

Navigating Controversy in British Classrooms: a reflection on discussing the religious connections to terrorism within schools

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Abstract: According to the UK Government's Prevent Strategy (2011), secondary schools play a vital role in preventing children engaging in terrorist activities; with later documents (HM Government, 2015; 2023) going further and mandating schools to take an active role in counter-terrorism efforts. This suggests that schools are not just protecting children from the effects of terrorism, but rather actively preventing them from engaging in terrorist activities. However, there is much debate over exactly how (and why) this controversial topic is explored in classroom situations. This article reflects on the data collected from six case studies, where both teachers and secondary school pupils were approached for their views on the topic, with a particular focus on any connections pupils' made between religion and terrorism. It highlights the complexities of discussing the topic with young people and reflects on the purpose and nature of counter-terrorism measures within secondary school environments.

Keywords: education, counter-terrorism, controversial issues, prevent, securitisation, teachers, radicalisation.

Zusammenfassung: Gemäß der Präventionsstrategie der britischen Regierung (2011) spielen weiterführende Schulen eine entscheidende Rolle dabei, Kinder davon abzuhalten, sich an terroristischen Aktivitäten zu beteiligen. Spätere Dokumente (HM Government, 2015; 2023) gehen noch weiter und verpflichten Schulen, eine aktive Rolle bei der Terrorismusbekämpfung zu übernehmen. Dies deutet darauf hin, dass Schulen Kinder nicht nur vor den Auswirkungen des Terrorismus schützen, sondern sie aktiv davon abhalten, sich an terroristischen Aktivitäten zu beteiligen. Es gibt jedoch viele Diskussionen darüber, wie (und warum) dieses kontroverse Thema im Unterricht behandelt wird. Dieser Artikel reflektiert die Daten aus sechs Fallstudien, in denen sowohl Lehrkräfte als auch Schülerinnen und Schüler der Sekundarstufe zu ihren Ansichten zu diesem Thema befragt wurden, wobei ein besonderer Schwerpunkt auf den Verbindungen lag, die die Lernenden zwischen Religion und Terrorismus herstellten. Er beleuchtet die Komplexität der Diskussion dieses Themas mit jungen Menschen und reflektiert den Zweck und die Art von Maßnahmen zur Terrorismusbekämpfung im Umfeld von weiterführenden Schulen.

Schlagwörter: Bildung, Terrorismusbekämpfung, kontroverse Themen, Prävention, Securitisation, Lehrkräfte, Radikalisierung.

1. Introduction

Teaching involves engaging in controversy. Every day, teachers cause and dissolve controversy because the act of sharing knowledge encourages individuals to think about the world around them. Classroom discussions can be particularly memorable because the room becomes a microcosm of the diverse perspectives and experiences that exist in society. However, we occasionally hear racist or prejudiced

views; ideas or activities that are considered controversial because they could cause upset, even harm. Traversing the delicate balancing act between free speech and maintaining a respectful learning environment is fraught with difficulties, but is well known within classroom settings (Cole, 2008) because it is important to teach children how to navigate disagreement and develop informed opinions (Hand, 2008).

One particularly controversial topic in British schools is terrorism because it can cause debate or personal discomfort (Wooley, 2010), with the potential for an intense emotional response (Perry, 1998) or a feeling of “guilt” (Oulton, Day, Dillon & Grace, 2004, p. 493). However, British schools need to engage with the topic since the 2011 Prevent Strategy emphasised the crucial role they play in preventing children from engaging in terrorist activities (HM Government, 2011). Later acts (HM Government, 2015; 2023) mandate that schools take an active role in counter-terrorism efforts: they have a duty to prevent young people from engaging in both violent and non-violent extremism, and from being exposed to environments “conducive to terrorism” (HM Government, 2015, p. 11). Schools must conduct risk assessments on pupil behaviour and local issues, so that they can identify pupils who may be vulnerable to radicalisation (HM Government, 2023); conduct comprehensive staff training (*ibid.*, p. 36); have clear IT policies that promote safety (*ibid.*, p. 42); and have a policy for submitting Prevent referrals, which typically includes working in partnership with Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) (*ibid.*, p. 40). Schools in Britain are thus responsible for protecting children from the effects of terrorism and are expected to actively prevent their involvement in terrorist activities.

