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To cite this article: Angela Quartermaine (2016) Discussing terrorism: a pupil-inspired guide to UK counter-terrorism policy implementation in religious education classrooms in England, British Journal of Religious Education, 38:1, 13-29, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2014.953911](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2014.953911)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2014.953911>



Published online: 05 Sep 2014.



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Discussing terrorism: a pupil-inspired guide to UK counter-terrorism policy implementation in religious education classrooms in England

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My research into pupils' perceptions of terrorism and current UK counter-terrorism policy highlights the need for more detailed and accurate discussions about the implementation of the educational aims, in particular those laid out by the Prevent Strategy. Religious education (RE) in England is affected by these aims, specifically the challenging of terrorist ideologies and improving community cohesion, but many RE teachers feel ill-equipped in dealing with the issues that might arise from terrorism discussions. Therefore, I suggest that clarification could help alleviate some of the teacher's concerns and help provide routes by which critical RE teaching and learning can take place.

Keywords: terrorism; policy; religious education; secondary schools

1. Introduction

My motivation for conducting this study stemmed from my experience as a secondary school religious education (RE) teacher. Many pupils wanted to discuss terrorism, most frequently during lessons on Islam, but their questions were often irrelevant or had prejudiced connotations. However, during more detailed discussions, I found that although they expressed biased understandings of terrorism, they simultaneously wanted to demonstrate a lack of prejudice, due to a fear of the wider social implications of their perceptions. As an RE teacher, I found this dynamic interesting because they expressed similar concerns to those I faced when attempting to teach about terrorism in the manner expressed within government policy documents. After conducting the fieldwork for my current project, I discovered that pupils and teachers had some interesting ideas that could be useful for other RE educationalists: this paper explores some of these findings, by first examining the term itself, before moving onto my interpretation of how pupil views could aid the implementation of the education element of current UK counter-terrorism policies.

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2. Overview of research

This article will focus on my findings from six short-term case studies (Yin 2009) from schools in Warwickshire. The schools were located in rural and town locations and included four mixed-sex comprehensive schools and two single-sex grammar schools: 264 pupils responded to the survey and 73 pupils were involved in a series of group discussions. The majority of pupils defined themselves as white British, with no religious affiliation and were aged 13–15. A total of 11 RE and Personal Health and Social Education (PHSE) teachers agreed to be formally interviewed.

The research was designed to adhere to the parameters and accepted practices associated with educational research, in particular the ethical constraints and research methods associated with such projects. Due to the exploratory nature of my research, and the sensitivities associated with the topic, short-term case studies were deemed the most appropriate approach. However, this approach was complex because it encouraged the use of multiple sources and methods, thus creating a large amount of data for each school. Furthermore, to limit the variables associated with this form of research, the case studies were restricted to a relatively small geographical region of the UK, which could limit the impact of these findings. However, I believe these restrictions were essential because more detailed information could be gathered in a relatively short time frame, thus providing deeper insights into the issues surrounding pupils' perceptions of terrorism.

3. The archaeology of knowledge discourses on terrorism

Prior to conducting my fieldwork, I began researching workable definitions of 'terrorism', to use as a guide for my research. However, I discovered that no universal definition exists and that the term has been used to describe a range of different activities, frequently depending on context. Indeed, my findings were one of the first discussion points raised by the pupils – they suggested that the word is used differently in UK policy, legal documents, academic literature, the media or in documents produced by those categorised as 'terrorists'. These divisions can be paralleled to what Schmid called 'arenas' of terrorism discourse (Schmid 1992; also see Schmid 2011): each arena uses the word in a different manner and for a different purpose, which makes it virtually impossible to find clarity in what exactly is being discussed.

