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Education and Extremism: “Fundamental British Values” in the Classroom

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KIERAN FORD, APR 25 2016

The threat of extremism captures the attention of media and academic circles alike. Horrendous attacks by Islamic State-affiliated individuals in Brussels and Paris in recent months, and a fear of significant numbers of European Muslims deciding to head to Syria in order to live and fight under the ISIS “Caliphate”, mean that extremism remains ever-present in popular discourse, and demands for more to be done are regularly aired. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the UK Government is keen to explore all avenues when compiling its counter-extremism and counter-radicalisation strategies. As David Cameron recently wrote: “the extremist narrative needs to be fought every day at the kitchen table, on the university campus, online and on the airwaves”. In tackling the threat from extremism, the UK Government – like many others across Europe and further afield – has emphasised efforts to counter “radicalisation”, highlighting the role of countering ideology as a key pillar of counter-extremism strategy (H.M. Government 2015, p.17).

“Radicalisation” gained salience as a term after the London bombings in July 2005, as scholars attempted to explain the phenomenon of “homegrown terrorism” (Sedgwick 2010), acts of political violence by citizens of the same country. Radicalisation offered an answer to the question of how someone could come to the resolution to engage in violence in order to promote a particular political or ideological position. Such scholarship has been heavily criticised both for its lack of empirical evidence (Bartlett and Miller 2012) and for its transformation of Muslim communities into “suspect communities” (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). Scholars of radicalisation focus on addressing a whole host of factors that they believe contribute to an individual’s radicalising journey (Schmid 2013). Such factors offer concrete and actionable factors for governments, keen to understand what makes someone “vulnerable” to radicalisation, and to engage a response of counter-radicalisation.

One such avenue for governmental intervention has been within the education sector. Such an intervention strategy consists of two complementary elements: a surveillance arm known as the “Prevent duty”, and a values-education arm, ensuring schools promote “fundamental British values”. Under the UK Government’s counter-radicalisation strategy “Prevent”, childcare providers, schools and universities must “have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. In practice this demands that teachers, lecturers – even child-minders – must be trained in how to spot signs of radicalisation amongst those under their care. Teachers have challenged such legislation – most recently, the National Union of Teachers passed a motion at their annual conference demanding the strategy “be withdrawn”. Such a law has been strongly criticised for creating “suspicion and confusion” amongst teaching staff. The duty has already provoked the simultaneously laughable and tragic horror stories such as when a 10-year-old boy was interviewed by police in January this year for misspelling “terraced” and writing that he lives in a terrorist house.

The discourse of “fundamental British values” has gained attention within media circles, while within academic circles, the beams of the spotlight have been pointed predominantly at the Prevent duty. Yet this secondary element of school counter-radicalisation strategy has become ever more embedded in schools’ commitment to countering the threat of extremism, meriting greater academic attention. As the current guidance to schools says:

All have a duty to “actively promote” the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty,

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and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.

This article expands on the criticism developed within the media that teaching “fundamental British values” is highly problematic, through exploring not only how confusing such terminology is, but also how the discourse of “British” values contributes to the division between various communities in the UK. Through actively narrowing the spectrum of legitimate opinion, the teaching of “fundamental British values” creates a docile, British insider, and a threatening, non-British outsider. The article argues that the government’s emphasis on schools within counter-radicalisation strategies and the promotion of particular values might appear benign. Yet, look underneath this form of values-education, and a more sinister reality emerges.

But What are “British Values”?

One of the only commonalities between those who have attempted to define either “British values” or “Britishness”, is to remark on the impossibility of the task. Britishness seems to imply contradiction, uncertainty and paradox. This was certainly the message when the teaching of British values was first included within the national curriculum in 2002 (though only included in counter-extremism strategies since 2011). Yet, even in 2002, such an idea was mired in confusion with the then Minister of State for Schools and Learners, Jim Knight, saying:

I’m not sure whether exclusively there are characteristics you can define as British, but I think there are important values to promote. The values of being British as we define them for ourselves can’t be taught but can be cultivated. The whole school ethos should be about tolerance, respect, liberty and fundamental British values. Be proud of your country but define Britishness for yourself.