This paper provides insights into teacher and pupil views on terrorism and explores the complexities associated with school engagement with this controversial issue. The aim of this paper is to critically reflect on what happens when we do discuss the topic with pupils and explore whether secondary schools can truly fulfil the expectations placed upon them.

2. Background

In recent years, European education policies have seen an increase in counter-terrorism measures (see for example the Council of Europe and individual country legislation), with the UK having a particularly influential document called the Prevent Strategy, which is part of the UK’s larger counter-terrorism (CONTEST) and aims to stop people from becoming terrorism or supporting terrorism.

The 2015 UK Prevent Strategy advises that schools should serve as “safe spaces” (HM Government, 2015, p. 11) for pupils to discuss and challenge extremist ideas, including ideas that promote a political, religious, or ideological cause that could lead acts of terrorism. This was updated in 2023 and highlighted Islamist and Extreme Right-Wing ideologies as causing the most concern in England and Wales (HM Government, 2023). The Prevent Duty guidelines are slightly differently in Scotland (Home Office, 2021), but similar concerns are discussed.

These State power-knowledge discourses guide the expectations and topics taught in schools, but they do not explicitly describe how teachers should deliver such ideas in lessons. The chain of information goes through multiple layers, from government to advisory bodies, local authorities and so on (Cole, 2008), before finally being filtered to the classroom teacher who devises a lesson around the topic, taking into account the pedagogical considerations for a specific class (Shulman, 1986). Although some scholars have argued that education may not be the correct medium by which violence could be prevented, as “there is still much we do not understand about ... education’s role in mitigating and preventing personal or political violence” (Nelles, 2003, p. 21), Prevent overlooks such concerns: it is not a question of whether such topics should be discussed, but rather an explicit expectation that they already are.

I hypothesised that the reasons for this inclusion were threefold: to safeguard children; to challenge those ideologies that are condemned by the State; and to improve community cohesion. The safeguarding of children can be comprehended as schools' challenging the violence associated with terrorism and it should be approached "in the same way that they help to safeguard children from drugs, gang violence and alcohol" (HM Government, 2011b, p. 69). However, this is a complex undertaking, with schools being advised to use multiple examples because "it is vital to understand how, historically, terrorism has drawn recruits from all parts of societies and from many faith groups" (ibid.).

Unfortunately, this approach causes controversy because such topics typically go beyond the curriculum and are relatively negative in scope (namely to condemn violence or violent ideologies). Teachers may also lack confidence discussing such issues, thus it might be better to focus on common values such as respect, human rights and justice instead (Davies, 2009). As Prevent suggests, "a stronger sense of 'belonging' and citizenship makes communities more resilient to terrorist ideology" (HM Government, 2011b, p. 27), so the more positive rhetoric of community cohesion could be used for policy implementation. Subjects such as Religious Education (RE), Citizenship and History are well-placed help pupils explore the historical and faith dimensions of terrorism, with RE being particularly useful because it helps build community cohesion through its core values of empathy and equality. RE encourages the development of critical thinking skills, dialogue and respect for diversity (Ghosh & Chan, 2017): skills needed to counter extremist thought. Teachers could develop critical thinking skills by discussing the concept of terrorism itself (Quartermaine, 2024) or through more targeting approaches, such as studying specific Scriptures (Oganessian, 2018). RE can also promote tolerance and social cohesion through the facilitation of communication, which would help dissolve those prejudices that contribute to extremist thought (Jackson, 2014).