My exploration into the origins of the word 'terrorism' caused similar difficulties: I found that different historical overviews (see Chaliand and Blin 2007 or Law 2009), used different examples as the 'archetype' of terrorism. According to Larsson, the parallels found between historical and modern groups are based on the etymology of the word 'terrorism' – namely an act that is intended to create terror and fear – and the desire to have an audience to witness the act (Larsson 2004, 40). However, some

texts suggest that the historical examples can be divided into ‘proto-terrorism’ and ‘terrorism’ (Law 2009, 11). According to Martin, the specific historical point when the word ‘terrorism’ was first used was during Robespierre’s ‘Reign of Terror’ in France (1793–1794) (Martin 2010, 24). Although this example does not provide a complete explanation for the term’s current use, or attempted application to the examples seen in historical overviews, it can be perceived as a turning point in our understanding of terrorism: not in terms of the event in itself, but rather the facets or characteristics of it that have been deemed applicable to previous, and subsequent, examples.

An examination of these characteristics is problematic though, because the word has become so diffused over time, used to describe numerous events and groups, including animal rights activists, cyber-terrorists and so on, that its ‘original’ characteristics have almost become lost. According to Laqueur, this is due to a change in perceptions: terrorism was once ‘value free’ (Laqueur 2004, 3), but has become a ‘dirty word’ (Laqueur 2004, 4). Although I would agree that the word has been affected by ‘the dispersion of time’ (Foucault 2002, 338), I doubt that it was ever ‘value free’ because even within the context of Robespierre’s ‘Reign of Terror’, the word had a derogatory meaning and was used to condemn the behaviour witnessed. Therefore, perhaps it is not within the specific examples that we can comprehend the term’s use, but rather, as Law suggested, within the perceptions of an event that provides a route into comprehending the convergence of definitions of terrorism (Law 2009).

Some pupils suggested that categorising an event as one of ‘terrorism’ is caused by those witnessing it; in particular by the ‘victims’ of terrorism. This does not mean that there is a definable victim of terrorism, but rather that our understanding of terrorism has been shaped by the notion that such ideas are associated with it. If we are ‘the witnesses’ or ‘victims’ of terrorism, and ‘our’ public agents are those who ‘affix the label on acts of violence that makes them terrorism’ (Juergensmeyer 2000, 5), then terrorism is not defined by a specific event or group, but rather from the perception of ourselves as the victims of terrorism.

Categorising an act as ‘terrorism’ is also dependent upon ‘the mechanism of attribution of violence to an act, a situation, an event [and thus] varies between cultures and approaches’ (Magnani 2011, 10). Therefore, our comprehension of terrorism is confined to our normative cultural expectations of behaviour. As demonstrated by the examples used by the pupils, such as Anders Breivik (who carried a series of attacks in Norway on 22 July 2011), the cultural backdrop we find ourselves in influences which individuals and groups are categorised as terrorists. The pupils thought that this categorisation could be the result of the media, or due to state legal and political requirements, but I would argue that these are examples of the power-knowledge discourses associated with global trends and international

(or local) relations (Foucault 1991). In Rapoport's thesis on the 'four waves' of terrorism (Rapoport 2004), he argues that modern or global terrorism began in the 1880s in Russia with the 'Anarchist wave', closely followed by 'three similar, consecutive and overlapping expressions': by comprehending the 'dominant energy' (Rapoport 2004, 47) within each historical 'wave', we can begin to understand how terrorism has been affected by the converging ideas within a particular time period. Not just converging in the sense of the motivations or activities of specific groups, but also within how and why those groups were categorised or perceived as 'terrorists' during that time.

For my work, I am most interested in the 'religious wave', because it is here that we currently find ourselves: perceptions of terrorism, both in the literature and in my fieldwork, were dominated by the notion that terrorism is somehow associated with religion, particularly Islam. Rapoport argues that post-1980s terrorism saw the beginnings of this 'wave', with Islam 'at the heart ... [because] Islamic groups have conducted the most significant, deadly and profoundly international attacks' (Rapoport 2004, 61). Although there have been historical examples of what some scholars would call Islam-inspired terrorism (Conrad and Milton 2013, 318), the most recent 'religious wave' has influenced the majority of post-1980s terrorist groups: both religious or secular groups, were influenced by, or formed in reaction to, a religious ideology in the modern era.

