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Teaching about Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalisation: Some Implications for Controversial Issues Pedagogy

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Government advice in relation to ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE) in English schools requires teachers to identify students ‘at risk’ of radicalisation whilst also encouraging them to facilitate open classroom discussions of controversial issues. Data collected in seven schools illustrate how teachers are responding to this advice and illuminate three tensions within ‘controversial issues’ pedagogy. First we discuss the tension between depth and coverage in case studies, which risks treating history as parable. Second, we identify a problem with finding a genuinely open ethical dilemma to discuss, which entails the risk of adopting a hypocritical stance in the classroom. Third, we identify a tendency to perceive school as the antidote to undesirable social attitudes. The teachers’ responses highlight the usefulness of framing certain issues as ‘controversial’ but also illustrate how difficult this can be in practice, especially in the context of CVE, which is perceived by many as a controversial policy.

Keywords: controversial issues, citizenship education, Prevent, countering violent extremism, radicalisation, pedagogy

Introduction

In this article we discuss one aspect of the citizenship teacher’s role during the era of the ill-defined ‘War on Terror’. Teachers in several countries have been drawn into their governments’ counter-terrorism response, in what has been called the ‘instrumentalisation of civil society’ (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018). The teachers we discuss below are looked to by the state to carry out a form of security role, to monitor young people for signs either that they may pose a risk to others, or that they may be at risk of radicalisation by others. But these citizenship teachers are also charged with educating young people to understand terrorism and to understand contemporary

political debates about it, and the ubiquitous media coverage of it. In such a complex role, some have turned to controversial issues pedagogy, as a way to adopt a neutral response to a field which is fraught with controversy (including fundamental questions regarding whether anti-terror legislation is a proportionate response; who is defined by our governments as a terrorist; which violent groups are proscribed; and which are supported). Our case study is located in England, but for reasons we explain below, we believe the lessons we have identified are applicable in many countries.

In responding to the threat of terrorism, the UK government has developed a legislative and policy framework for countering violent extremism (CVE) which has influenced the approaches of other governments around the world (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018). A feature of such policy is that it is no longer solely concerned with acts of terrorism themselves, but instead deals with the development of all forms of ‘extremism’: so-called ‘pre-crime’ interventions (Palmer, 2012). In 2015 the government introduced a legal duty for schools and other public services to have ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’ (HMG, 2015). Extremism in this context has been defined as “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values” (FBVs), which are defined as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs (HMG, 2011). Schools are required to promote the FBVs (DfE, 2014), a responsibility which is regularly inspected (Ofsted, 2016), and teachers are individually forbidden from undertaking any actions to undermine them (DfE, 2011).

At the same time teachers are advised that they should facilitate classroom discussions of controversial issues, including those related to the FBVs and extremism (DfE, 2015), which positions teachers in a potentially difficult situation. On the one hand they are encouraged to engage young people in debates about controversial issues,

but on the other hand they are required to monitor the young people's opinions for signs that they may dissent from the FBVs, which is seen as a risk factor for developing extremist ideas. The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT), in collaboration with the Expert Subject Advisory Group for Citizenship, has produced guidance for teachers to help them navigate this difficult territory. They take the position that some issues in this broad area of public policy are controversial, whilst others are not, and teachers therefore must take care over how they define and teach such issues (ACT, 2015). ACT also secured funds from the Home Office to explore these issues in a curriculum development project with ten secondary schools in England, and this article is based on data collected during that project. The project is outlined in the methods section below, the next section considers the implications for couching this educational response in the broader tradition of teaching controversial issues.