Although these approaches can have positive outcomes, the controversy surrounding this topic is enhanced due to the purpose behind them. Discussing terrorism is a known area of concern, thus pupil interactions or conversations would typically be monitored throughout: but does this really promote social cohesion or has education simply become an arm of the State through intelligence gathering (Gearon, 2015)? Profiling pupils and conducting risk assessments presumes that they could be susceptible to the extremist rhetoric (Heartfield, 2002), but other causes, such as a lack of coherent frameworks (Malik, 2009) and underdeveloped critical thinking skills could also be drivers. Furthermore, extremist thinkers are typically highly secretive in nature, which can make it difficult for teachers to identify (with the potential for wrongful accusations). Perhaps Prevent should be reframed in "the language of therapy, resilience and well-being" (O'Donnell, 2017, p. 177), because this would target the underlying need for pastoral care (Durodie, 2016).

In my experience, the vast majority of pupils do not engage in terrorist activity; some may express ideas that cause concern, but if that is identified and tackled quickly, the problems are easily overcome. Issues generally only arise once an individual has been radicalised, because it becomes necessary to engage in more intensive communications and interventions. For those requiring further assistance, there are many resources available to teachers, including national guidelines and websites, such as www.educateagainsthate.com, as well as more local information for each district. Every British education facility should also provide information about Prevent, with information accessible to teachers and parents (on request).

3. Case Studies: Overview

To better understand how British teachers and pupils perceive this controversial topic, this paper reflects on the results gathered from six case studies conducted in Warwickshire, a county in the heart of the UK. The boundaries of this county are peculiar, with a number of major UK cities (Coventry and Birmingham) being extremely close but the region itself having a distinctive demographic. At the time of the research project, the majority of the region's population identified as white (the highest being Stratford-upon-Avon at 95.5%), which differed significantly to the nearby cities of Birmingham (48.6%) and Coventry (65.5%).

The primary research question was: “how do secondary school pupils in six Warwickshire schools perceive terrorism?” With three secondary questions:

- What connections, if any, do the pupils' make between terrorism and religion?
- How do the school and classroom teachers affect and influence the pupils' views?
- What wider social influences and concepts emerge from the discovered pupils' perceptions?

To ensure a robust analysis was achieved, the study focused on the language and discourses surrounding terrorism, in particular the links made to religion, history and politics (Foucault, 2002). The primary considerations were to find a method by which perceptions of an abstract concept could be explored and to discover an appropriate analytical approach to those findings. Perceptions, by their very nature, are complex, particularly when they are divulged by another individual because it is impossible to know what they truly think. Furthermore, they are in a constant state of flux: previous knowledge influences the foundations of those perceptions, yet they are constantly changing as more knowledge is acquired. Therefore, this study should be considered a snapshot of the perceptions divulged by participants during the research events, as gathered through the data collection techniques used.

For the purposes of the study, I chose Foucault's theories on the nature of knowledge: he provided useful insights into the various components of the research process, particularly general knowledge formation, language analysis and the importance of power-knowledge in the divulgence of ideas and perceptions. He helped explain the reasons why certain knowledge was discovered, which in turn provided deeper insights into the nature of the perceptions under investigation. However, the nature of the topic in itself resulted in some information becoming concealed, restricted by socially imposed powers, which required additional analytical insights, as explored by Foucault's theories on power-knowledge.

That is not to say that this is a Foucauldian-based project, but rather that I have used his philosophical outlook as an aide to comprehending the perceptions and ideas under investigation. Foucault did not (nor did he intend to) provide a comprehensive philosophical and methodological episteme for research projects, thus it was necessary to interpret his ideas according to the parameters of the research undertaken. In this sense, perhaps I was emulating Foucault: I required an appropriate approach to collect and analyse young people's perceptions of a multi-faceted concept and thus chose a philosophical outlook that could help me comprehend such complex ideas.

