

Can Prevent in schools combat Jihadi Cool?

One of the cries coming from heads at the recent NAHT conference was to make Religious Education (RE) compulsory. 'If it's laughable that we would withdraw our children from English or science, why is it ok to withdraw from RE?' asked the head of a Trojan Horse school in Birmingham. Allowing Muslim children to be withdrawn from RE and exposure to other value systems and ideas makes them more vulnerable to grooming and radicalisation, she added.

It's not helpful that moral, social and spiritual education is increasingly bundled under RE, rather than citizenship – RE is a term likely to frighten the more devout Muslim parents. Making it compulsory could speed up the exodus from state schools into Islamic 'free' schools and do the opposite of what was intended.

RE itself doesn't seem to have stopped the propagation of 'un-British' values among some sections of Muslim youth, and of overt support for ISIS or other extreme forms of Jihadist Islam among its 'outliers'. It's not surprising. Simple teaching and exposure to other value systems in school is contending with family and temple ideologies. Those who monitor these things have been surprised, for example, at the level of support among Salafi temples – the majority and 'moderate' doctrinal allegiance of UK Muslim temples – for the Pakistani assassin who murdered an elected minister for his support of the reform of the country's draconian Blasphemy Law.

'Ah well, it's only a few of the vulnerable children that become prey to this extremist thinking,' it is often said. But this is completely contentious. We don't know how many are silently following non-democratic, non-mainstream views. The idea that it is the weak-minded who are most attracted to ISIS or other violent Jihadist groups is also questionable as a global truth. Many of those actually found guilty of the more sophisticated plots in the UK are well-educated and middle class. Many are rejecting the more accommodating values of their parents. A surprisingly high number seem to be studying towards becoming doctors.

Maybe, and this has to be a serious concern, it is the most idealistic and strong-minded – those capable of critical thought – that are attracted to taking action against the Western system of rule by proxy and of the hypocritical value system that upholds unjust regimes in the Middle East. No matter how few of these actually defect, they will be the thought leaders of the most idealistic of their generation and be far more influential than their visible numbers might suggest.

The clever ISIS propaganda is aimed directly at mobilising the idealism and disgruntlement of this group – with language, images and a call to join a rebellious subculture. A community of resistance. Social media channels that the young have made their

own are the subculture's pathways, and its overall appeal has been given the soubriquet of 'Jihadi Cool'.

'Jihadis look cool,' explains one young ISIS fan, 'Bint Emergent', on her blog, BintChaos, 'like ninjas or video game warriors.' She concedes that 'there aren't a lot of jihadist "poster-girls" displayed – they all wear niqab [face veil] but sometimes it's tastefully accessorised with an AK47 or a bomb belt'. She contrasts this to 'Team CVE' (Countering Violent Extremism – that is, Anglo-American efforts to challenge extremist narratives), which consists of mostly middle-aged white guys with a smidgin of scared straight ex-mujahids and a couple middle-aged women.

She continues: 'Jihadis have cool weapons. And cool nasheeds [a cappella hymns]. They also have 'young fiery imams that fight on the battlefield', as opposed to Team CVE, who have 'ancient creaky dollar scholars. Most importantly, Salafi-jihadism has made being pious cool. It became cool to quote aya [verse] and study Quran. And CVE has absolutely no defence against this.'

She adds: 'I love jihadi cant – dem, bait, preeing, binty, akhi [brother]. . . it's like Belter dialect in *The Expanse* [a sci-fi novel series]. . . [It's] the voice of youth counterculture and revolution for an underclass. Like the ghetto culture in the US, jihadi is cool, violent, rejecting the mainstream but, weirdly, still engaging in its brands, its commercialism and sexualisation.'

Youthful idealism is often twisted into extremes – even without jihadism. Teachers using our Prevent Pack – **Who's Running The Country?** – find that when empowered as 'virtual' judges and law-makers, pupils' response to behaviour they deem aberrant is often ultra harsh, while the laws they would promulgate are very authoritarian – or very anarchistic.

It's only when the implications of these laws are discussed and the effects applied to themselves and their families that their judgements become more sophisticated, realistic and liberal.

Even with this role-play, ethical-dialogue type of approach, schools can't simply teach young people to resist Jihadi Cool and the impact of family and temples. Schools have to exemplify the values that they espouse in their day-to-day practice. How many schools really demonstrate democratic values in their management and engage their clients in real decision-making? How many give children the chance to study up on their own interests and allow them some self-determination in learning? How many really engage in serious current political debate, with speakers presenting different sides of contentious issues?

By making schools into zones of physical and intellectual confinement, no matter what they ostensibly teach, they might just be adding to the problem.

*With thanks to Simon Cottee's article in *The Atlantic*: 'The challenge of Jihadi Cool.'*