Teaching controversial issues

There is a small but influential literature on controversial issues, which has helped to define what they are and why it is particularly useful for teachers to distinguish them from other types of issues they teach. The literature we draw on here is from different academic disciplines, conceptualised in relation to different curriculum subjects, and devised by a range of education actors. Some of the literature is philosophical and focuses on the criteria to be used for ascertaining whether an issue is genuinely 'controversial', for example Hand (2008; 2014) and Cooling (2012; 2014) have engaged in sustained debate about the nature and role of the 'epistemic criteria'. Other contributions focus on the subject-specific implications of engaging with controversy, for example in history (Barton & McCully, 2007), in geography (Cotton, 2006), in civics (Hess, 2009) or in science (Levinson, 2006). And guidance and frameworks for good practice have emerged from teacher organisations (ACT, 2015), government

(CCEA, 2015) and inter-governmental organisations (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). Whilst the literature tends to reflect approaches to teaching in established democracies, there is also engagement with this approach in conflict-affected societies (Pollak et al., 2018) and new democracies (Chikoko et al., 2011). In England, the committee which recommended the introduction of citizenship into the national curriculum included an appendix on the importance of tackling controversial issues (QCA, 1998), which explicitly built on older tradition of humanities teaching (Stradling, Noctor and Baines, 1984; Wellington, 1986).

So, what does this literature suggest about the importance of thinking about some issues as distinctly controversial? First, by way of definition, they are the kinds of issues that are not easily settled by facts alone, where there are legitimate alternative opinions, and which are held to be so important that they create conflict or social division (Stradling, Noctor and Baines, 1984; Wellington, 1986). This means arguments about controversial issues may be constructed from shared facts but by people who hold different values positions or world views (Oulton, Day, Dillon and Grace, 2004, p. 491). Consequently, such issues often arouse intense emotional responses (Perry, 1999) and this means discussions are not merely a rational exchange of alternative arguments, they are often 'complex, dirty and frequently involve an element of guilt on all sides' (Oulton et al., 2004, p. 493). This emotional dimension also means some groups seek to deny the legitimacy of other positions, and therefore contest whether the issue really is controversial (Claire and Holden, 2007). And this in turn means that making the decision that an issue is controversial is itself often controversial (Camicia, 2008), a problem compounded by the fact that issues which are intensely controversial in some countries (e.g. gay marriage, collective health care) may be less so in others, and that issues become more or less controversial over time (Hess, 2009).

In the social studies or citizenship class, the discussion of controversial issues serves an important purpose. It inducts young people into a fundamental aspect of democracy, by enabling them to understand how public deliberation takes place, and why society needs mechanisms for dealing with disagreements and conflicts (Misco, 2012, p. 70). Misco argues that such discussions also promote democratic values such as open-mindedness and embracing diversity, which in the UK context resonates with the promotion of the FBVs.

The pedagogic tradition relating to controversial issues contends that the problem of definition is worth grappling with because it makes a significant difference to how teachers approach such issues in their classroom. If one accepts an issue as genuinely controversial then it follows it would be inappropriate for a teacher to promote any particular opinion about that issue, and the main purpose of teaching is to impartially present the range of views, enable students to understand them, and support them to develop their own informed opinions about them (Hand, 2008). A key feature of teaching about controversial issues is to be clear what underlying principles are at stake, or as Hess (2009) puts it, to identify the perennial issues. This means that such teaching is always operating on two levels at least – firstly students are learning about the case in hand, and secondly they are learning through the case about the deeper political issues. There is considerable professional debate about the role of the teacher in such situations (Kelly, 1986; Kerr and Huddleston, 2015; Porter, 1991; Stradling, 1984) and in particular, whether it is appropriate for teachers to disclose their own opinions (Hess, 2009; Swalwell and Schweber, 2016).

These issues are all apparent in the UK in relation to CVE policy, which is seen by some as inherently controversial, whilst others claim it is not controversial at all. Those who see it as a controversial issue do so because it illustrates a perennial issue of

how the state balances actions to protect collective security with individuals' liberty to think and say what they want (see for example, Kundnani & Hayes, 2018). Whether or not the policy strikes the right balance is unlikely to be settled by facts alone, it generates strong emotions, and is a divisive public issue. On the other hand, those who dismiss this claim sometimes argue that these kinds of concerns are being constructed by extremists and extremist sympathisers as part of a 'Preventing Prevent' lobby, and therefore disingenuously misrepresent the actual level of concern and disagreement (see for example Sutton, 2016). On this view, the definition of the Prevent policy as a controversial issue itself becomes embroiled in contemporary politics, and teachers opting to treat it as such run the risk of being branded part of the 'Preventing Prevent' lobby.