The most noticeable parameters of the divulged discourses were affected by what Foucault called “power-knowledge” (Foucault, 1991, p. 2): the undercurrents of power that limits and confines the language used to those discourses and ideas considered appropriate to the context. One example includes the academic protocols associated with demonstrating the essential expectations for such studies, in particular the ethical procedures and method choice. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, conducting short-term case studies were considered most suitable (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Thus the information gathered at each participating school was initially considered unique to its context,

with later comparisons between the case studies to gauge more general views. This approach was based on the framework of Yin (2008) and Woodside (2010) because the focus was on a contemporary or complex social phenomenon (Yin, 2008), where the researcher has little control over context or behavioural events (Yin, 2008). It also allowed for multiple methods and sources to be used in conjunction with a societal theoretical basis that aimed to explore the perceptions of a phenomenon (Yin, 2008).

The research design was also affected by the practicalities of conducting short-term research events in schools. It included approaches that could help answer the research questions and incorporate flexible methods that were responsive to the specific needs in each case study. Using CSR helped in the adherence of these considerations because it allowed for some flexibility in the research design: the overall structure remained the same in every case study, but contingency planning and alternative approaches were incorporated.

One core research question was to uncover connections made by pupils between religion and terrorism: this choice was partly because of my educational and teaching background, but also due to the current academic and public interest in the relationship between religion and terrorism. Although some have argued that discussions on terrorism and extremism should not be incorporated into RE because it risks “subjecting religion to political purpose and security interest” (Gearon, 2013, p. 143), I would argue that we cannot escape the discussions about terrorism and religion because they are already happening within RE classrooms. Furthermore, as the European document, the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religious and Beliefs in Public Schools, stated, “there is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts” (OSCE, 2007, p. 87). Therefore, it is logical for RE to play a role in such discussions, because the subject focuses on the religious aspects of life.

However, for the purposes of this study, the question was whether pupils made religious connections to terrorism, thus care needed to be taken over the choice of participants and I felt that just engaging with RE cohorts could have caused subconscious bias. Therefore, evidence was gathered from pupils in multiple subject groups (Personal Health and Social Education, Citizenship, History and RE). Various data sources, including interviews, visual and verbal data, and other sources, were used to formulate a clear overview of the perceptions under investigation.

To ensure validity and triangulation of the data, two meetings with teachers were also organised: the first involved informal discussions with key staff members and the second were recorded interviews with the same member of staff (where possible). Not all staff members contacted agreed to the second interview, and some who agreed did not want the session to be recorded. The pupil data was gathered from some of the classes taught by the teachers interviewed and took the form of two research events: a survey taken during class time and a follow-up group interview with class volunteers.

4. Case Study Data

To demonstrate the nature of the research, this section provides a brief overview of the data collected and the initial analysis. A more detailed overview of Case Study 1 has been provided to exemplify the research process, but evidence was gathered from a total of six schools. Overall, 12 teachers participated in recorded interviews (with others willing to take part in informal discussions) and survey materials were gathered from a total of 264 pupils and discussion group data from 73 pupils.

4.1 Example: Case Study I (CS1)

CS1 was in a white, middle-class district of Warwickshire: pupils did well in examinations and Ofsted graded its overall effectiveness at 3 (satisfactory).

Interestingly, the gatekeeper (T1) provided me with additional details of the anti-bullying policy during his interview, because he felt it important to demonstrate the school's positive work. However, the document highlighted some of the areas undisclosed during our initial discussions, including how "bullying motivated by prejudice ... for example Islamophobia and against Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers" (school internal document, 2011). When asked, T1 stated that: "I try to bring in a variety of information ... for example, we did black history month ... that's one of the ways we try to mend [pause] ... well, it's quite a unique position".