Religion, particularly radical Islam, is frequently credited as 'the most important defining characteristic ... [of] new terrorism' (Schmid 1988, 82). One potent example referenced by the vast majority of pupils, and indeed in most of the literature, was al-Qaeda – particularly in post-9/11 texts, which almost always included an overview of the event and its links to the Islamic (and global) nature of current attacks. However, 9/11 does not demonstrate the current parameters for terrorism definitions and discourses, but rather is used as the 'typical' example within the literature to help explain the current links between religion and terrorism. Indeed, its continuous remembrance has left an imprint on the minds of young people, despite some of them not being old enough to remember the actual event happening.

These representations of terrorism were contested by some pupils though: some questioned whether their perceptions of terrorism were correct, particularly since the dominance of 9/11 and its links to Islam may have affected their views. A few noted that many adherents to any faith would argue that those who perform acts of terror are not part of their religion: they have misunderstood the true meaning of the faith and gone beyond the boundaries of acceptable behaviour (see Schmid 2011, 23–27 for an overview of the scholarly debates on this matter). However, I believe that if we do not apply religious meaning and comprehension to these groups or individuals, it becomes difficult to understand their motivations and defining them as anything else 'misunderstands religion and

underestimates its ability to underwrite deadly conflict on its own terms' (Appleby 2000, 30). Therefore, the relationship should not be ignored, but instead more work needs to be done to help pupils comprehend the troublesome dynamic between religion and terrorism.

Some pupils were also aware that alternative descriptive concepts, such as radicalisation, extremism and fundamentalism, are sometimes used to describe these groups, but they found such terminology confusing, because some media sources (and scholars) use these terms interchangeably (Nasser-Eddine et al. 2011, 9). Perhaps, these words are used to simply demonstrate a distinction between those who follow the 'normal' religion and isolate 'religion's problems to a deviant form of the species' (Juergensmeyer 2004, ix). However, I have found that there are some subtle differences in how and when they are used (in the literature, such as Schmid (2011) or Heath-Kelly (2013), and by some pupils): radicalisation generally describe the process by which an individual becomes extreme; extremism relates to the carrying out of such ideas; and fundamentalism relates to the extreme version of religious-inspired ideology that motivated such groups or individuals (although there are problems with using the word fundamentalism in this way, see Barkun 2003, 60). Perhaps, if these terms are used in a clearer manner when discussing these issues with pupils, we can help them better comprehend the nature of the terrorist's relationship with their religious community: terrorists promote 'religiously-inspired goals against their society's norms' (Bruce 2000, 5) and thus exist within the spectrum of religious understanding, but are outside (and distinct from) the rest of the religious community.

4. Counter-terrorism discourses in the school arena

According to ter Avest et al. (2009, 10): 'this arena is shaped and sometimes restricted, or even curtailed, by the wider societal and political context; but it can also create space for unrestrained exchange and for the development of new ideas'. Indeed, the issues raised by the pupils involved in my research were affected by wider social and policy issues, but their ideas simultaneously provided useful insights into the implementation of the education element of UK counter-terrorism policy; and I have used their ideas to help determine potential approaches to current policy guidelines.

Current requirements for counter-terrorism implementation in English Secondary Schools predominantly stem from an influential policy document called Prevent, which has been part of the UK counter-terrorism CONTEST Strategy for both the previous and current governments (HM Government 2011a). Although some elements of Prevent have changed, both the 2008 and 2011 versions state that schools play 'an important role' in counter-terrorism strategies (HM Government 2008, 47, 2011b, 69). This document frequently uses extremism and terrorism as synonyms (see Richards 2010), but for the

purposes of this section, I will temporarily ignore these definitional differences and instead suggest that these words are used to highlight policy concerns about the ideologies that could promote, or lead to, violence.¹ Some scholars have argued that education may not be the correct medium by which violence and terrorism should be prevented, as ‘there is still much we do not understand about how or why violence occurs ... or education’s role in mitigating and preventing personal or political violence’ (Nelles 2003, 21), but Prevent overlooks such concerns: it is not a question of *whether* such topics should be discussed, but rather an explicit expectation that they *will be*.