This issue is by no means unique to this policy and this particular context, and Hlebowitsh (2005) has referred to the ways in which teachers may be constrained by the 'social and political winds' that blow through the school and affect the curriculum in different ways. As Misco (2012: 71) argues 'the sociohistorical location of the teacher and the teacher's negotiation of context is critical for the normative decision about what should be done about an issue.' Hess (2009) argues we need to think about the geographical and temporal context. Some issues are controversial in some states but not in others, some issues achieve a 'tipping point' and become controversial, or cease to be controversial as attitudes change. Swallowwell and Schweber (2016) point out that the context can also be understood in very local terms, deriving from political issues affecting a local area or even individual school.

There is also an even smaller scale contextual factor that may determine the approach taken by a teacher, and that reflects the curriculum context in which they are working in their school. In England, the Prevent policy has implications for whole

school policy relating to child safety, and through that it impacts on the pastoral curriculum, but it also connects directly with the citizenship curriculum, which exists as a subject in maintained secondary schools. The place of Prevent in the citizenship curriculum reflects the broader debate about the nature of citizenship education, which is at one level concerned with acquiring the knowledge and skills for effective citizenship, but at another level is concerned with the attitudes and values of young people and seeks to promote a commitment to the principles of democratic citizenship (Halstead and Pike, 2006). This means the subject is always treading a line between values education and knowledge building, and this brings us back to the importance of controversial issues, as those issues where the teacher will be genuinely neutral.

Sometimes it will be appropriate for the teacher to assert a values position, for example there is no expectation that the teacher would be neutral on the acceptability of racism or sexism, but at other times they will seek to construct discussion around related issues that are still considered to be controversial, for example, what should be done about the fact that police stop and search powers continue to be used disproportionately on black young people (Lammy, 2017). In such cases the teacher is more likely to engage with the issue from a variety of legitimate perspectives and to use a values-clarification approach (Raths et al., 1978), rather than seeking to promote any particular position. ACT's (2015) guidance on how to teach about Prevent in the citizenship curriculum urges teachers to be very clear if they are framing an issue as controversial and what reasons they have for that, and to be equally clear about what deeper knowledge students might gain through the study of a particular controversial issue.

Methodology

In 2015-16 the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) ran a project, funded by the Home Office, to develop a curriculum response to the Prevent policy in citizenship

classes. The project ran in ten schools, where citizenship teachers were supported by ACT to plan locally relevant projects, ranging from a short sequence of 2-3 lessons, to a major scheme of work stretching over half a term. The authors of this article evaluated the project and were able to collect data from all the schools, including from teachers, senior managers and young people (Jerome and Elwick, 2016). This article reports on interviews with eight of the teachers in seven of the schools (three of the schools were unable to accommodate a visit and teacher interview). During each school visit the interviewer observed a lesson and then interviewed the teacher with responsibility for the project (and the teacher whose lesson was observed where these were different). The semi-structured interviews included the following topics:

- Background questions about the schools' response so far to the Prevent duty.
- Questions about the teachers' own beliefs about the causes of radicalisation and the Prevent policy.
- Questions about the scheme of work they developed and the rationale for their focus.
- Evaluative questions about how the students were responding to the lessons, how the teachers' thinking had progressed and what the next steps for the school might be.

