

## 'It's Not Just Any Old Discussion'

– being controversial, being sensitive, a pilot project

Javid Akram and Robin Richardson

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### **Celebration and vision**

'A celebration of good practice and approaches already in place within our schools' ... 'It's been great to meet new colleagues and make links with consultants in order to ask for help and guidance' ... 'Well organised, nice venue, and extremely useful meeting other delegates from local schools' ... 'It has been challenging not being given the answers, but finding them more from self-reflection, and from colleagues'... 'I feel I can go back to school and lead the professional development of others' ...' I now have a vision of my department's future!'

These were amongst the written comments made by teachers at the end of a recent two-day workshop in the West Midlands concerned with teaching about controversial issues. The theoretical basis for the workshop, and for the pilot project in citizenship education for which it was the launching pad, was outlined in an article published in *Race Equality Teaching* in summer 2009.<sup>1</sup>

What are the key themes in citizenship education within the overall context of multiculturalism, Islamophobia and extremism? And how can they most appropriately be explored and explained in school classrooms, and in the continuing professional development of teachers? These were the essential questions which the pilot project asked and responded to. Reflecting on some of the activities at one school, Year 7 pupils observed:

- We get to talk about things that other people wouldn't talk about. (*Sameera*)
- We talk about the for and against of different things. (*Faisal*)
- It's not just any old discussion. It's things that matter. (*Nasser*)

This article describes the format and aims of the pilot project, and some of the activities and exercises used at the initial workshop. It is likely to be of interest to all readers of *Race Equality Teaching* who have occasion to teach about controversial, sensitive and difficult issues, or to plan and organise courses on this topic for teachers or trainee teachers. It starts by recalling an episode at a regional meeting in the West Midlands whose purpose was to commend and promote a government publication for schools on preventing violent extremism.<sup>2</sup>

### **The story begins**

The story begins with a meeting in early 2009 convened by the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM). The participants were from West Midlands education services and the speakers were from the police service and central government. The purpose was to begin 'rolling out', as the official terminology put it, a so-called toolkit for

schools on preventing violent extremism. Recalling the event later, a participant wrote as follows:

'Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a 'clash of civilizations... Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.' These were just two of the eight components used to define Islamophobia<sup>3</sup> which came piercing into my heart and mind when attending the first GOWM meeting for education representatives to do with the toolkit for schools.

Most of what was presented was the familiar narrative – Al Qaeda and radicalisation of youth etc which you get from press, media and politicians. My thoughts began wandering. Where is all this going, what is the real relevance for educationalists, are we going to be part of the government's counter-terrorism programme? None of what has been said is being challenged, but do others here have reservations and, if so, will they voice them?

Then suddenly I was brought back into the present. 'The threat of Islam...' The person speaking was the official representative of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Did I hear clearly? Why has no one said anything? Oh my Muslim brothers within GOWM and the police, do we let this moment go by when a great religion is being spoken about in this way?

I broke the speaker's gallop. 'Excuse me but what do you mean, "the threat of Islam"?' He was now looking as if he had some realisation of what he had said. A deafening momentary silence. Clearly the rhetoric and the PowerPoint were well rehearsed but the lack of thought and (unwitting??) utterance and subsequent challenge created a moment of confusion for him. My empathy forced me to offer support – 'Did you mean a "distorted interpretation of Islam"?' It offered an escape, but it too was ambiguous.

Was this institutional Islamophobia? An-Nisa's definition offers assistance: 'It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and anti-Muslim stereotyping which disadvantage Muslim people.' I was reminded too of Richard Haley, who has said that the government's Preventing Violent Extremism programme 'exposes professionals involved in implementing it to indoctrination with Islamophobic and pro-war attitudes.'<sup>4</sup>

The Director for GOWM Children's Services came over at the end to apologise for the choice of words, which was accepted for the sake of cordiality. But I continued to be dismayed that the DCSF could appoint someone who could be so careless and thoughtless. The DCSF's whole approach to this, it would seem, was one of compliance because of the fear generated by the threat of violent extremism posed by Al Qaeda etc from the government.

### **Plans beginning to form**

Following from the reflections quoted above, and from closer study of the toolkit document itself, a plan began to form. A quotation on page 5 of the document from a member of the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) provided initial inspiration: 'We need more support for teachers who are dealing with such sensitive subjects... Teachers should be given support and materials which they can use to achieve this.' The author of this comment was Usman Nawaz, aged 18, from Rochdale.

