

Open Democracy

Extremism and 'Prevent': the need to trust in education

PAUL THOMAS and TED CANTLE 10 December 2014

'Prevent' is the part of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy designed to respond to the ideological challenges of terrorism and extremism. Are its priorities self-defeating? There are promising alternatives.



Nottingham University

model United Nations. Martin Sylvester/Flickr. Some rights reserved.

In responding to the recent Select Committee Report into the terrorist murder of soldier Lee Rigby, Home Secretary Theresa May has offered a significant strengthening of anti-terrorism measures. These include greater responsibility for all public organisations to contribute to terrorism-prevention. They also confirmed a greater focus, post the [Trojan Horse affair](#), on schools, colleges and other educational institutions: the teaching of British values are now compulsory for all state-supported schools in England, and OSFTED are actively investigating their implementation during their inspections of both schools and colleges. Universities have also been obliged to re-double their efforts to ban 'extremism' on campuses.

Responding to terrorism

However, amidst this flurry of activity there are few signs of any actual anti-extremist education taking place. Our concern is that the *Prevent* focus on identifying young people viewed as vulnerable to radicalisation is taking attention away from the need to promote the prevention of extremism through educational approaches that build individual and collective youth resilience that not only just teach the principles of democratic citizenship but actually put it into practice.

We feel that initiatives such as the Welsh-based [Think Project](#) show how to do this through open and robust educational conversations. However, currently such open and upfront political education work is not being prioritised by *Prevent* - educational practitioners are not being trained and supported to undertake

such work – and the wider context of citizenship education is being downplayed in England under the Coalition.

Leading academic analysts of terrorism such as Richard English have long-argued that how democratic states respond to terrorist threats is crucial – a response of repression or unjustified surveillance can represent precisely the undermining of democratic rights and processes that extremist groups hope to achieve. In that context, we argue that *Prevent*'s failure to trust in, and promote processes of, genuine education built around principles of democratic and equal citizenship represents a failure of our national democratic traditions and our nerve as a society in the face of an undoubted terrorist threat.

***Prevent* and young people**

From its inception, the [Prevent counter-terrorism strategy](#) has been controversial for two reasons. Firstly, the focus on Muslims only (something that seems not to have changed despite the claims of the 2011 *Prevent* review) contradicted the policy approach of community cohesion, which was emphasising commonality and more complex identities, and has led to predictable Muslim perceptions of stigmatisation. Secondly, *Prevent*'s preventative approach of engagement has increasingly led to a reality of Police/Counter-Terrorism Unit dominance in a community-based programme, with the inevitable charge of creating a 'suspect community'.

Prevent has very significantly focused on young people, engaging with very large numbers of young Muslims in Labour's 'Prevent 1' phase and a continuing concern with young people and educational institutions in the Coalition's smaller 'Prevent 2'. The prioritisation of *Prevent* measures through OFSTED inspections in the wake of the Trojan Horse Birmingham Schools affair (which was actually about religious conservatism, NOT terrorism) has simply deepened the securitised nature of *Prevent* as Police officers visit more schools to warn 'vulnerable' young Muslims.

As we [have argued previously](#), there has been precious little evidence here of actual education input for these young people – *Prevent* has not focused on, or encouraged, open political debate and education about the sort of domestic and international political issues that may anger some young Muslims and attract them towards more radical groups. The 2008 School *Prevent* Toolkit was side-lined in favour of schools focusing on core curriculum subjects, whilst the UK Youth Parliament's offer to lead a national political education training programme for youth workers was rejected.

Under the Coalition, the *Prevent* approach to young people has increasingly been one of 'child protection' – these are 'vulnerable' young people who must be 'safeguarded' from terrorism's ideological virus; but there is little by way of real education to help build the political resilience against such extremist narratives (whether Islamist or far-right racist).