That is not to say that children are becoming radicalised but rather that schools can help ‘young people to challenge extremism and the ideology of terrorism’ (HM Government 2011b, 64). However, this makes the aims of Prevent confusing because it is unclear exactly why counter-terrorism measures are necessary within the education system if it is not to prevent radicalisation. After conducting my research, in particular the pupil group discussions and teacher interviews, I concluded that this confusion could be overcome if the aims of Prevent are divided into three categories: to safeguard children, to challenge those ideologies that are condemned by the state and to improve community relations. Prevent states that the safeguarding of children should be approached ‘in the same way that they help to safeguard children from drugs, gang violence and alcohol’ (HM Government 2011b, 69), which suggests that subjects such as PHSE² or Citizenship could fulfil this role, since those comparable topics are generally covered therein. However, challenging terrorist ideology is more complex, and schools are told not to simply use the example of al-Qaeda, but that ‘it is vital to understand how, historically, terrorism has drawn recruits from all parts of societies and from many faith groups’ (HM Government 2011b, 26), therefore subjects such as RE and history could be used to help pupils explore the historical and faith dimensions of terrorism. These approaches are relatively negative in scope (they condemn violence or violent ideologies), but Prevent also suggests that ‘a stronger sense of “belonging” and citizenship makes communities more resilient to terrorist ideology’ (HM Government 2011b, 27), therefore the rhetoric of community cohesion could also be used as another avenue for policy implementation, which could be explored in Citizenship, PSHE and RE lessons.

I hypothesise that by dividing the education aims of Prevent into three categories, the complex nature of what schools are expected to achieve can be better explained and help alleviate the possible confusion that may arise during the implementation of such policies, particularly at the classroom level. Schools are given autonomy in how they deliver policy requirements (HM Government 2010a, 12), but the delivery of these strategies are not always clear. As one government report states, Prevent has not been entirely successful because ‘there is clearly a disjuncture between the stated national aims of the Prevent educational activity and the reality of much of its content – much

of it is positive and diversionary youth activity, but it is not Prevent activity in any meaningful sense' (H.M. Government 2010b, 59). Therefore, I hope that by separating the policy aims, the expectations placed on schools can become more explicit, and thus help teachers devise clearer lessons or cross-curricular strategies (Miller, O'Grady, and McKenna 2013, 193).

4.1. Safeguarding children

The safeguarding of children is a powerful concept in education because the pupils' well-being, protection and safety are deemed essential when working with young people (HM Government 2013). The use of this fundamental principle demonstrates the high status that is placed on terrorism discussions: if it is deemed an important aspect in the development of children's safety, it is more likely that such policies will be implemented within schools. Furthermore, paralleling the topic to the anti-drugs campaign of the PHSE curriculum is useful in comprehending the possible placement of such programmes – perhaps within the non-statutory requirements for key stage 3 and 4 PHSE concerning personal risk (QCA 2007, 245–255).

However, the safeguarding of pupils does not just include teaching about personal risk – this is a 'sensitive' topic that can cause discomfort or emotional distress for some pupils, thus it may not be appropriate to discuss with all pupils (PSHE Association 2007). Furthermore, as Hilbourne argued, it has 'become a minefield for many teachers because of prejudice among pupils' (Hilbourne 2008). Although my fieldwork and work experience demonstrated that examples of extreme prejudices are rare, the fear of such problems does affect the teaching about terrorism. Teachers may choose to ignore the topic completely, preferring to safeguard children from the potential prejudiced rhetoric that could occur rather than safeguard pupils from potential terrorist attacks, particularly if a school does not have the clear ethos, structure and educational principles in place to help teachers discuss sensitive issues or to deal with the potential repercussions of such discussions (Miller, O'Grady, and McKenna 2013, 193).

