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Disrupting transmission of extremist messages through education

Educational institutions ought to be the prime site for building resilience to the lure of violent extremism. However, many extremists are highly educated, and educational and religious institutions are not necessarily protective of people joining extremist movements - whether Islamist or far right.

Efforts at peace education and education for cohesion are paralleled elsewhere by authoritarian methods, biased curricula and the normalisation of violence. Research on the impact of segregated schooling on conflict is mixed and depends on the political context and how far schools are linked to religious and ethnic identities. But studies of divided societies across the world reveal how segregated schooling can reinforce mistrust among communities.

...attractions to violent extremism whether radical Islamist or racist white extremism, are likely to be stronger in isolated and monocultural communities where ethnic segregation and singular identities are the norm (Paul Thomas, 2009, 'Between Two Stools? The Government's Preventing Violent Extremism agenda').

While in many countries there are programmes to counter extremism and extremist messaging, measuring the long term impact of these is difficult. One

field of research that looks at the ways to challenge polarised thinking suggests that this cannot be achieved through the simple promotion of a counter-narrative or 'correct' ideology. Instead, what works is increasing the complexity of thinking in students. Programmes promoting 'integrative complexity' in countries as far apart as Scotland, Kenya and Pakistan broaden ways of seeing the world and others. This work suggests that resilience comes through 'value pluralism', being able to understand apparently opposing views, and even integrate them. Getting children to debate and mount arguments on controversial government policy, or international issues like climate change, builds habits of seeing more than one side, fostering comfort with ambiguity and healthy doubt about received knowledge.

Linked to this exploration of contested values is the need to provide safe spaces for debate. Ideally, discussion and dialogue should not be limited just to one bounded context. The encounter with others who think differently is crucial to complex thinking. In the UK, current proposals to increase selective grammar and faith schools, in essence to erect more boundaries between schools and between communities, can be argued to pose threats to integration and to community contact. Faith schools in particular run the risk of a singular transmission of values, however much they may claim to value all faiths equally or mount periodic exchanges with 'others'.

Another important task for schools is to raise awareness around how extremists

communicate. There are numerous programmes and websites promoting internet safety. This isn't just a question of blocking access, but also requires promoting skills in decoding messages and imagery, habits of searching for evidence, and awareness of the sophisticated strategies that radicalisers use to promote the appeal of violence, adventure and belonging.

Surrounding all this is the imperative of learning about rights. Value pluralism is not the same as moral relativism, that anything goes. Understanding human rights enables decisions on what to tolerate and, importantly, what not to tolerate. An evaluation of UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools programme revealed that children who participated showed increasingly greater respect for diversity as well as becoming actively involved in campaigns upholding or defending the rights of others. Knowledge of rights can help enable confidence to challenge injustice or corruption; or conversely not to claim rights when none exist.

Disruption of the extremist message space therefore entails the building of a complex, rights-based, confident worldview which has enduring resistance to manipulation.

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