Here, Knight appears to de-couple this set of values and “Britishness”. He introduces certain values – tolerance, respect, liberty, etc. – while “fundamental British values” are separate, disjointed, and unspecific. The current definition, as described in the Prevent strategy, has altered slightly. Here, “fundamental British values” plays the role of an umbrella term that “includes” (but is not limited to?) four key ideas: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance (H.M. Government 2011). In practice (at a school policy level), the notion of “includes” is ignored, and these four values provide a distinct and closed set of values that are fundamentally “British”.

However, while such a set of values has become enshrined in law and curriculum alike, the ability of schools to transmit such values to their pupils has been challenged. Michael Goodwin, writing as the head of a Quaker school, Sibford School, for example, questioned whether schools should “really promote an unquestioning adherence to the rule of law”. Goodwin cites the UK’s involvement in the arms trade and related human rights abuses, and how, at a recent arms fair, only those protesting the UK’s involvement were arrested. That the current government asks that schools promote respect for the law, as part of “British values” is perhaps unsurprising. However, as Goodwin notes, this poses a number of challenges for teachers and students alike.

To give another example, how are schools to discuss the civil disobedience of the Suffragette Movement? David Cameron, speaking to the Conservative Party conference in October 2015 said:

We should be saying what’s right with Britain. Freedom. Democracy. Equality. These [values] are precious. People fought for them – many died for them in the trenches, a century ago; on the beaches, 30 years later; in the Suffragettes.

David Cameron here links the Suffragettes with British values. Indeed, the Suffragettes were celebrated as part of the London Olympics in 2012. Yet, it is also well known that the Suffragettes used both violent and non-violent direct action; even bombs were planted, with many activists facing prosecution. If the Suffragettes are truly “British”, then how can an unquestioning attitude towards the rule of law be British also?

Such confusion was spread further when it was revealed in September 2015 that police, while training teachers in West Yorkshire in their Prevent duty, cited the example of Green MP Caroline Lucas blockading a road during an anti-

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fracking demonstration in 2013, as an example of “extremism”. Not only was Lucas acting against British values, it appears she had also become “radicalised” and was an “extremist”. Lucas was far less violent than some Suffragettes, and certainly appears committed to the UK’s democratic process, if not committed to a blinkered deference to the rule of law.

Furthermore, to shift the focus to those offering such training, the police appear at times “less than British” themselves. The policing of protest movements, burdened with the problematic terminology of “domestic extremism”, has often been criticised for criminalising legitimate protest, showing little regard for democratic norms. As the recent cases of undercover police having sexual relationships with protest movement members also show, the police have at times themselves demonstrated less than British attitudes towards the rule of law. Such mixed messages leave teachers, unsurprisingly, feeling unsure and confused about how to teach these values.

The confusion regarding who is an extremist, and who is not, relies on an uncertain and normative definition of extremism. Definitions are hard to find. One attempt merely notes extremism as “deviations from the norm” (Borum 2011, p. 9). Another, using a bell curve analogy labelled attitudes as extreme for existing at the fringes of orthodox opinion (Lake 2002). What begins to emerge, therefore, is an understanding that counter-extremism education relies on drawing more and more students into the homogenous and orthodox middle ground, with two side-effects: the alienation of those “other” to the norm, and the production of docile subjects, capable of perpetuating the status quo.

The fact that the Suffragettes are now in the realms of history whereas fracking is a key topic of the present is important to consider. The notion of “fundamental British values”, with sentimentality for past achievements in struggles for equality, and a strong focus on the rule of law, places the Britain of today distinctly outside of a realm of questioning. The underlying message is that we have a fixed set of values that those such as the Suffragettes have fought for, that we can *now* be proud of – a clever teleological narrative shielding the leaders and issues of today. Despite the Department of Education encouraging what it calls “critical thought” in the classroom, it is quite clear from government messages that whether one engages in the journey critically or not – the destination (approval of the status quo) is pre-set. When one considers the impact this has on schools, it appears that the government is altering the role of schools quite dramatically. Whereas schools might be conceptualised as spaces for ideas to be engaged with, and minds to be opened, a school that aims to promote this discourse of “fundamental British values”, aims instead to produce docile pupils, deferent to decision-makers in power.

Thus far, this brief article has examined why schools are becoming enveloped in the fight against extremism, and how this is both proving a challenge for teachers, and transforming the nature of the education on offer. But it is vital also to consider the impact of these changes on students. An underlying question remains. *Who* is British? Exploring the British value of “tolerance” helps answer this. Beneath this discourse of inclusivity, lies a clear margin between those it includes, those who “we all know are really British”, and those communities who the government simply cannot trust.