According to Davies, even if attempts to discuss terrorism fail, 'what it can do is not make things worse' (2008, 620). However, despite the rarity of extreme prejudice, I would argue that the fears raised by Hilbourne are real for teachers. During my fieldwork, a few teachers informally discussed how they found it an interesting topic, but do not always feel adequately prepared in dealing with the possible prejudiced views that might be expressed. They were concerned that such discussions could exasperate social divisions if not handled correctly, which makes them wary to explore the topic with pupils. Therefore, there needs to be more clarity on the expectations and requirements regarding the safeguarding of young people, which could be achieved if the parameters of this aim are made distinctly different from the other aspects explored herein.

4.2. *Challenging terrorist ideologies*

As indicated above, classroom discussions about terrorism can lead pupils to question the ideologies associated with it. The Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES) have both produced materials suggesting possible avenues for teachers in this regard: either by tackling the grievances of extremists or by helping pupils appreciate social diversity. The DCSF argues that ‘education can be a powerful weapon against [terrorism]’ (DCSF 2008, 3) because schools are ‘a safe environment’ (DCSF 2008, 4) for pupils to discuss the topic. The DfES concurs that pupils should not be sheltered from knowing about terrorism, but rather provided with ‘constructive avenues ... [to] explore their feelings, fears, curiosity and concerns’ (DfES 2008, 6). However, it also states that teachers should ‘actively challenge such [violent] beliefs in a constructive but unequivocal way’ (DfES 2008, 2–3), which makes it difficult to know how one can discuss terrorism openly. Furthermore, how one defines a ‘terrorist ideology’ feeds into the state power-knowledge discourses concerning condemned groups or individuals (Gearon 2013), thus pupils will not be able to explore the topic in depth if a bias towards government views is given preferential treatment.

However, a few pupils noted that there could be parallels to other controversial topics discussed in schools, particularly in RE, thus perhaps it is here that we can find insights into discussing terrorist ideology. Studies by Hess (2002), Claire and Holden (2007) and Versfeld (2005) explore how certain topics, including war and conflict, racism and the holocaust, can be broached by secondary school teachers. Examining anti-racism teaching is a particularly useful parallel because it is similarly considered a sensitive topic and any pupil who holds racist views or ideologies is often challenged and their views ultimately condemned. That is not to say that teaching about racism is completely adequate (Gilborn 2006, 13), but rather that the scope of pedagogical discourses are more developed than those currently available in relation to terrorism. For example, the resources found in PHSE, RE and Citizenship education frequently link anti-racism to multiculturalism and community cohesion education, which is similar to the expectation placed on counter-terrorism teaching (May 1999; Gilborn 2006). Furthermore, anti-racism has been linked to post-9/11 rhetoric concerning the resurgence of racist nationalism (Rizvi 2003), which could be used in discussions challenging certain types of terrorist ideology. By examining these approaches, teachers could replicate the pedagogical methods recommended in anti-racism lessons as a basis for classroom discussions aimed at challenging terrorist ideologies.

However, the nature of challenging an ideology can be negative and even counter-productive. As the literature regarding anti-racism education demonstrates, condemning racist ideas may simply make pupils less likely

to discuss their views in public, rather than actually change their perceptions, which is problematic because it reduces the possibility for true community cohesion (Bryan 2012). Discussions that challenge terrorist ideologies may similarly make pupils aware that their views are generally perceived as wrong by others, but they may still maintain those views regardless of what they are told. Therefore, perhaps alternative approaches need to be explored, to ensure that the some of the causes of terrorist behaviours and activities can be overcome in a more positive manner. Although there may be certain circumstances where such discussions are necessary with young people who are considered ‘at risk’ (see DCSF 2008, 33),³ I would argue that the vast majority do not hold terrorist ideologies and indeed some pupils may feel that such discussions were unsuitable for them. Therefore, a more positive approach may be necessary: either by tackling the topic through academic discussions on the history or ethical dimensions of terrorism (various history and RE textbooks incorporate such discussions), or through community cohesion education.

