (New York: Longmans, 1952).

60. Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks, and de Winter, “Neither Villains nor Victims.”

afterward about their motives for the inappropriate interruption, they lamented, “Nobody ever held a minute of silence for our families.” The school staff listened, saw that the pain was genuine, and decided to hold another minute of silence: against violence, hatred, war, and terror around the world. Now, you could have heard a pin drop. Interestingly, this minute of silence was made part of the school ethos and now has been held every year. Even more interestingly, when in 2021 the Israel–Palestine conflict flared up again, the students themselves contacted the staff and asked for a minute of silence, “not only for Gaza, miss, but all (young) victims of violence around the globe.”⁶¹ Twenty years after this school ritual was born out of urgency, another minute of silence took place and was followed by a powerful student speech for the entire school populace on the playground. Clearly, by allowing for the expression of grievances and fears, and by investing in common ideals, the democratic ethos had found its way into the hearts and minds of the students, leaving less chance for divisive or extremist recruiters to lure them into their nets.

IN CONCLUSION: A TOUCH OF REALISM ABOUT THE SCHOOL’S CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTING EXTREMISM

In this paper we have suggested that while pathways of radicalization are diverse and relative to agents and their circumstances, they are all (partly) triggered and sustained by two psychological dimensions of human existence: finding meaning in life and identity formation. By giving students the feeling that they matter, and by creating inclusive communities where students can express what matters to them, schools also provide a communal social basis to teach that not all ideas and ideals can be acknowledged or recognized, and that other citizens’ interests need to be taken into account. In other words, caring and just democratic schools promote reasonable passion for ideals and at the same time show how passionate idealism can be perverted by (violent) extremism.

However, we have also noted that we should be realistic in the expectations we have about what schools can do. To lay all the burden for countering extremism on the shoulders of the school, would be a form of what Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers call the educationalization of the problem:⁶² schools are made accountable for solving the problems that society causes. This is something schools should reject, as they can only contribute to part of the solution while educating the next generation. The investment of schools in preventing extremism and promoting the democratic allegiance of adolescents will only pay off if adolescents

61. Stijn Sieckelinck and Femke Kaulingfreks, *Speelruimte voor identiteit. Samenwerken aan veerkrachtig identiteitsvorming van jongeren* [Room for Identity Development: Cooperation toward Resilient Identity Formation of Young People] (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: AUP, 2021), 132 (our translation).

62. Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers, “Educationalization as an Ongoing Modernization Process,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 379–389.

experience that it is also to their advantage to think and act democratically,⁶³ that they experience a just and caring environment not only in but also outside the school. Therefore, governments and other agencies also have to make sufficient effort to enhance these values in society.

Finally, it is important to recognize that teachers are in a vulnerable position. In multiple countries, far-right parties have set up tip-off lines for “leftist indoctrination” in schools,⁶⁴ and since the beheading of Samuel Paty in France in October 2020, teachers are extremely cautious about critically discussing Islamist dogmatism or showing cartoons of the prophet Muhammed. Thus, teachers do have to think twice about discussing emotionally charged religious or political topics, as they may lead to classroom conflicts or even violent acts by extremist students. Therefore, as scholars we need to accept the possibility that a theoretically well-defended strategy to prevent extremism may be unfeasible in a particular school context, and therefore keep talking to teachers about what they believe they can and dare to do. At the same time, there is the important idea that investing in additional structural support from outside the school may be a necessary part of strengthening the democratic ethos inside the school.⁶⁵ Teachers must not be forced to stand alone.

63. Micha de Winter, *Verbeter de wereld, begin bij de opvoeding. Vanachter de voordeur naar democratie en verbinding* [Improve the World, Start with Upbringing: From behind the Front Door to Democracy and Connection] (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: SWP, 2011).

64. Ico Maly, *Nieuw Rechts* [New Right] (Antwerpen, Belgium: EPO, 2018).

65. Rhian Jones, Dawn Rees, and Les Davies, *A Class of Their Own: The Youth Workers in Schools Youth Work Methodology Handbook*, 2014, <https://www.cwvys.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/HB-Youth-Workers-in-Schools.pdf>; Jeremy Rijnders, Willeke Manders, and Judith Metz, “Elements and Conditions for Successful Collaboration between Professional Youth Work and Schools for Secondary Education,” *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 3 (2021): 17–36; and Sieckelinck and Stephens, “Education.”