

The Prevent duty, resilience and Religious Education –

A personal reflection from Jonathan Marshall

In order to clarify what the duty is and what it means for schools and for Religious Education, some extracts may be helpful, from the Department for Education, “The Prevent duty – departmental advice for schools and childcare providers” June 2015...

“From July 2015 all schools and Early and Later Years childcare providers are subject to a duty under Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. This duty is known as the Prevent duty and it applies to a wide range of public facing bodies to have, during the exercise of their functions, *due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism*. Protecting children from the risk of radicalisation, from whatever source, should be seen as part of schools’ and childcare providers’ wider safeguarding duties and is similar in nature to protecting children from other harms (e.g. drugs, gangs, neglect, sexual exploitation) whether they come from within their family or are the product of outside influence.”

The advice goes on to state that the Prevent duty is, “...entirely consistent with schools’ and childcare providers’ existing responsibilities and should not be burdensome.”

Furthermore, “Schools and childcare providers are in a particularly influential place to help build pupils’ resilience to all forms of radicalisation by promoting fundamental British values enabling them to challenge extremist views.”

(The Fundamental British values are; democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. These values first appeared within the Prevent Strategy in 2011 and were adopted as part of Teachers Standards the following year, so they are not new.

Extremism is defined as, vocal or active opposition to these values.)

The advice emphasises that the Prevent duty is not intended to stop pupils debating controversial issues, “...on the contrary, schools should provide a safe space in which these issues can be discussed.”

“The statutory guidance refers to the importance of Prevent awareness training to equip staff to identify children at risk of being drawn into terrorism and to challenge extremist ideas. The Home Office has developed a core training product for this purpose – Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent (WRAP) Individual schools are best placed to assess their training needs in the light of their assessment of the risk. As a minimum, however, schools should ensure that their Designated Safeguarding Lead undertakes Prevent awareness training and is able to provide support and advice to other members of staff on protecting children from the risk of radicalisation.”

As we know all teachers have responsibility for this safeguarding role and a number of the issues and big questions around free speech, radicalisation and terrorism will, no doubt, be addressed and discussed within a PSHE/Citizenship/RE “safe space” context but I would like to offer some thoughts on how RE teachers are uniquely placed to offer something more and central to “Prevent” – equipping young people with awareness, understanding and resilience.

Let us remember RE’s place within the school curriculum. It remains a statutory requirement but we increasingly need to emphasise the profound educational contribution RE makes to the learning, growth and development of our young people. RE remains at the heart of the

two key aims of the National Curriculum; “Every state funded schools must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based and which; promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, (SMSC) mental and physical development of pupils and; prepares them, at school, for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

Promoting British values is now part of the SMSC curriculum in schools* and they are closely inter-related, as defined by Ofsted in their latest “School Inspection handbook”, June 2015. It is intended that these values will help build resilience, acting as an antidote to the dangers of being drawn into extremism which leads to violence and harm, not only to the vulnerable young person but also to wider society. We have seen some tragic examples of this over recent years and, indeed, we have our own local example in Nicky Reilly. Reilly was self-radicalised over the internet and left Plymouth by bus, in May 2008, with a home-made bomb in his rucksack, intending to blow up the Giraffe restaurant in Exeter. He continues to serve a long prison sentence.

What made Nicky Reilly vulnerable to being drawn into violent extremism? There is no easy answer. He did have special educational needs, mental health problems and his father and brother were both in prison. But there is no check list for a would-be terrorist, whether influenced by extreme right wing or AQ/ISIS views and propaganda. Later in the same year as Reilly’s crime, two doctors tried to blow up Glasgow airport. In what ways were they vulnerable?

However, there are some common themes. Goebbels, Hitler’s Propaganda Minister said that every individual German, who was not part of the Nazi movement, was like a worm and the purpose of propaganda was to make the little worm feel that he/she was part of a great dragon.

For some, the immense power of the call is too overwhelming and allied with a personal need and search for meaning, purpose, belonging and truth it becomes irresistible, as we read from the descriptions of the so-called, Jihadi brides.

There will be clues and part of the awareness training, mentioned above, is to alert us to them but the same signs can be indications of a whole manner of concerns, not necessarily related to radicalisation or terrorism. But our support and help may still be needed, so, either way, it doesn’t matter.

Helping to build pupils’ resilience to all forms of radicalisation is new. But I am wondering if this is something already closely related to what RE is about. Resilience is not a word that usually pops up in RE or religion itself but perhaps it is worth reflecting on, to see what it might mean for us in the classroom? To see if it relates to other areas of our work. It is an interesting choice of word and to me it has to do with a certain kind of strength, of buoyancy; the ability to stand on solid ground, within oneself. It is a good RE word!

Resilience points to and can only arise from a certain kind of inner strength; inner resources. In being resilient, there is the hope that wise choices will follow as well and one will live wisely and compassionately. Not subject to the vagaries and pressures of passing fads and fashions, one is instead moved and directed by other, more transcendent forces and human values. Though clothed in a different language and form, we are surely exploring here, with a little re-framing, what we might regard as spiritual development and this is very much the business of RE.

The Plymouth Agreed Syllabus for RE states; “RE should also promote and encourage a deepening appreciation of the spiritual and its value in providing young people with the opportunity to identify and cultivate inner resources and a growing sense of an inner life;

indispensable tools for the journey through life.” (Engaging with Religion and Worldviews 2014)

In 2009 the Children’s Society published “A Good Childhood – searching for values in a competitive age”. The importance of an inner life, as described above, was highlighted and also that children should experience, “...the feeling of belonging to something bigger than oneself, something that gives meaning to one’s own small existence. Religious people experience this or it can come from music, dance, drama or painting – from anything that takes you out of yourself and makes you thankful for what you have rather than focusing on what you don’t have.”

It is difficult to imagine that a young person who has grown and developed through a range of good quality RE experiences; who has sensed their potential for an inner life and inner resources; who has experienced belonging, beyond boundaries of difference and where it has been understood that, “We are as big or as small as the space we make for others who are not like us.” (Lord Sacks)... It is difficult to imagine that such a young person, who lives and is taught in an atmosphere where there is mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and where compassion for the “other” is real...It is difficult to imagine that for that young person, the call to become part of a great dragon would be heeded.

That someone in my school, in my classroom, will be drawn into violent extremism is rare, it is a small risk but it remains a risk and we must be aware and vigilant.

*The Department for Education: “Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools. November 2014

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Jonathan recently revised a small booklet for schools entitled, “Building Bridges” July 2015, which explores the search for, and promotion of values, through Belief, Faith and Culture. It is available in hard copy from the Centre. For details; Tel 01752 254438 Email: info@pcfcd.co.uk

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