4.3. Improving community cohesion

According to the 2011 Prevent Strategy, funding for community cohesion programmes had previously been incorporated into the scope of Prevent and used for activities that target vulnerable people and sectors, in particular those within the Islamic community (HM Government 2011b, 28–29). However, following a government report that stated the funding was not adequately managed (HM Government 2010b, 61), community cohesion projects were, for the most part, decoupled from Prevent because ‘Prevent depends on a successful integration strategy but that strategy by itself will not deliver the Prevent objectives’ (HM Government 2011b, 30). This bizarre dynamic is a result of the negative publicity concerning the allocation of Prevent funding: ‘the term *Preventing Violent Extremism* ... was seen by many Muslim community members and some stakeholders as insulting [and] provocative’ (Waterhouse Consulting Group 2008, 42. Also see Kundnani 2009). However, despite Prevent funding for community cohesion projects being reduced, the need for such projects has remained essential, because it is perceived that they can help overcome the causes of terrorism (Maddern 2013).

International studies on counter-terrorism and education have increasingly focussed on the role of community cohesion (Nelles 2003). Even the United Nations (UN) Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy states that it is necessary to ‘promote dialogue, tolerance and understanding among civilisations, cultures, people and religions ... by establishing and encouraging, as appropriate, education and public awareness programmes involving all sectors of society’ (UN 2006, I.2–3). Therefore, it is unsurprising that such a focus has become central to UK policy guidelines. However, I would

argue that such approaches are too simplistic, because they suggest that terrorism is caused by stereotypes and miscommunications between social groups, rather than other factors (see Husband and Alam 2011 for an in-depth examination of these issues). Although it does contribute to the motivations for some terrorist attacks (such as those seen in Woolwich, May 2013, and at Wolverhampton mosques, June 2013), the pupils involved in my research also discussed other causes, such as political difficulties, conflict and recent UK government policies that may have caused violent responses. Therefore, focussing on improving community cohesion is too limiting: pupils are aware that there are other causes of terrorism, but they are concerned that if they discuss them they may be perceived as ‘agreeing’ with the terrorists. I consequently believe that pupils should be allowed to critically engage with these other possible causes of terrorism, including the role that UK foreign policy has played in the formation of such groups, so that they can really begin to understand why terrorism occurs, and thus help prevent it from happening. However, more research needs to be conducted in this regard to ensure that it is done in an academic and critical fashion, so that such approaches are responsive to concerns about the safeguarding of children.

5. The role of RE

According to Gearon, we should be wary about including discussions on terrorism and extremism into the RE sphere because it risks ‘subjecting religion to political purpose and security interest’ (2013, 143). I would agree with this concern, but in my experience, we cannot escape the discussions about terrorism and religion: they are already happening within RE classrooms. Therefore, if we cannot ignore or avoid them, then clearer guidance for educationalists is required (as this paper intends to provide) so that we do not become trapped into political or securitisation rhetoric.

In my opinion, one key reason for this topic’s appearance in RE is the current academic and public interest in the relationship between religion and terrorism. According to the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religious and Beliefs in Public Schools*, ‘there is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts’ (OSCE 2007, 87). Therefore, since RE focuses on the religious aspects of life, it is logical for RE to play a role in such discussions. Ofsted concurs that pupils ‘need to grasp how powerful religion is in people’s lives ... [and] explore areas of controversy in the world of religion’ (Ofsted 2007, 41), thus it is relevant for RE to accommodate discussions about controversial issues, including terrorism. Furthermore, the vast majority of pupils involved in my research felt that RE was a suitable forum for such discussions because they wanted to better comprehend the relationship between religion and terrorism.