For this article the re-analysis of our interview data drew on the ideas outlined above, in our discussion of the controversial issues literature, and as such we drew on those ideas as 'sensitising concepts' enabling us to identify new insights from the data. When Blumer introduced the idea of sensitising concepts he distinguished them from 'definitive concepts' by arguing they only "give the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer, 1954, p.7), an idea echoed

by Charmaz who argues they provide “starting points for building analysis” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259). In this way we returned to our data to consider what teachers said in broad terms about conceptualising their teaching as controversial, but also more specifically to consider how they planned and taught case studies, how these related to underlying perennial issues, and how their teaching reflected their reading of the local context and the Prevent policy. To some extent our re-reading of these interviews was deductive, drawing on ideas in the literature, but these ideas were not tightly defined in advance, rather we allowed them to provide a series of general starting points. This means we have identified some insights that relate back to those issues identified in the literature, but we have sought to avoid the possible distortions arising from applying a tightly defined set of concepts to data that was generated independently of them. In this we are aware of the risk that imposing externally derived conceptual categories groups “objects and events and people around us into classes” and encourages us to “respond to them in terms of their class membership rather than their uniqueness” (Bruner, 1972 quoted in Thomas, 2007 , p. 152). Whilst the constraints of space preclude us from sharing all the details of our different respondents’ accounts, we have taken some space in the next section to illustrate three of the projects developed by teachers, before moving on to consider three general issues arising from our data.

Three case studies

This section provides three case studies to illustrate how varied the teachers’ choices were about how to approach the Prevent duty. These brief accounts demonstrate how teachers chose very different topics to focus on, and how these are related to their accounts of the context in which they were working.

School A: Far-right extremism

This school was situated near a town where various far-right organisations had been organising high profile marches to protest against immigration. These marches attracted far-right activists who organised coaches to transport them to the town, and in turn their activities attracted significant numbers of anti-fascist activists. The clashes on the streets, as the anti-fascists attempted to prevent the far-right from marching, required a substantial police presence, and the ensuing struggles disrupted local life, dominated the local press, and were widely seen as an expensive and intractable mess. The teacher saw this as the ideal way to tackle a local issue and engage with some of the important themes relating to the Prevent policy.

For the theoretical stuff to really take hold, they have to have some practicality, and see something that actually affects their lives. So local protests and fighting on their streets, well that affects them. (School A)

The issue was undoubtedly of interest to the students, and they were keen to know more about what was happening and why. The teacher's learning objectives included developing a better understanding of the immediate issues in the local area and deeper issues, such as:

Balancing the right to protest over the rights of others; the role of the police in protest; understanding that there are different ways to protest; understanding how communities can react differently to protest and come to resolutions, oh god there's loads... (School A)

This illustrates Hess's point about controversial issues being useful for teaching about the perennial issues which arise in any democracy.

The scheme of work consisted of local research and media analysis to explore a range of perspectives, then students formulated questions to ask of the different groups.

They invited in a local police officer, several local councillors, and a member of one of the anti-fascist groups and interviewed them to make a film about the events. Whilst the teacher decided not to invite in members of the EDL (a far right group), she did invite a UK Independence Party (UKIP) councillor to make the case against immigration. Here the teacher's emphasis was on identifying issues which were genuinely open dilemmas, in so far as there is no obvious answer to the issues listed above, and people will have a variety of legitimate answers. The learning consists in understanding the different positions and why they might be adopted, and shedding light on some of the core ideas in such debates.

School B: Rejecting extremism

The second example was developed in a school where some of the students' older brothers had left the country to fight for IS in Syria and been killed. There was a strong local network of schools working together with the local authority to establish intervention and support programmes to prevent similar incidents and so the school had already developed a range of activities around Prevent. These were largely seen as being part of the pastoral curriculum, and were focused on preparing individuals to deal with the personal risks of radicalisation:

I mean we have got some lessons which are 'don't become a terrorist, this is how a terrorist is going to come at you...' (School B)

But the new project this teacher was developing was attempting to take a more general look at terrorism through the lens of fundamental British values:

It's teaching people how democracy works, how the rule of law works, how you can support the rule of law, and making them realise, we've got freedoms in this country which aren't so bad and if you do have problem in this country then there are ways of sorting it out. (School B)

Significantly, although the context in which he worked involved direct experience of young people being recruited to fight abroad, this curriculum project was driven by promoting the FBVs rather than engaging with these concrete phenomenon.

