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Terrorism in the Nursery: considering the implications of the British Values discourse and the Prevent duty requirements in early years education

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ABSTRACT This article explores some of the implications of the British Values discourse within early years education and the consequences of the Prevent duty requirements. It highlights some of the ethical dilemmas imposed as a result of the potential securitisation of early years education, and also explores the very ethos of British Values within early years pedagogy.

Introduction

The Prevent duty (Her Majesty's Government, 2015) forms part of the government's wider counter-terrorist stratagem CONTEST (Her Majesty's Government, 2011a) and places a duty upon all registered schools and childcare providers to promote fundamental British Values [1], defined as: democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (Her Majesty's Government, 2011b). In addition, there is a statutory obligation placed upon the education workforce to report any concerns they may have in relation to children and families displaying extreme and ideological views and those who are felt to be at potential risk of being drawn into acts of terrorism. These relatively recent requirements are not without censure, and it is the problematised discourse relating to British Values and the securitisation of early years education that will be explored in this article.

Prevent Duty: its origins and tensions

It is worth noting that political and religious extremism is not a new phenomenon and that it has been a repeated and significant part of history (Ghosh et al, 2016). Yet our current counter-terrorism policy and Prevent strategy finds its roots in the origins of the 'war on terror'.

Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC in 2001, the American president, along with other western leaders, declared a 'war on terror' (Errante, 2003). This prompted both the US government and the UK government to begin the job of reviewing their own internal infrastructures in response to this new terrorist threat, and subsequently led to the UK's first coordinated, pan-government counter-terrorism strategy.

Since its inception, the strategy has grown and developed in response to the perceived threats from terrorism, with its approach centred on four main areas:

- Pursue: the investigation and disruption of terrorist attacks;
- Prevent: work to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism and extremism;
- Protect: improving our protective security to stop a terrorist attack;
- Prepare: working to minimise the impact of an attack and to recover from it as quickly as possible. (Her Majesty's Government, 2011a, p. 10).

In the wake of the London bombings of 2005, the government acknowledged that Prevent was the least evolved of its strategies (UK Parliament, 2010) and so made a concerted effort to engage the wider community, at grass-roots level, in the prevention of terrorism. Recognising that it was not enough just to deal with those who plan to deliver violence, and that there was a need to focus on those who may be vulnerable to committing acts of terrorism in the future, the government invested some £80 million, across 94 local authorities, in a combination of youth and community projects designed to support social cohesion (Casciani, 2014). The majority of these 1000 projects were centred on Muslim communities, and, while some schemes attracted success, many had the opposite effect, causing resentment, division and social antagonism (Awan, 2012). While in hindsight it is easy to mock the efforts of a government trying to grapple with the effects of contemporary terrorism (Vertigans, 2010, p. 61), it must be acknowledged that this 'hearts and minds' approach was neither a fiscal nor a civic triumph.

Under the new coalition government, the Prevent strategy was reviewed in 2010, resulting in a renewed approach to youth engagement and the introduction of a requirement for schools to actively promote fundamental British Values. Teaching standards were revised to ensure that teachers did not undermine these values, and non-statutory guidance was issued to advise schools on how to deal with the potential problems of radicalisation. Furthermore, a specific unit was set up in the Department for Education (DfE) to help combat extremism, and Ofsted was given the responsibility of inspecting

how well schools dealt with any potential problems of radicalisation (Ghosh et al, 2016).

Further terrorist attacks across Europe and the controversial 'Trojan Horse' scandal in Birmingham prompted the government to change tack and adopt a policy of more 'muscular liberalism' (Poole, 2016). Blaming the rise in extremism on previous approaches of 'passive tolerance' to multiculturalism, the government intensified its rhetoric and introduced a new Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015). Under section 26 of this new legislation, active collaboration with the Prevent strategy became statutory for all schools and registered childcare providers, imposing on them the duty to promote integration through the teaching of fundamental British Values and stressing the need to refer any individual considered to be at harm from extremism or vulnerable to radicalisation. This wide-sweeping statutory act over the entire education sector made Prevent the world's most extensive counter-radicalisation policy, and places the UK as one of the most authoritative leads in counter-terrorism strategy (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015).