In recent years, the literature on the role of RE in discussions that challenge terrorist or extremist ideology, and the responsive role community cohesion education can play in such programmes, has significantly increased, with books by Grimmitt (2010), Barnes (2011) and Miller, O'Grady, and McKenna (2013), providing useful insights into the difficult issues surrounding these topics (also see Ipsos MORI 2011 for details on how schools have responded). However, these texts do not differentiate between the policy aims, arguing that community cohesion can help counter terrorist ideology by encouraging pupils 'to flourish individually and within their communities as citizens in a pluralistic society' (QCA 2004, 7–15). In my opinion, greater differentiation between these topics is required, because challenging an ideology can have negative overtones that are not necessarily answered through community cohesion education (see Thomas 2011). If these two aims are not explicitly defined, they can become confused and result in teachers focusing on those specific communities which are claimed to contain the politically condemned ideologies (particularly Islamic), rather than on the wider spectrum of issues relating to community cohesion.

Throughout my research, I frequently experienced pupils who were unsure about what they could say with respect to Islam due to the confusion between the associated violent ideologies and their knowledge of local Islamic communities, thus I believe that if these two aims of challenging specific ideologies and achieving community cohesion were made more distinct, then pupils would have a clearer idea about the specific parameters of discussion within those lessons.

Another interesting discussion point raised by the pupils was their desire to understand the ideologies associated with 9/11, with a few adding that if they were given the opportunity to discuss it in RE, that might improve their opinion of the subject. Such discussions were expected given the extensive literature and media coverage of 9/11, but I would urge caution to educationalists using this as a rallying point for RE, because it could undermine the other positive work and aspects of RE teaching (Moulin 2012, 169). RE has much to offer and we should be working on ensuring pupils are aware of the general importance of RE, not just raising awareness of those sensitive (or controversial) topics they might find interesting.

On the other hand, the increased focus on 9/11 and terrorism has had an impact in terms of expanding curriculum guidelines on teaching about controversial issues in RE. One resource is *REsilience*, which provides teachers with additional support for dealing with the possible issues that might arise from discussing these topics with pupils (see www.re-silience.org.uk). However, the nature of this guidance has come under scrutiny because some scholars felt that it could be biased in promoting UK state agendas (and discourses) on terrorism rather than promoting critical thinking about the topic (Gearon 2010, 112). These concerns exemplify the overall issues that RE teachers and scholars face in trying to broach the topic: there

has become a growing need to justify the subject since recent political manoeuvrings, such as the exclusion of RE from the English Baccalaureate, have damaged the subject's reputation, but teachers also want to maintain the basic premise of RE teaching: that it contributes to the 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils' (DCSF 2010, 4).

Discussions about the incorporation of counter-terrorism measures in RE have also brought to the fore *how* this topic can be taught. For example, Watson and Thompson argue that RE can be used to respond to terrorist ideologies by teaching the 'correct interpretation of religion and scriptures' (2006, 15); not only to Muslim pupils but also to pupils from other backgrounds who may be unclear about how (or why) Islam was associated with 9/11. However, I would argue that this approach suggests an 'unequivocal' (DfES 2008, 3) rejection of terrorist ideology, which may adhere to state agendas, but does not allow scope for critical discussion. I would also disagree with the premise that RE teachers can provide 'correct' interpretation of scriptures, because different groups or denominations can have a range of interpretations, each of which is 'correct' for that particular group (or even individual). As Miller noted, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, states that people should have the freedom of religion, meaning that 'they can believe whatever they like: they may be wrong and what they believe may be irrational, even abhorrent, but that is their right' (2012, 193), therefore, alternative approaches should be explored. One method could be, as Miller suggests, through Human Rights Education (2012), but there is also scope in using Jackson's interpretative approach (Jackson 1997) because this pedagogy has the potential to provide an interesting route into the topic: it would allow pupils to critically engage with various scriptural and religious interpretations, from both global and local environments (which is something that the pupils' themselves wanted to discuss further). Thus, teachers could discuss views that are generally accepted by the majority of faith followers and compare how this differs to the terrorist ideological links to a faith, explaining why other believers may disagree with such ideas, but ultimately respecting the individual's right to hold any belief he or she chooses (Miller 2013).