In the latest *Prevent* measures, the further pressure to ban extremist speakers in universities and colleges will remove almost all opportunity for young people to hear extremist views and to have them challenged in an open and reasoned way, as though they are so seductive that any attempt to oppose them will result in failure. More generally, the Government seems very reluctant to allow a more open debate about a wider range of contentious issues in which young people can begin to acquire a political and religious literacy.

Educating against extremism

What we urgently need to see *Prevent* encourage and support is the approach advocated by Lynn Davies, which she terms '[educating against extremism](#)' in both schools and communities. Here, the success of the *Think* Project, a Swansea-based anti-extremism education initiative created by a local BME

organisation has much to offer and that is why we support the replication of their approach in other parts of the UK.

The *Think* Project targets local white young people seen as vulnerable to far-right racist ideologies and organisations. But it has learnt the lessons of [previous anti-racist educational work](#). *Think* does not see racist language or behaviour by young people as evidence of inherent, essential racism that must be condemned. Instead it sees young people's radical/racist views as fluid and potentially changeable.

Their educational approach is one of open dialogue, with prejudiced views challenged but in a patient and respectful way that encourages young people to re-think assumptions through exposure to different perspectives. This includes dialogue with local asylum seekers about their actual experiences and the input of a confident, trained and ethnically-mixed staff team who demonstrate 'cohesion' in action. Above all, the *Think* Project trusts the power of education and shows a faith in the potential of all young people to develop resilience against extremism and hatred by enabling them to learn and to practice real, democratic debate and citizenship.

Three fundamental learning points for Prevent emerge from the *Think* Project experience:

- Firstly, the need for training that gives educational practitioners the right skills and approaches to confidently engage young people in processes of debate and reflection.
- Secondly, the need for educational leaders and, more importantly, politicians to trust teachers and youth workers to engage in such political education debates with young people – such processes inevitably lead to the airing of strong language and strong views but these are much better aired within facilitated educational processes that are set against multiple perspectives, than in private spaces where no challenge or learning is encouraged.
- Thirdly, such anti-extremist educational processes need a sound philosophical base. 'British values' is a highly controversial concept, whereas processes of citizenship education based around concepts of human rights enable young people of all backgrounds to appreciate that they have rights but also have responsibilities.

An investment in and encouragement of such anti-extremist educational processes by Prevent would show that the UK believes in and trusts its own democratic system and that it upholds a real sense of equal citizenship in the face of a terrorist threat. Prioritising surveillance and fear over education is both stigmatising and self-defeating.

We also recognise that 'education' does not just take place in the classroom. Indeed, it is important that societal processes support and underpin formal education and learning. [A new pan-European study led by Miles Hewstone of Oxford University](#) has shown that everyday learning through positive intergroup contact, develops both directly and indirectly to improve the understanding and acceptance of diversity.

While also including the tackling of disadvantage, we conclude from this that we need to re-invigorate those wider schemes that were begun under the community cohesion agenda, schemes that have been increasingly reduced and marginalised. We need to provide a counter-balance to the negative narrative which is succeeding across Europe where popular extremist and nationalist parties are growing. This is often reflected in the press and media too.

Young people are emerging into an increasingly globalised world, but have few opportunities to acquire intercultural competences in which they are able to negotiate national, faith and cultural boundaries, with tolerance and respect, rather than retreat in fear.

This is a challenge for all young people and is not confined to Muslims, migrants and other minorities; a sense of belonging needs to be shared by the entire population. As populations grow and become ever more globalised, governments need to take responsibility for a more positive vision of diversity, and to promote the development of shared spaces in which such debate can take place and be facilitated.

About the authors

Paul Thomas is Professor of [Youth and Policy](#) at the University of Huddersfield and author of [*Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism – Failing to Prevent*](#).

The Cantle Report in 2001 followed disturbances in a number of English regions. In 2005, Professor Ted Cantle established the [Institute of Community Cohesion \(iCoCo\)](#), the UK's leading authority on community cohesion and intercultural relations. He is the author of [*Interculturalism: The New Era of Cohesion and Diversity*](#).