Panjwani (2016) recognises that schools and education 'cannot remain unconcerned with the threat of extremism' (p. 338), but, like many others, he also voices concern over the securitisation of education. Is it right for schools and early years providers to take responsibility for elements of the nation's security troubles? Furthermore, what about the preservation of 'free enquiry' and 'critical thought'? Surely radical ideas and questions are the bedrock of education for all ages? They certainly form part of the characteristics of effective learning promoted by the early years education agenda (Early Education, 2012). Ghosh et al (2016) argue in favour of education being brought into the government's fight against terrorism. Aware of the psychological, emotional and intellectual appeal used by terrorists, they propound that education is the correct platform from which to develop resilient citizens who are capable of critical thinking and ethical conduct.

Much research shows that this focus on Islamic extremism within the Prevent strategy is not helpful, but rather socially divisive, creating a culture of Muslims as a 'suspect' population, and that the government's episteme is in danger of 'demonising all Muslims' (Tomlinson, 2015). This concept is very much at odds with the 'unique child' pedagogy espoused by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017). However, the impact of this 'group-labelling' is not lost within the realms of education as examples are cited of pupils being stereotyped because of heritage or religion. One such case presented by the Muslim British Council (MBC) (Khaleeli, 2015) tells of a pupil being reported for extremism after asking how to build a bomb during a lesson on nuclear fusion; his non-Muslim counterparts who asked the same question were not reported. In a further seemingly ridiculous example, a nursery raised concerns when a four-year-old child mispronounced 'cucumber', with staff believing that he was saying 'cooker bomb' (Fox, 2016). Unfortunately, these cases are unsurprising when teachers are afraid of not reporting matters and of being chastised by Ofsted for failure to report children's comments. Perhaps

then it is not just about the counter-terrorism policy content, but also our interpretation of it as educators and how we choose to respond to the Prevent duty requirements. Guidance published for schools and early years providers clearly states that 'the Prevent duty is not intended to stop pupils debating controversial issues' (DfE, 2015, p. 5). Rather, we should provide them with a safe space in which to develop their knowledge and skills in order to challenge extremism. Yet, while this concept may initially seem achievable, it creates an ontological dilemma. How do we debate controversial issues with our children without undermining fundamental British Values? Similarly, how do our children voice radical and critical ideas without raising suspicion and without fear of referral?

Farrell (2016) describes this dichotomy as the conflicting discourses of the 'neo-liberal war machine and the pluralist, critical and democratic models of education' (p. 283). This sentiment is shared by Sukarieh and Tannock (2015), who feel that the anti-radicalisation agenda in schools and early years has the potential not only to harm the civil rights of Muslims and other minorities, but also to undermine the use of education as an instrument of social change. Certainly, Simons (2016) notes how the term 'radical' historically had positive connotations, linked to trailblazers championing social change, but now holds the more negative association of terrorism and violence. Yet history is littered with progressive thinkers whose radical approaches have benefited society: Owen, Einstein, Pankhurst, Mandela and Wilberforce, to name but a few. One cannot even say that some of these reformers did not resort to violent acts in order to promote their own ideologies and demands. How, then, as educators do we promote radical thinking without compromising the securitisation of educational policy?

The Prevent duty recognises that as early years educators, we serve 'arguably the most vulnerable and impressionable members of our society' (Her Majesty's Government, 2015, p. 10), yet in order for us to fulfil our role in supporting this duty, I would argue that we first need to consider our own stance within this political domain of the counter-terrorism policy. What do we perceive to be extreme or socially acceptable? One can argue that one person's villain is another person's hero. Indeed, do we share the same views as other colleagues in our nurseries and childcare environments? If not, then we are in danger of inconsistencies with regard to the Prevent duty and, furthermore, with regard to the delivery of our support for the families and children we work with. Likewise, it can be argued that it is important for those of us working in early years to consider how we balance the more progressive pedagogies of our practice, which champion creativity and critical thinking, and actively promote individual ideas and opinions, within this modern educational arena – an arena that one could argue is potentially in danger of becoming stifled by securitisation and a culture of suspicion.