The conversation moved onto school events where terrorism may have been discussed: in particular an assembly on the anniversary of 9/11, after which pupils were able to discuss "elements of terrorism (T1)" in subsequent PHSE lessons. T1 commented that 9/11 "stimulates their ideas or responses, so unfortunately ... that's going to bring in certain ideas": although he did not provide specific examples of these responses, as the conversation progressed, T1 commented on a lesson with a bottom set RE group where "Muslim extremists or terrorists" had been brought up out of context.

During my second teacher interview (T2), he notably stated that pupils might misunderstand terrorism: "there's a lot of conceptions that they're all Islamic," which reflected my findings from the interview with T1. Interestingly, T2 conducted a lesson between my research sessions, where he discussed asylum seekers and refugees, because he felt it was important to "break down some of the ideas ... with things like terrorism ... there's a lot of closed-mindedness with it".

The pupils themselves were from two year nine mixed ability groups. In response to the word "terrorism" the most noticeable phrases included: bombs or explosives but, despite the teacher's concerns, only one pupil wrote "Muslim". In response to the starter sentence "I think terrorism is ...", the majority of pupils wrote that it was associated with an attack or act of violence that hurts a large number of people. Two pupils associated it with people who kill others, either "because of their religion" or "because they don't agree with them or their religion". Other interesting comments included: "terrorism is an act of beliefs and injustice and the stubbornness not to give in"; and "it's mostly about racism and beliefs".

Once the survey was completed, the classes did some group work on the ideas discussed in the survey. The majority of the pupils engaged with the activity well, but some admitted they found the topic difficult because they had not really thought about it before. One interesting comment was: "I don't think that terrorism is just a random event of a murderous act – there's always a reason behind it ... like what they believe in". This led to a discussion about the motivation behind terrorist attacks, which concluded with the comment: "most terrorists have been forced into a view ... they can't look outside the area and at the big picture".

This case study demonstrated how both the teachers and pupils made connections between religion and terrorism, but used words or phrases to try and distance those connections. For example, T1 used the term "stereotype" and T2 used "misconceptions": the pupils in Group B similarly used different terminology (such as the word extremism) to suggest that religious terrorists were a "step up (G1)" from other religious followers.

However, the teachers were evidently concerned about what the pupils' would discuss with me. For example, T1 used the word "mend" and T2 said "fix" when discussing pupils' perceptions. T1's noticeable change in conversation highlighted his concerns about the pupils' attitudes and there was a sense that their views needed altering. On closer examination of the data, there were a few examples where pupils avoided discussing certain ideas – including P10's comment where she "couldn't say" which group she associated terrorism and G2's stating she did "not remember" the religion. Perhaps this reflected T1's disposition of concern, but it may also have demonstrated a sense of wariness in the

pupils themselves: they were aware of dangerous stereotyping and wanted to demonstrate that they did not hold, or agree with, such views.

4.2 Evidence from other Case Studies

The other case studies followed a similar pattern: interviews were conducted with teachers; and pupils participated in a written activity and group discussions.

4.2.1 Interviews with teachers

A few teachers deliberately focussed on positive school initiatives, such as anti-bullying policies or strong community links, whilst others discussed their personal views or the difficulties of discussing terrorism with pupils. Some provided specific details, for example, at CS2 the school had “overcome” the difficulties they had with some boys claiming to be BNP members. That teacher believed the extremist views were related to social divisions: “this is a funny town in that the vast majority is very affluent and the less well-off part of town is totally segregated, almost ghettoised”. However, he thought that “the vast majority of [the pupils] were not taking it as actual belief, but saying it to irritate and to cause controversy ... to provoke a reaction. The majority of their efforts were trying to get sent out of lessons ... four of them are in prison now”.

In CS3, there had also been “a few instances with the BNP ... there was rioting”, but that teacher thought the pupils were involved because they had been “swept up in what’s happening nationally”. He went on to emphasise that the RE department worked hard to enhance community links by inviting different faith leaders to the school and liaising with schools from different areas, including Birmingham, to encourage dialogue between pupils.

