

## Problematizing the Context of anti-radicalism programs in Australian schools

At face value, the Australian government radicalisation awareness kit seems informative and full of useful tips for deterring individuals away from radical paths. Understandably, events such as the Numan Haider incident and the fact that some Australian teenagers (such as Abdullah Elmir and Jake Bilardi) have joined the 'Islamic state' helped create concerns about teenage involvement in terrorism, resulting in increased efforts to involve schools in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). CVE broadly refers to non-coercive measures aimed at reducing the chances of people becoming involved in terrorism but as an experimental area risks causing harm, especially if programs are broad in their target and treat community groups as potential terrorists.

*So, what is it then about this kit that renders it as problematic from an educational perspective?*

Criticized by Maurie Mulheron, the president of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation for generating fear, division and intolerance in the community and by Gary Bouma, who is quoted widely in the kit, as being published unexpectedly, the kit has generated much criticism for being misused and forming the basis for anti-radicalism programs in schools.

The educational and political contexts in which the non-evidence based, anti-radicalism programs in schools were introduced is problematized for several reasons.

Firstly, the political context saw a significant rise in Australian right-wing politics including Hansonites, with which it became acceptable to blame an entire heterogeneous population for the actions of a few- regardless of whether the underlying motivation for the actions was religiously motivated or not. Despite, ASIO Chief Duncan Lewis, stating that his organisation is mainly interested in individuals 'inspired by a warped version of Sunni Islam,' the entire Muslim community found itself under surveillance. The radicalisation awareness kit, problematically also states that 'countries such as Australia, with large culturally and ethnically diverse communities, are often directly impacted by international conflicts and civil wars' with no mention as to how our foreign policies indirectly support extremist narratives through contributing to millions of innocent deaths in the Middle-East, while conveniently ignoring the inconvenient truth of Australia's direct funding and support for ISIS and its allies in Syria, in order to depose the Syrian Leader Bashar Al-Assad. In such a political context, the corporate media has helped to ensure that fact based narratives are derided as 'conspiracy theories' with genuine public debate on Australia's counterproductive foreign policies censored creating a consensus of ignorance. This is problematic, not just because it undermines our democracy, but because while ISIS linked groups are successfully physically expanding throughout neighbouring South-East Asia and putting our national borders at significant risk, we have yet to even introduce the issue in the public sphere. Indeed, there have been no attempts to address how Australia's close ties to countries such as Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries- that actively export Wahhabism (a radical version of Sunni Islam) could actually be helping to fund and fuel the global expansion of radical

terrorism. Real investigative journalism offering historical context and legitimate evidence has been relegated to the fringes, with unsubstantiated claims against the Syrian president and fraudulent use of Syrian Children's images such as Omran Daqneesh ("Little Omran" in the media) used to fuel a needless disastrous war for the Syrian population, with repercussions for global security.

Secondly, the educational context in which anti-radicalism programs was introduced is even more so problematic. Despite research revealing that many Australian teachers have a poor understanding of their Muslim students and that the Australian Curriculum excludes the Muslim identity resulting in dehumanising effects, Muslim students have suffered from both the abuse and misuse of the kits, regardless of warnings by key experts who contributed to the kits case studies. Children as young as 6 years old have been subjected to strict discipline over jokes overheard by their peers, causing them distress in the process. Inexperienced and islamophobic teachers have also been the subject of complaints for abusing or misusing the kits. The harassment and monitoring of prayer groups was seen as a key government strategy, regardless of research pointing to the fact that perpetrators of terrorist acts in western countries lack religious observance and that there is no single path to radicalisation. The research had also concluded that political/social grievances along with individual factors are just as important as ideological beliefs to contributing to such behaviour. Combined with prayer group audits, the awareness kit has effectively placed all Muslim students on a terror-suspect watch list, especially if students mention their views on imperialism in the Middle East. Interestingly, the UK Security Service MI5 reported that a religious identity can actually protect against radicalisation. Many educators have also voiced concerns that such school based programs are a waste of time and money as teachers have always involved police when students commit 'adult' crimes, whether drug or violence related. As there is no profile of a terrorist offered, teachers must rely on their own biases and judgments when choosing what to report and have been forced to identify something that others have found impossible to identify or predict, using their limited CVE training. For example, the suspect behind 591 bomb threats sent to Australian schools was revealed to be an Israeli-American teenager and not Muslim. Furthermore, there is also the risk that ordinary teenage defiance could be reclassified as a national security threat, creating false, costly leads.

Finally, critics have warned that following the UK approach to counterterrorism will be counterproductive as it will distract from genuine terrorist threats through trusting guesswork and support extremist narratives by encouraging racial and religious profiling. Even though the UK government stated that its CVE programs were not meant to censor public debate on controversial issues, in practice trivial matters such as speaking Arabic in class lead to police referrals and resulted in needless student trauma.

Locally, the Australian prayer audit risked further destroying the crucial and fragile teacher-student relationship by forcing teachers to spy on and police their students; so how do we get the balance right as educators in ensuring that we create ideal

citizens amid national security concerns and given the increasing political pressures we are constantly bombarded with? Perhaps, the answer to that is simpler than we thought: By doing what we do best. That is, establishing strong critical relationships with our students by genuinely valuing them as individuals and role-modelling good citizenship through embracing rather than trivialising controversial debates our students may bring to the classroom. After all, it is only through valuing our students as human beings that we can address their human needs. Placing our students on a terror-suspect watch list gives the counterproductive message to our students, that they are not valued citizens and only exacerbates the impacts of a curriculum that continuously fails to recognise their humanity and histories. This is arguably the forgotten key to CVE programs ultimately succeeding.

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