The British Values Discourse

Poole (2016) uses the notion of an 'othering discourse' and suggests that the 'Britishness' attributed to the values promoted in the Prevent duty does not serve to promote integration through an ideological national identity, but rather fosters a wary suspicion of anyone who may hold opposing views. Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) take this argument further and note that the term 'British Values' is socially divisive and intellectually dishonest. These feelings concur with those of colleagues I have worked within early years education who have voiced concerns over the concept of a homogeneous set of values.

In order to critically analyse the British Values discourse and link it to early years education, it is advantageous to rationally reflect upon what it actually means to be British. Evans (1996) notes that to talk of a British culture is unhelpful. Comparisons are made with the prospect of defining a culture as 'American or Asian', which cannot honestly reflect the diverse mix of values, dispositions or backgrounds held by the wide communities within these continents. Furthermore, this identity labelling of a culture does not capture the historical referents that have moulded contemporary reasoning or attitudes. To take this concept further, it is important to consider that whatever British Values are, they have changed – indeed, must change – to reflect different eras within social history. For example, attitudes have changed from times of slavery, colonialism, child labour and selective voting systems. To ignore these differences in social evolution could perhaps be seen as folly or indicate an air of arrogance. Tomlinson (2015) is critical of the values listed in the Prevent duty as being apparently British and proffers that democracy, social responsibility, freedom of choice and mutual acceptance of different principles and convictions are in fact universal human values upheld by many countries around the world.

This mismatch in political rhetoric and social practice poses real questions for those working within the early years sector. How should we interpret and teach British Values? What, indeed, is the true meaning of democracy, tolerance and individual liberty and how do we genuinely advocate this for all children in our care?

British Values and the Early Years Foundation Stage

The Prevent duty guidance recognises that the EYFS already places clear duties on early years providers to keep children safe and promote their welfare. It also acknowledges that early years educators focus on children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED), encouraging them to learn about similarities and differences between themselves and others and to learn right from wrong, and that the Statutory Framework requires practitioners to challenge negative attitudes and stereotypes. However, as recognised by the national charity 4Children (2015), early years practitioners are concerned about how they should interpret British Values in early childhood education and, furthermore, about how this would be assessed during Ofsted inspections.

The emphasis is on British Values being part of an overarching, holistic approach to early childhood education rather than being a 'topic' or display board to share at group times, with practical opportunities being provided for children to share, problem-solve and collaboratively establish rules and boundaries. When the values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of other beliefs and faiths are allowed to permeate practice rather than being introduced as abstract concepts, children can begin to construct their own understanding. Bentley (2012) is keen to emphasise this and points out that when fundamental values in the classroom are given meaning, and are not tokenistic, children have time to develop their understanding in far deeper ways, making them more resilient learners. Using the example of being tasked with contributing to the school's assembly on Martin Luther King, Bentley's article describes how fundamental values in the classroom, which she describes as multiculturalism, diversity and social justice, cannot be forced upon children. She advocates that children should not be taken along a topic 'ride' but, rather, that they should be given the time to develop their own ideas and outlooks: 'we cannot push or force this kind of understanding; it grows through respect, time and community' (Bentley, 2012, p. 200). Her action-based research demonstrates that pre-school children can be introduced to significant concepts, such as justice, but that as practitioners we need to bring it down to child level. For example, democracy can be simply demonstrated under the auspices of self-confidence and self-awareness in PSED by encouraging children to know that their views count, that they must value one another's views, and acknowledge their feelings. Opportunities to share, turn-take and collaborate in games or ideas help children to naturally develop their own decision-making processes. Erwin and Kipness (1997) suggest that children best understand democracy as a value when they are given the opportunity to make meaningful choices which pertain to their everyday lives. This is further increased when the children's decisions are honoured by both teachers and practitioners.