Interestingly, the focus on community cohesion was mentioned by teachers in all schools, with one stating that Remembrance Day was particularly important because “we use war poetry to try and get them to empathise ... with people who lost people in war; it’s along the line of community cohesion ... And to stop anti-social behaviour, which could lead to terrorism or extremism”. (CS3)

Behavioural issues were also discussed, in particular one teacher noting that her class were often “inappropriate or just plain silly ... [they show] immaturity in dealing with difficult topics”. She found it “challenging” when they “express very racist views and then laugh when they are told that they’re being offensive”. She felt that although discussing difficult topics was “part of PHSE and RE ... some pupils just cannot handle them and sometimes it’s tough to know how to discuss it with them”.

Another teacher (CS4) thought his pupils were “very sheltered” from world events, but interestingly, at the end of the lesson with his pupils, one boy asked, “are most of them [Muslims] peaceful then?” and another replied “if a Muslim did an attack, they could be a sick person but people associate it with the whole race, which is unfair”.

Other teachers similarly mentioned connections made to religion, in particular Islam, with one teacher stating, “it’s not a conscious thing, but I think they [the pupils] just see Islam and ... well, everyone’s just a terrorist, you know ‘every Muslim goes bang’ ... it’s our job to de-programme that” (CS2). Another noted that, she’d experienced “Islamophobia in the school – not because it’s promoted but because there’s nothing to counter-act it” (CS4). She also thought that “the Muslims in the school don’t get that much of a voice ... and I think it is the duty of RE and Citizenship to get them to think about these things”.

4.2.2 Data from pupils

A total of 264 pupils responded to the (quantitative) written activities: 148 boys and 116 girls. Approximately 70% of pupils categorised themselves as white British and 17% were mixed-British heritage; 53% stated they had “no religion” and 25% categorised themselves as Christian.

The starter activity was a word association activity and the most noticeable words across all data sets were bombs or explosives (115), which was triangulated in a later question concerning their perceptions about the activities of terrorists, where most pupils wrote a suicide attack (119 pupils) or killing (40). Interestingly, the word “religion” or “religious” was only used by 32 of the pupils in the starter activity but a third of all pupils did use a word that could also be associated with religion, such as “belief” or “Islam”. No other specific religion was mentioned during this exercise. However, in a later question concerning the motivation of terrorists, 140 pupils thought religion was the most likely motivation, with racism and anger coming close behind.

What about the perceived threat from terrorism, over 70% of pupils thought terrorism could happen anywhere, but generally felt that the terrorist threat level where they lived was “low” because their local village or town was too small (35%) or a “safe” location (23%). They considered the threat to be either “substantial” or “moderate” for the whole of the UK, with approximately 22% writing that another city, such as Coventry, Birmingham or London would be a more likely target – during the research events, the threat level from international terrorism was considered “substantial”.

The semi-structured (qualitative) group discussions with pupils took place a week or so later, with small groups of volunteers from each class. A total of 73 pupils took part: the data was used for triangulation and developing the analysis (summarised below).

4.3 Further insights

The research analysis was based on Foucault’s theories on the nature of knowledge (2002; 1991). The primary focus was on where the pupils’ ideas and knowledge converged, including: the language they used; the power-knowledge dynamics uncovered (including moments of silence); and the overall network of comprehension. My particular interest was on the connections made between religion and terrorism, but additional insights were investigated, when deemed appropriate.

I began with frequency counts from the written materials to help uncover the potency of particular words or concepts that the pupils’ associated with terrorism. The most notable words were then investigated within the other data sets, for verification and clarification. For example, most pupils used the word “bombs” in the survey, and within the group discussions pupils’ discussed how bombs were part of secretive attacks, typically placed in locations that would cause destruction.