Incidentally, three other members of UKYP, Minhaz Khela from Blackburn, Rob Clews from Gloucestershire and Lisa Carroll from the East Midlands, later gave evidence about the toolkit to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee. They referred to a UKYP survey which had found that nine out of ten young people felt they needed more opportunities to discuss terrorism and violent extremism, and on the basis of which UKYP had strongly argued that all young people should be involved, not just Muslims. Their arguments had fallen, however, on deaf ears. Rob Clews said:

It is quite disempowering as young people to see our report be completely ignored by government ... [W]e made a constructive criticism to DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) on the terrorism toolkit, based on consultations with teachers and youth workers. From what we heard and in our opinion, it was not working and it was not being as effective as potentially it could have been. When we presented that view to them, it was completely shot down and ignored.<sup>5</sup>

It wasn't just the UK Youth Parliament that was shot down and ignored, however – others faced similar treatment. Alternative proposals presented to DCSF representatives by education consultants at regional training around radicalisation were also ignored 'We have had a disastrous experience in one of our schools,' emailed a colleague in a local authority. 'A teacher raised a concern that following a police-led session the only thing the students will have been left with is Islam and terrorism etched in their minds... We need to abandon Prevent, such initiatives come and go, we need to deal with the long term issues of racism and Islamophobia.'

The toolkit contained among other things a section entitled Teaching, Learning and the Curriculum. This said that the aim should be 'to build the resilience of pupils through 'teaching and learning strategies which explore controversial issues in a way which promotes critical analysis and pro social values'. It quoted the Ajebo report to the effect that 'engaging pupils in controversial but deeply relevant issues will excite them, involve them, develop their thinking skills and both raise standards and make our country an even better place'.<sup>6</sup> The toolkit said further:

Effectively addressing controversial issues will also help challenge misinformed views and perceptions amongst pupils, challenge commonly held 'myths' and build understanding and appreciation about others. This requires questioning techniques to open up safe debate; confidence to promote honesty about pluralist views; ensuring both freedom of expression and freedom from threat; debating fundamental moral and human rights principles; promoting open and respectful dialogue; and affirming the multiple dynamic identities that all people have.<sup>7</sup>

The section ended by saying that there is a need in every school to review staff confidence in dealing with controversial issues.

In their report entitled *Citizenship Established?* (January 2010), observations by Ofsted inspectors included the following:

Managing discussion of sensitive and controversial issues can be very demanding, but confident teachers made such lessons worthwhile. For example, schools which were more confident in dealing with controversial issues continually exploited news stories to make cross-references to topics that had been studied previously.

Subject knowledge was also highlighted as being integral to discussion of controversial issues. Provision was inadequate where teachers' subject

knowledge was insufficient for them to deal with sensitive and controversial issues or where there was insufficient emphasis on these in the curriculum.

Most of the outstanding teaching was by well-trained specialists. They had strong subject knowledge and were willing to tackle sensitive and controversial topics.

Incidentally, the Ofsted report contained several references to teaching about racism. There was not a single reference, however, to teaching about Islamophobia, or to teaching about terrorism, violence or extremism.

### **Designing a specific programme**

Against the background sketched above, a programme was devised in one authority, Walsall. It was modelled on a format developed by the National Union of Teachers and consisted of three parts. First, the headteacher of each participating school sent two delegates to an introductory two-day residential workshop. Second, participants carried out practical projects in their own schools. Third, participants gathered about four months later to report on what they had done, and what they had learnt. They were teachers in secondary schools of citizenship, history, English, religious studies or PSHE. Most held positions of responsibility and were therefore in a position to contribute to school or departmental policies on topics such as speaking and listening, equalities (including religion and belief), building resilience, critical thinking, and community cohesion.

Participation in the pilot project was free of charge. In addition, each school received a grant to pay for supply cover, resources and consultancy during the project's lifetime. The formal statement of aims for the project indicated that participants would:

- consider Ofsted expectations about the importance of speaking and listening in classroom discussions, and build their own confidence and practical skills in conducting classroom discussions
- take into account current policy developments nationally, for example the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, and national projects such as the Rights Respecting Schools programme pioneered by Unicef and the Resilience programme on building confidence in handling contentious issues, organised by the Religious Education Council for the Department for Education
- consider and assess a number of web-based or publication-based practical resources, including those developed by the Shared Histories Project currently taking shape in Walsall
- increase their awareness of practical ways of developing critical thinking and media literacy, and of building resilience
- clarify general principles for talking and teaching in schools about difficult, sensitive and controversial issues

### **Exercises and activities**

The first exercise at the introductory workshop involved a ranking exercise. Participants were given nine statements about the problems and difficulties which teachers experience when handling issues on which society is divided, and about which discussions may be sensitive. The items which were selected most often were these:

- What should we do when pupils express views that are racist, sexist or homophobic?
- How do we deal with our own feelings of ignorance or inadequate knowledge, and with anxieties we may have about provoking concern and criticism amongst parents?
- Where does our professional responsibility lie when we are aware there are disagreements between a pupil and his or her parents or family?
- How should we react when pupils are angered, offended, threatened or distressed by opinions expressed by others?
- What should we do when consensus amongst pupils seems to have been reached without due reflection and discussion?

It is often useful if discussions of how to deal with controversial and sensitive issues refer to some specific events or scenarios. Participants were given a set of short stories and asked to select the three or four they found most relevant to their own concerns. They were then asked to consider, in relation to each of their selected stories:

- the background – what may have happened beforehand, both immediately and over time
- the follow-up, distinguishing between the next few minutes, the next few days, the next few weeks.