However, this approach could be problematic due to the violence associated with the topic: if it is not taught with clarity, it could be mishandled and perhaps lead some pupils to agree with the ideologies under scrutiny, which would breach the safeguarding of children. Alternative ideas were explored by Marshall (2009), who provided lesson plans and suggestions for classroom-based activities that draw from Philosophy for Children, thinking skill activities, visual stimulus and examining primary sources: approaches which could help RE teachers display the critical engagement expectations found in 'good' RE teaching (see Everington and Sykes 2001).

Many of the pupils involved in my research were aware that the issues surrounding terrorism make it a sensitive and challenging topic within RE

classrooms. They raised interesting questions about political agendas, media representations and whole school or parental concerns, as well as the desire to remain respectful of the views held by the majority of religious followers: and some were also aware that such issues could affect attempts to critically engage them in such discussions. However, despite knowing that the violence associated with terrorism makes the ideology condemnable, they wanted to be given more scope to engage in critical or academic discussions because they wanted to understand why terrorism occurs. Therefore, perhaps teachers should look beyond the linear approach that adheres to the expectations (and bias) of state discourses, and discuss the wider implications and causes of terrorism, as well as its relationship to religion. Although this may give rise to questions about the safeguarding of children from violence or prejudice, I believe that, with further research and resources, the vast majority of pupils are capable of engaging with such discussions, and should be allowed to do so within the RE classroom.

6. Conclusions

The necessity to incorporate terrorism (and the associated discourses of extremism and radicalisation) into English Secondary School Education is the result of influential political agendas, in particular the Prevent Strategy. However, the lack of clarity over terminology has brought into question *what* exactly is being taught, as well *how* schools are expected to discuss such difficult and controversial subject matter.

By dividing Prevent into three overlapping, but noticeably distinct categories (the safeguarding of children, challenging terrorist ideology and community cohesion), educationalists can hopefully appreciate the nuances of this policy, and provide more specific guidelines and materials for each aspect. These divisions highlighted how certain aspects of Prevent can fit into the discourses within specific curriculum subjects and thus help teachers find clearer and more specific avenues for cross-curricula or whole school teaching, as well classroom-based activities and discussion.

For RE in particular, approaching these topics is challenging, because teachers are torn between adhering to political discourses, protecting children from violence, as well the dynamics of 'good' RE teaching that encourages critical thinking. Some RE teachers do (understandably) simply chose to ignore the topic, but my fieldwork demonstrates that there is a genuine interest from pupils in discussing the relationship between terrorism and religion, thus it is imperative for RE teachers and researchers to engage with the topic and explore resolutions to the problems outlined above.

As a result of my findings, I also suggest that RE teachers can go beyond the aims of Prevent and its associated political or securitised rhetoric, and allow pupils to really engage with the issues raised by these violent attacks. By allowing scope for critical discussion, perhaps by

exploring challenging materials such as terrorist literature and ideology, or through discussions about the potential role that the UK or other governments have had in the creation of terrorism, we can really begin to move away from stereotypes and prejudices, and actually work on proactive measures that will help to prevent terrorism from happening in the future.

Notes

1. Please note that despite some confusion over terminological usage in the main body of Prevent Strategy, there are definitions provided in the glossary, see HM Government 2011b, 107–108
2. Schools sometimes call this subject PHSE or incorporate additional ideas such as ‘economic’ (PHSEE), ‘citizenship’ (PHSCE) or ‘religious’ (PHSRE).
3. Although I would question how one defines a child ‘at risk’ from terrorism.

Notes on contributor

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