Across all case studies, religion featured highly, but since there is no universal definition of religion, word tables and the cross-referencing of data was used to discover if pupils’ associated it with any general concepts. These included: belief, faith, a way of life, God, religious books, rules and heaven. The pupils predominantly referenced Christianity and Islam, which was expected due to the religious heritage associated with the location. Interestingly, Sikhism was discussed in two case studies, which fitted in with some of the broader terms used to describe religion (such as God, religious books etc.), but which could also be attributed to the fact that it was also one of main minority religions found in the local area.

When the pupils associated religion with terrorism, they frequently stated it was the main motivation, reason or cause for terrorism, with some pupils in CS1 categorising terrorism as “act” of religion. However, in the CS2 and CS5 group discussions, some pupils discussed the idea that religion was not connected to terrorism, but was a “shade” for the real causes, such as hatred or politics.

A number of additional concepts were discussed, including: extremism; a desire to go to heaven; martyr fulfilment; defending or promoting a religious belief; stereotyping; and sending a message about the “correct” religion. The term extremism was particularly interesting because it was used to either demonstrate a specific element of, or a point of differentiation from, religion: again demonstrating the importance of terminology within the comprehension of religious associations to terrorism.

The pupils did discuss other possible motivations besides religion, including racism and politics. Where racism was referenced, it was either because terrorists had “no tolerance of other ethnicities” or because they had “a racist background”. Pupils in four case studies thought that the terrorists hated a race and that was “the reason why people acted in that manner”.

However, in CS2, the pupils discussed racism in a different way: they were concerned about being perceived as racist themselves. For example, one pupil stated that he did not discuss terrorism with his Muslim friends because he was concerned that they accuse him of being racist. Another thought that it the media affected how people perceived terrorism: “it was like we’ve hated a race rather than an activity or group of people”.

Another motivation discussed was politics, but it did not feature as highly as religion or racism. Some pupils thought that the location or nature of the attacks would make a terrorist attack more political – for example, if a parliament building was bombed or when a group used scare tactics that could influence a government. Pupils in three case studies also thought that it could relate to a desire for power: dictators may use terrorist tactics to stay in power or other political groups may use it to gain power. A few pupils also discussed the possibility that governments themselves committed acts of terrorism.

However, there was some disagreement about whether politics was really a motivator for terrorism. For example, pupils in CS1 discussed how politics gave people rules and restrictions: that it was peaceful. Another pupil in CS6 thought that people did not strongly follow politics (as shown by low voter turn-out), thus it was not a motivator for terrorism.

5. Analysis

In addition to the disclosed information gathered, it was noticeable that the discussions caused some discomfort amongst teachers and pupils – as demonstrated by the moments of silencing or silence: a dynamic of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1991) that gave rise to the theory that controversial issues caused a disposition of concern (Quartermaine, 2016).

For example, when examining the interactions and behaviours of pupils, there were moments where participants deliberately made manoeuvres to silence their ideas. Although some examples may reflect “unconscious” aspects of knowledge (Foucault, 2002, p. 330) and unknown qualities of the internalised power-knowledge process, there were some noticeable points when the discourses were actively silenced, either by an individual or the group. The hesitancy when pupils were questioned about, or began discussing, the relationship between religion and terrorism was by far the most noticeable topic that caused this silencing, although racism similarly caused some pupils to hesitate. For example, when the discussion was deemed potentially racist, it was ended: asking questions or saying certain words became too controversial.

Interestingly, the power-knowledge discourses of anti-terrorism and anti-racism sometimes complemented each other: they both exhibited forms of social normalisation that contributed to the legitimisation of certain ideas above others. This was particularly noticeable during the discussions about Nazi Germany, where terrorism was perceived as something associated with the Holocaust, an event the pupils thought was motivated by racism. The pupils did not discuss any religious-race

connections, but instead focussed on how racism itself was the motivator behind extreme forms of criminality.