The starting point was a fictional scenario about a conflict between the Hillys and the Billys, which grows over time and gets out of control. Then students looked at the Northern Ireland conflict and peace agreement to consider a real life scenario that mirrors aspects of the fictional one. Students also considered Nigel Farage, the (then) leader of UKIP as an example of someone who started their political life with a view that was seen as relatively fringe and eccentric (that the UK should leave the EU) and after 25 years of campaigning and arguing, this position won a majority in the 2016 referendum. Through such examples, the teacher hoped to illustrate that:

Even if there's something that doesn't look like a remote possibility, who knows, if you do it right, and persuade people, there's a way forward. And hopefully we get them to shun the use of violence as a way of getting change. (School B)

There is little investigation here of moral dilemmas or genuinely controversial issues – value positions are outlined and defended, as with the following example:

There's a divide between young people and adults and we had this when teaching FGM [female genital mutilation] – a lot of them were saying well if the girl agrees and she said she wants it to happen then that's her choice, it's up to her, and they don't see her as a victim and, you know, I'm trying to challenge that... You know, take violent extremism, [pupils may say] it's up to them, and [I want] to make them realise that actually it has really bad consequences not just for them but for the community as well and families. (School B)

Here the teacher essentially set out to model a values-transmission approach, rather than values-clarification, and to promote the fundamental British values. This created

tensions with the pedagogy associated with controversial issues, as will be seen below.

School C: Learning about ideology

The third school was in a different situation again, a relatively suburban school, where teachers felt there were no urgent or immediate local issues that connected to the Prevent agenda. Here the teacher took a rather different focus and emphasised the acquisition of knowledge:

We know that an attack happened in Paris, we want to know why it happened, where it came from, what the thinking behind it was. Not saying that then justifies it, but if it explains it, it then opens up into a critical discussion and you can't have a critical discussion just on your emotional response to whether you like or don't like an act... (School C)

Here, the teacher is interested in creating informed discussions, through which students can come to an enhanced understanding of terrorism and extremism. This shifts attention away from the individual terrorist, and the need to explain their state of mind or motivations, and opens up a broader framework for making sense of such incidents:

There's loads of people throughout history who have done things that are extreme, they have had extreme ideologies that go against the grain and at the time people in power hated it, but now, in hindsight we think actually they were good movements. (School C)

So this scheme of work foregrounds political ideologies, and then considers within each ideology, what role uprisings might have. This attempts to demonstrate two things to students, firstly that there are different ideological frameworks for explaining the world (and these reflect different values and world-views); and secondly that the same actions can be interpreted differently in different contexts. This second point led the teacher to

look at examples of violent uprisings in non-democratic contexts to demonstrate how they may be justifiable, or at least to consider that the justifications for violence might differ in different contexts.

It is evident in these three examples that the teachers responded in very different ways to their local contexts, and adopted distinctive approaches in relation to focusing on knowledge and values, and identifying controversy. The rest of the article explores some the problems with controversial issues pedagogy in practice and draws on the wider sample of teacher interviews in seven schools.

Two problems associated with identifying what is controversial

At the heart of the pedagogic tradition of teaching controversial issues one finds the core idea that the ethical issue must be genuinely open, in the sense that there is a range of legitimate responses. Our data illustrates two distinct problems that emerged for teachers in adopting this pedagogic approach: the first concerns a tendency to adopt shortcuts to illustrative case studies, which end up recasting historical cases as parables; and the second concerns the difficulty in sustaining a genuine open enquiry, without defaulting to a pre-determined 'right' answer.