(In)tolerance, Britishness, Inclusion and Rejection

While government documentation and academics alike are often keen to express how radicalisation refers to all forms of extremism, in practice, the vast majority of effort is focused on the issue of Islamic extremism (Kundnani 2009, H.M. Government 2011). For example, one school policy seen by the author, listed examples of “extremist language” to aid teachers’ understanding of the factors of radicalisation. The list described eight different terms – all of which were Islamic terms that were key components of Islamic theology. The majority of Prevent funding is deployed to those areas in the UK with large Muslim populations, and the majority of those referred to Channel, the de-radicalisation programme, are Muslim. Research shows that young Muslims in particular feel under the gaze of the authorities irrespective of the “extremity” of their theology, creating a definitive gap between Muslim and non-Muslim communities (e.g. Choudhury and Fenwick 2011).

Yet, what is fascinating, and indeed frustrating, is the UK Government’s inability to see the role it itself plays in perpetuating the very divisions it is seeking to address. The UK Government upholds that it celebrates tolerance, respects those of other beliefs, and that extremists are those who do not. David Cameron’s 2011 speech at the

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Munich Security Conference was instrumental in defining the then coalition government’s policy on inclusion and extremism. Here, Cameron outlines the threat:

In the UK, some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practiced at home by their parents, whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to modern Western countries. But these young men find it hard to identify with Britain too, because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity.

Cameron clearly presents an antagonism between two cultures. He continues: “We’ve failed to provide a society to which they feel they want to belong. We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.” Cameron’s deployment of “us” and “them” indicates an uncritical attitude towards what he perceives as two distinct communities. Yet, through placing blame for segregation purely on the “other” community, Cameron demonstrates his inability to acknowledge his own role in perpetuating this sense of division. Rather than this division being something created purely by the “other” in society, the division is mutually produced, and government strategies, such as the promotion of “fundamental British values”, play a key role in this.

Cameron used the term “us” in his speech. It is apparently self-evident that this “us” already understands “British values”. The UK is not the only country to see “values” as an important component of a counter-radicalisation strategy. Australia also sees the importance of asserting “Australian values” to counter extremism. Yet, writing on the issue of Australian values, Peterson and Bentley note, “the use of exclusive language implies that only some (largely Muslims) have learning to do, while others already know, understand and accept Australian values” (Peterson and Bentley 2016, p. 244). That it is only a minority that currently lack “fundamental British values” can only alienate those, predominantly Muslims and ethnic minorities, who the strategies are trying to include. The discourse of “fundamental British values” actively communicates to certain sectors in the community that they are not “really” British. The “inclusivity” of such values being taught in schools only serves to produce the same alienation that the strategy is set up to address.

Tolerance is a “fundamental British value”. However, while one typically understands tolerance to mean the acceptance of others and the multitude of faiths, values and upbringings that this entails, the linking of tolerance and extremism as opposites, alongside an education that imposes a set of values, suggests something quite different. The reality is much closer to its deployment in engineering or biology – the maximum amount of pain before collapse. When the government deploys the term tolerance, what it really means is: we must be tolerated, and we can only tolerate a certain amount of heterogeneity. The scope for whom they tolerate is in fact relatively small, demonstrating ironically little tolerance. Tolerance appears to be a fig leaf value, shielding the intolerance and divisive attitudes at the policy’s heart.

Conclusion

As part of a problematic counter-radicalisation strategy that focuses intensively on British Muslims, the UK Government teaches its young population that we have a shared set of “fundamental British values” around which a collective identity can be forged. Not only are such values contradictory and confusing, as has been shown, but the deployment of these values plays a cogent role in the very division that the intention of such values-education is meant to bridge. The article has highlighted two dominant effects of the discourse of values education. First, it narrows the spectrum of non-extreme opinion, contributing to the production of docile students and the perpetuation of the status quo through labelling dissent as both extreme and non-British. Second, it clearly delineates between those included within British society, and those who are excluded. While a great deal of attention is being paid to the surveillance role being demanded of teachers and university lecturers in aiding the UK Government in halting extremism, critical awareness must be drawn to the active role the very same government plays in provoking division and exclusion between communities. That a government-endorsed set of values is undemocratic may come as no surprise. The fact that this set of values has broadly gone unchallenged should come as a grave concern.

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