The research also highlighted how the pupils' disposition of concern differed to teachers: they were not concerned about portraying the school in a 'good' light, but rather about how they would be perceived, either as individuals or in comparison to their peers, or even as an overall group. The pupils' used certain manoeuvres and techniques, such as silencing or restricting their behaviour, language and interactive discourses, to ensure that more positive observations were made. Power-knowledge was also uncovered through the examples of imposed regulations and expectations placed on the participants by the teachers and the school environment. Certain disciplinary techniques functioned on both the conscious and subconscious level, thereby ensuring that standard practices were reinforced by all parties involved in the research.

According to Foucault, linguistic manoeuvres and silenced discourses can also be subtle demonstrations of how the State enforces power over the population (Foucault, 1991). For example, criminal offences are considered objects of revulsion and the perpetrators of such crimes are perceived as individuals who had gone against an entire society (Foucault, 1991), thus worthy of hatred. In examples of extreme criminal behaviour, prevention is encouraged as part of the punishment (Foucault, 1991); thus, social surveillance incorporates identifiable markings to aid in the prevention of those acts being repeated in the future (Foucault, 1991).

Terrorism is certainly something that warrants such revulsion, thus it is understandable why this topic has caused a desire for prevention from the State and society in general. The problem is that it has no universal definition or easily identifiable traits: there are certain things you can watch out for, such as involvement in known groups, but even that does not mean that someone is going to actively engage in violent activities. It is important to remember that despite the danger associated with terrorism, acts of aggression are extremely rare and it is questionable to presume that pupils are going to act in accordance to extremist rhetoric (Heartfield, 2002). In reality, young people, particular at school age, are unlikely to actively engage in violent behaviours. It could even be argued that giving the topic too much attention may give rise to more problems because it could encourage those with a behavioural difficulty or other problems to use the topic as a method of getting attention.

The main controversy for schools is that teachers are expected to counter terrorism through open discussion whilst simultaneously actively engage with assessing the risks presented in pupil conversations and interactions (Busher et al., 2020). This is a complicated task because, as demonstrated by my research, the pupils' disposition of concern was most notable in their manoeuvres to sanitise certain discourses; to tactically avoid potentially damaging or prejudiced conversations through a technique of altering or avoiding the topic, thereby bringing into question whether such surveillance can work (or is even appropriate) within educational settings.

6. Conclusion

There are no simple solutions to the controversies surrounding the topic of terrorism within secondary schools. Since the Prevent Strategy requires schools to actively engage in counter-terrorism measures, there has been a notable increase in standard Prevent training for teachers, which has been useful, but expecting teachers to both counter terrorist ideologies and actively engage in surveillance puts additional pressures on them. Some simply ignore issues, whilst others report anything they perceive as odd, simply because they are unsure of the boundaries of concern. The lack of a universal definition or easily identifiable groups further complicates the matter, because it brings into question the exact nature of what teachers are meant to report.

Furthermore, although the pupils involved in this research demonstrated that young people are capable of engaging with this controversial topic within a safe environment, I doubt that such research could be replicated in the current climate of known surveillance requirements. Pupils are now more aware that teachers are obliged to report their findings, so may not feel as free to discuss their views or ask questions about it. This heightened disposition of concern has sadly hindered free speech with most pupils neither wanting to appear supportive of terrorist ideology nor wanting to demonstrate any form of racism or prejudice. Furthermore, it means that anyone exploring extremist rhetoric might not speak openly in school, thus reducing the possibility of teacher's actually noticing anything untoward, thereby rendering the surveillance aspect of the process futile.

I maintain that when given the chance to explain their views in a safe environment, most pupils can demonstrate their ability to understand, explore and question the discourses surrounding terrorism. The problem is that the known expected reporting of any questionable comments has hindered open discussions, which can be detrimental to actually uncovering hidden extremist agendas. However, since the vast majority of pupils never engage with violent discourses or activities, it is worth asking if this requirement actually helps our endeavours to counter terrorism. Perhaps a more appropriate focus for teachers should be on community cohesion, human rights and developing the critical thinking skills necessary to counter extremist thinking.

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