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What should schools do about Radicalisation?

Paul Thomas (University of Huddersfield)

Opening remarks as Invited Panellist at Westminster Faith Debate 'What should Schools do about Radicalisation?', RUSI, London, 1st July 2015.

It's helpful to start with two contextual points. Firstly, despite having the Prevent strategy since 2007, it's only recently that schools have come to the forefront of concern through the combination of the Syria crisis and the 'Trojan Horse' affair. Suddenly they are under the pressure of this new legal duty to implement Prevent and fundamental British values, policed by OFSTED inspection. Secondly, despite this legal pressure, we have to acknowledge that the 'radicalisation' schools are being asked to spot amongst young people is a highly problematic concept – increasingly, academics question whether there is such a thing as 'radicalisation'; certainly the predictive power of any models of radicalisation – who will actually go on towards involvement in terrorism – is very weak, so any policy that asks schools to prioritise this spotting is going to have difficulties.

In addressing what schools should do, we need to look at what Prevent is currently supporting and not supporting schools to do. Here, the 'triangle' model used by Prevent is helpful, with the broad group of young people in general at the base, a middle section of young people seen in potential need of targeting because of the demographic and peer group/community influences that may make them vulnerable, and the 'acute' group of 'at risk' individuals at the apex. Currently, Prevent is asking schools to really only focus on those at the apex and is doing this through WRAP (Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent) training for staff to help them spot

individuals showing signs of vulnerability to radicalisation and refer them to the 'Channel' counter-radicalisation counselling scheme. There is little or no Prevent focus on the other two groups of young people and this is highly problematic; for the reasons stated earlier, focussing on spotting radicalisation will only ever have limited success and, more importantly, it inevitably involves increased securitisation through police involvement and the worrying potential for a negative and stigmatising focus on Muslim students – recent clumsy measures in schools that have been reported in the press highlighted how such a focus can be counter-productive.

I believe that we need to help schools go beyond this legal duty and focus on anti-extremism education with the two broader groups. Firstly, we need to support and encourage schools – give them permission – to bring political debate and activity in to schools, to encourage debate of radical ideas, with all young people. This should be done both in a planned way, using RE and a re-prioritised citizenship studies and in a reactive way when national and international events impact on young people though finding space in the curriculum. This would obviously need more focus in Initial teacher training and continuous professional development on facilitating difficult debates; above all it needs politicians to give heads and teachers licence to engage in such democratic education. Such an approach would both teach the skills and conventions of democratic political debate and would help young people develop the skills of questioning and checking different sources and claims.

A great example of this is work our University of Huddersfield has done with Kirklees council and Parliament's Education Service. The 'My Country, My Vote' project has involved young people in four local high schools forming campaigning groups on local, national and international issues, standing for election and hundreds of fellow

students voting. One of those schools was the Dewsbury High school that saw two ex-students go to Syria recently. The project has encouraged passionate and engaged involvement from young people, with Muslim young women to the fore, its involved community cohesion within and between schools and has shown young people the power of democratic involvement. Of course there are risks and difficulties in allowing open debate of controversial subjects within schools, but even the most inflammatory statements made will be mild compared to the extremist material available to all young people at the click of their mouse – the way to defeat extremism is to confront young people with radical ideologies and then critique them, not shield them from them.

Such a broad and non-stigmatising approach of educating against extremism amongst all young people in schools would legitimise the focus on vulnerable individuals and would also enable a targeting of smaller groups in need of more sustained educational input; here schools could and should be supported to draw on special educational projects, such as the South Wales-based 'Think Project' that Ted Cattle and I have been supporting. Think is a project aimed at 'vulnerable' white young people with strong racist views about minorities and at risk of influence by far-right groups. Rather than condemn them, Think takes them through an intense three day educational programme that includes meetings with Muslim and Asylum Seekers, so that young people can experience the human reality behind the media stereotypes. This experience has enabled profound learning and attitudinal shifts amongst most of the young people taking part. At the moment, the vast majority of the Prevent budget is Police salaries. Instead, the Police need to step back and Prevent should resource projects like Think so that schools and

colleges in their region can draw on them for work with targeted groups of students.

Helping schools to focus much more on anti-extremism education with students in general and with targeted groups within them will not guarantee to stop any individual young person moving towards terrorist acts but no preventative measures can guarantee that.

Unlike the present limited and inherently negative basis of the current 'spot the potential terrorist' approach, focussing on genuine educational processes with young people of **all** ethnic, social and faith backgrounds will provide a positive and non-stigmatising basis for work on radicalisation, one that supports the democratic values of equal citizenship that we are defending in the face of terrorist violence.