I would argue that the role of early childhood education in shaping and supporting children to develop lifelong values, be they termed British or otherwise, is vital. It is in these formative years that children begin to acquire pro-social moral behaviours, learn about diversity, develop empathy and practise tolerance. Further social advantages of early education are recognised by Garcia-Sanchez (2014), who explains that opportunities for children to learn about tolerance are greatly enhanced when they attend a nursery or preschool as these provide an environment in which a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures can mix. This is important, given the segregated nature of, and overt labelling used within, the English education system, although I would caution against falling into the trap of thinking that this opportunity to mix different backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures is the solution to learning tolerance and respect for others. Cultural referents extend beyond the early years environment. Indeed, with the progressive permeation of media into our homes, schools and leisure spaces, our children have a heightened exposure to what Errante (2003)

terms 'vicarious solidarity experiences' (p. 134), in which a 'them and us' discourse is repeated. Children can be exposed to the continual drip-feed of media reports and images that can have a negative impact on their developing social constructs: the image of an incident involving the black community and the white members of the police force in America; the video game in which the Arab-looking enemy is destroyed (Errante, 2003, p. 134); and the news report that continually refers to Islam when discussing the latest terrorist atrocity. Even without a personal, first-hand experience of any of these situations, children are constructing a social understanding through the television, the Internet and a range of media sources, creating an 'us against them' understanding of society, with the potential to dehumanise the 'other' as 'not us'.

With such vicarious violent acts becoming normal contexts for many children, I would suggest that as early years educators we should be aware of the potentially harmful effect this passive media experience is having upon our preschool children. Have we considered how to respond to children's stereotypes formed via vicarious experiences? Indeed, are our own views being shaped by this drip-feed of media representation and social construct rather than through informed and academic debate based upon research and facts? Following on from this, and with a practical pedagogical dilemma in mind, we should also consider how we might respond to the child who painstakingly builds a Lego tower only to knock it down 'because the terrorists blew it up', or to the small, caped superhero 'who decides to stop the Muslims'. Are we as early years teams prepared for these politically charged scenarios, and what is our chosen response? Indeed, do we have a shared response or will it depend upon our own interpretation of British Values?

Responding to children's stereotypes can be difficult for some practitioners who may feel unsure of how to challenge comments for fear of upsetting parents, yet the EYFS clearly states that it is a duty for all providers to ensure anti-discriminatory practice, and the Prevent duty plainly expects that we challenge negative attitudes and stereotypes. Putting policy rhetoric into practice is not always easy, but with children starting early schooling aware of racial and religious differences (Woods, 1952), it is essential that we address this. While Woods' research was conducted some sixty-plus years ago, her desire to eliminate the ignorance, misunderstanding and intolerance, which she felt threatened relationships all over the world, still rings true today.

Conclusion

Perhaps with these ideas in mind, as early years practitioners we need to consider the implications of the British Values discourse and the Prevent duty requirements in our work:

- What do British Values really mean in the context of a multicultural early years framework?
- How shared are our values, be they termed British or otherwise, within early childhood pedagogy?

- How do we formulate our understanding of extremism, and what does it look like?
- How do we present a genuinely democratic environment for our children that promotes both individual agency and social cohesion?
- How do we promote tolerance towards and respect for other beliefs and faiths without tokenism or stereotype?
- How do we choose to respond to children's play which may include politically charged scenarios based upon perceptions of terrorism and religious identity?

The answers to these questions cannot be fully explored within the limits of this article. However, I would argue that we should take time to critically reflect upon the implications of the British Values discourse and the Prevent duty requirements within early childhood education, within a human rights context and with full recognition that early childhood is a crucial space for reconstructing society (Elbrahim & Francis, 2008).

Note

[1] British Values is not presented in quotation marks for ease of reading, yet it should be assumed that throughout this article the concept is always under critique.

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