History as parable

The earlier discussion of the controversial issues literature indicated that individual case studies are valuable not only as objects of study in their own right, but also as an illustration of the perennial issue at stake. In addition to their identification of a core local case study, several of the teachers decided it was important to introduce students to a broader range of case studies of extremism or terrorism to help extend their

understanding beyond the simple identification of Islam(ism) and terrorism. Several teachers pointed out in their interviews that all their students had grown up in the post 9-11 era, and for them ‘terrorism’ was almost always associated with Islam. Additional case studies emerged as a useful strategy here, as teachers explicitly tried to overcome this default connection. In several schools teachers independently arrived at the three contrasting case studies and the teacher in School G describes how one thing led to another to arrive at this selection:

Originally I had only planned to do the case study of IS [Islamic State], but it was when I looked at IS that I realised I had to do something else, so I then did the IRA [Irish Republican Army] and when I was looking at the IRA I realised I had to... bring in something that the students would... completely understand why you would fight against that, which is why I looked at the apartheid system. (School G)

In this example, each case study serves a particular purpose. IS is obviously the organisation that features in contemporary politics; the IRA demonstrates a violent political organisation within the UK’s recent history; and the actions of the ANC appear quite understandable as a response to apartheid. Indeed teachers relished the opportunity to contrast Nelson Mandela’s reputation as a global champion for democracy with his endorsement of violent methods against an unjust government.

When teachers felt this worked, they were very pleased with the results, for example the use of case studies in School F led the teacher to note how students’ idea of what constituted terrorism had expanded:

One of the girls said she didn’t understand that terrorism could also be for political reasons as well as religious. (School F)

However, this glosses over the potential problem that these historical examples were being simplified to serve the role of a parable, rather than a genuine historical enquiry.

There was not time to teach fully about the context of any of these cases, and therefore teachers had to shortcut to the ‘messages’ they wanted to derive from considering them. In brief one might say IS represented an unjustifiable example of political violence; the IRA represented a questionable use of violence where history has judged them fairly favourably because of the peace process; and the ANC provided an example of the justified use of violence. Whatever one feels about these moral lessons, it is noteworthy that this method of extracting simple moral judgements sits uneasily with the general approach to teaching controversial issues. History educators warn that “history cannot be disaggregated and plundered for bits and pieces that can... inform the present” (Shemilt, 2000: 100) without distorting the examples and undermining the complexity of what it is to really understand history and historical accounts. The perils of employing one complex situation to illuminate another complex situation were evident in School B where the teacher felt many students had been unable to grasp the IRA case sufficiently, and some had asked if it was also a fictional story (like the Hillys and Billys) – designed by the teacher to illustrate a point.

The unspoken ‘right’ answer

Difficulties also emerged over whether the teachers were able to find genuinely open ethical issues to treat as controversial issues or whether they adopted some of the characteristics of controversial issues teaching whilst effectively covertly imposing a moral stance on the students. It seems that some of the teachers were able to frame things fairly neutrally, for example in School C the teacher genuinely wanted students to use the conceptual knowledge about ideologies to interpret situations afresh and make judgements; and in School A, students were encouraged to explore the underlying issue of the freedom (and limitations) to protest, if violence is a perfectly predictable outcome. However, in School B, the teacher was directly promoting an ethical position

and slightly struggled to articulate his position:

I suppose I am leading... although they could take various positions... and the position, I suppose I am leading them to, is that we support the rule of law but it can be challenged. (School B)

In this case the teacher acknowledged he was leading the students to a conclusion, but recognised that the logic of teaching controversial issues required him to accept a range of opinions. The problem arose because he had not really identified a genuinely controversial issue, but was attempting to teach as though he had. Here we can see in very practical terms how teachers can feel somewhat trapped by the tensions in the Prevent policy which, as we have seen, invites them to openly discuss issues, whilst simultaneously monitoring for ‘extremist’ opinions. This is particularly important because the rule of law is one of the fundamental British values schools are supposed to promote (DfE, 2014), so it is difficult to see to what extent it is legitimate for students to genuinely argue against the rule of law in a democracy.