On the basis of discussions of specific episodes there was consideration of general principles. These included:

- The fundamental educational task is to help pupils think for themselves, and to sort out and clarify their emotions and values.
- Fears of ridicule or of being isolated may lead pupils to be wary about expressing their own views, or about asking questions, or thinking aloud ('exploratory talk'). So special care has to be taken to make sure they feel safe and secure.
- It is miseducation or even indoctrination to say or imply there is consensus around certain issues when in fact there is not.
- It can be reassuring to children and young people, as distinct from merely alarming or depressing, to be reminded that their elders are in disagreement with each other about important matters.
- Pupils benefit from thinking consciously about positive and negative ways of taking part in group discussions, and from being introduced to conventions and procedures widely used in committees and debates in wider society.
- It is valuable if the whole staff of a school discuss and agree general policy for dealing with sensitive and controversial issues.

Other exercises were concerned with media literacy, constructive and negative ways of contributing to group discussions, language and so-called political correctness, and the nature and importance of ground rules. Handouts included an aide-memoire about useful classroom activities for giving a sense of safety and inspiring curiosity, a list of useful websites, and extracts from a National Strategies paper on the nature and value of

collaborative talking and listening. There was also an art activity, and a fascinating presentation by, and conversation with, a visiting speaker, Jahan Mahmood, about a project entitled *Our Forgotten Heroes*.<sup>8</sup> This involves original historical research, readily adaptable for history and citizenship education in schools, about the role played in the British army during the two world wars by soldiers recruited in South Asia, particularly the areas in what is now Pakistan from which the grandparents of many Muslim pupils in British schools originated. Written comments about this presentation included:

- *Forgotten Heroes* was fantastic – extremely interesting and enlightening, a useful resource for schools.
- A very good presentation by Jahan – informative and thought-provoking
- The visiting speaker was inspirational, largely because I could immediately see how I could use the material.
- Our Forgotten Heroes - excellent!

### **Follow-up in schools**

In the four months following the workshop there was a wide range of follow-up activities in schools. They included debates, conferences, games, simulations and surveys and took place within several different curriculum areas. Several of them involved contact and consultation with parents and in all there was much use of collaborative groupwork. Between them, they involved all age-groups in secondary schools. Specific topics included work with pictorial material, language and political correctness, British identity, national and international politics, global poverty, the involvement of soldiers from Pakistan in the two world wars, and the history, landmarks and current issues of a school's local area.

What did the pupils learn? One written report responded to this question with seven bullet points:

- how to hold a debate
- how to speak in front of people
- to talk with confidence
- what identity is
- about different cultures
- how to be respectful
- why they should be sensitive.

Encouraged by evaluations such as this, the next stage was to share papers and lesson plans from the pilot project on a website.<sup>9</sup> Looking ahead, it may perhaps be possible to organise, or to contribute to, a regional or national conference. In the meanwhile it is relevant to quote from an email message written shortly after the follow-up day:

It was full of innovative and fascinating work, beyond what I had expected. From the case studies presented and strategies, activities and work shared it was clear that there was a lot of thought given and work developed. There was a lot presented, shared and discussed, all extremely valuable. It was clear that in most cases the vital groundwork of involving senior leaders and whole school staff, and raising the profile of such important work had paved the way for greater development.

The last word here, however, goes to 11-year-old Nasser, quoted near the start of this article and in the article's title:

It's not just any old discussion. It's things that matter.

*At the time of this pilot project, Javid Akram was a consultant for Walsall Education Services and Robin Richardson was a director of the Insted consultancy*

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<sup>1</sup> Akram, Javid and Robin Richardson (2009) 'Citizenship Education for All or Preventing Violent Extremism for Some? – choices and challenges for schools', *Race Equality Teaching* 27(3), pp. 49–55.

2 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Learning Together to be Safe: a toolkit to help schools contribute to the prevention of violent extremism*.

3 Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (1997) *Islamophobia – a challenge for us all*, Runnymede Trust, p.5.

4 *Preventing What?*, written for Scotland Against Criminalising Communities.

5 House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (2010) *Preventing Violent Extremism: sixth report of session 2009–10*, oral evidence given on 18 January 2010

6 Ajegbo, Keith (2007) *Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review*, Department for Education and Skills, p.4.

7 Toolkit (note 2 above), p.31, based on guidance published in the DCSF's publication *Bullying around Racism, Religion and Culture* (2005), pp. 85–90, now available at <http://www.insted.co.uk/racist-bullying-april11.pdf>.

8 There is full information about Jahan Mahmood's research at <http://forgottensoldiers.co.uk/>. There is a fascinating report about the educational implications at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/05/24/uk-britain-muslims-radicals-idUKTRE74N10Q20110524>. The research is also reported at length at <http://criticalppp.com/archives/29303>.

9 The papers used at the initial workshop, amended in several instances in the light of participants' comments and additional suggestions, have been posted at [www.insted.co.uk](http://www.insted.co.uk).