One can also see this dilemma as reflecting the deeper tension in citizenship education, which both aims for informed and independent critical thinking and to promote the values underpinning democracy (Halstead and Pike, 2006). All of these teachers were constructing their projects within the specific context of their school’s citizenship education provision, which meant they were looking for citizenship learning intentions to embed in their work. This gave the work a particular focus, and in general the teachers tended to focus on the more academic domain in citizenship – focusing on knowledge and understanding and critical media literacy skills. Sometimes they focused more on the values dimension, and here there was some movement between a values clarification approach to teaching and a values transmission approach. This ran the risk that teachers adopted a slightly hypocritical approach – teaching as though an issue was

open, when in reality it was not. This can lead to a rather hollowed out experience, which Pace (2015) has described as a form of ‘ventriloquism’ in which the students work out what the teacher wants to hear and effectively give voice to the teacher’s opinion. This creates the appearance of a free flowing conversation, but is really a disguised form of teacher authority and student collusion.

Responding to community (deficits)

We have seen that in their construction of relevant case studies, and in their attentiveness to issues in the local community, these teachers demonstrated aspects of ‘responsive teaching’. The concept of the responsive teacher is associated with Ladson-Billings (1994) and Villegas and Lucas (2007) who have written about culturally responsive teachers, but we hesitate to ascribe this model to the teachers in our sample because there was more scepticism towards the local communities and parents than is implied in their definition. Rather than see parents and communities as sources of values and support, the teachers we spoke to often characterised them as sources of problematic attitudes and values, which the school had to oppose to some extent. In responding to local issues and needs, it was evident that the teachers constructed their own interpretations of the parents’ and students’ knowledge, understanding and values. Such interpretations were subjective, but were drawn on frequently by teachers to justify the decisions they took. This reflects Kello’s (2016) observation that teachers’ approach to framing and responding to issues relies on the actual and the perceived context, meaning one has to pay attention to how teachers construct their own view of the situation.

When the teachers spoke about the parents and the community they frequently dwelled on negative characteristics or painted a picture of a series of deficits. Typically the local community and parents were racist and Islamophobic:

I think a lot of things that I've seen since I moved to this area... it would be unrealistic to say that there's not underlying racism. (School D)

A parent got very confrontational with me because we were teaching about Islam and she didn't understand why. (School E)

Their opinions were largely characterised as being based on ignorance and prejudice:

We need to help children understand that maybe what their mum or dad says may not be true because a lot of them come in and just, you know, say what their parents say. (School F)

We have a lot of socio-economic problems here and I think there's a blame culture... I think their parents want to blame people for the reasons perhaps they don't have jobs and they don't have certain things in their life... (School F)

In addition, some teachers simply felt that part of the blame for children's vulnerability could be laid at the door of parents:

I'm sorry to go on a rant here, there's kind of a gap in society now where a lot of young people... are kind of bringing themselves up. (School G)

Clearly this kind of interpretation raises some important issues from teachers' perspectives. The task of teaching about these issues within a framework of values promoting inclusion is undoubtedly more challenging if there are active racist groups in the community, parents who criticise teaching about Islam and high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment. Not only do such attitudes raise the potential of open conflict with parents (withdrawing children from lessons, complaining to the head teacher etc.) but they also demonstrate the personal challenges for teachers engaging with genuinely controversial political issues. On the other hand, it strikes us as significant that most of the comments about parents were focused on these negative aspects, and it is unlikely

that all parents expressed these sentiments. There is some evidence here that teachers had developed a discourse around parental deficits that assumes the need for school to provide some form of corrective or counter-measure to parental influence. It is conceivable that the tendency to focus on negative perceptions is itself a result of the framing of the Prevent policy. As one of the headteachers we spoke to pointed out – it is quite difficult to take a proactive and positive response to a policy which is fundamentally reactive and negatively framed as preventing something.

There are at least two possible interpretations. On the one hand, the teachers' concerns might indicate they have to be aware of values and beliefs in their local communities which are essentially opposed to some of the values espoused by the school as an institution. Here we might consider the tension between the school's duty to promote equality and some of the reported attitudes among parents. This indicates that schools may have to develop robust approaches for dealing with this tension, and certainly it will be important for teachers to understand their legal responsibilities and how to manage potential conflict which may arise. Several of the teachers mentioned parental complaints about political bias, or even about the mere existence of Islam in the curriculum, and it is important for individual teachers to know what the position of the school is to reduce their individual vulnerability to such complaints. But on the other hand, these concerns about parental influence also seem to tell us something about how teachers have engaged with the Prevent duty. Prevent may well include an inherent bias towards focusing attention on specific suspect communities (initially traditional conservative Muslims and more recently white working class supporters of the far right), and this has given rise to concerns that the policy is already counter-productive, further exacerbating the labelling and marginalisation of these groups (JCHR, 2016). Whilst framing Prevent as a controversial issue offers teachers opportunities to develop

educational responses rather than security-led responses, it also opens up new controversies for teachers, who inevitably negotiate these challenges from their own perspectives and with their own interpretations of what is going on and what kind of educational response is needed. The issues at stake are so significant that it seems surprising that some of these teachers reported they were effectively negotiating these problems alone, with minimal intervention or support from colleagues.

Conclusion

In summarising our conclusions we remind readers that this is a small qualitative study involving experienced citizenship teachers who had opted in to a curriculum development project and invited us in to their classrooms. This is not a representative sample and so conclusions cannot simply be generalised from their views, but by approaching our data with sensitising concepts from the literature we are able to offer three insights that resonate with the wider literature on teaching controversial issues. These insights all address different aspect of how we might account for the contexts in which teachers work, and as such our insights build on Misco's (2012) ideas generated through comparative case studies.

Our first insight concerns the process of identifying and defining an issue as controversial in the context of specific policies. In one of our schools we saw how difficult it can be to identify a genuinely open ethical stance, when in fact some ethical issues are relatively closed. The teacher in School B clearly wanted to promote the rule of law as a good thing, but experienced a sense of dissonance when trying to promote this stance whilst framing the discussion as a controversial issue, open to multiple views. In England in the context of the Prevent duty this definitional problem seems to be exacerbated by the language of 'promoting' FBVs, rather than engaging in critical discussion in order to deepen understanding of them – whilst one might want to

promote toleration, not all beliefs are equally tolerable, as the Prevent policy also makes clear (through the proscription of certain groups).

Our second insight addresses the process of teaching through the case study to the perennial issue (Hess, 2009) and illustrates the importance of curriculum context. Our data illustrates that, for entirely pragmatic reasons, teachers often introduced parallel case studies to illustrate points they wanted to make to construct their main investigation. This has the unintended effect of closing down one set of ethical discussions, in order to open up others. This may well be an inevitable compromise given the time constraints faced in the classroom, but we believe it is an issue worthy of further exploration for those interested in developing controversial issues pedagogy. It is also possible that this a problem exacerbated in the curriculum context of teaching citizenship, given that the subject is both committed on the one hand to rational, critical thinking and moral reasoning; and on the other hand with promoting the core principles of democratic citizenship.

Our third insight addresses the broader local context in which the school is situated. The Prevent policy in England has tended to focus on Muslims and white working class communities, seen as vulnerable to extremism (in the form of Islamism or far-right beliefs) (JCHR, 2016). Given this focus on ‘suspect communities’, which have also been characterised by government as sustaining “regressive social practices” (Casey, 2016), teachers are often positioned in opposition to (elements of) communities. In the context of the Prevent policy, if one focuses on ‘extreme beliefs’ as the problem, then teachers will find themselves opposed to families and organisations who promote these beliefs.

In considering how these teachers have responded to the Prevent policy in England, we have illustrated some more abiding aspects of controversial issues

pedagogy. As well as thinking about the everyday issues relating to classroom organisation, planning and discussion, teachers must also develop critical and informed readings of their legal and professional responsibilities in an evolving policy landscape; of their educational purpose as teachers of distinctive curriculum subjects; and of their local communities. By relating teaching practices to this multiple account of context, we have highlighted some further complexities inherent in engaging in teaching controversial issues.

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