The real Trojan Horse? Prevent and the growing securitisation of education

Paul Thomas

University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, UK

Much has already been said about the Trojan Horse Birmingham schools controversy. However, its true purpose for government is now apparent as it has enabled a significant step-change in the ‘Prevent’ strategy’s engagement with education. This has come immediately through Prevent’s inclusion in OFSTED Inspection criteria (which has since been foregrounded in inspections) and will now apparently be further embedded through the imposition of a legal duty on all educational institutions to demonstrate implementation of Prevent, alongside promotion of ‘British values’.

Drawing on a long-term research engagement around Prevent, the paper argues that this post-Trojan Horse development is the latest stage in an approach of securitised engagement by counter-terrorism police with young Muslims and their educational institutions through processes that are largely about surveillance rather than preventative programmes of anti-extremism education. Under the initial ‘Prevent 1’ phase of 2007-2011, Prevent was shown to be a highly-problematic approach that contradicted community cohesion and its conception of more complex individual identities in its mononcultural focus on Muslim communities as the location of British’s terrorism problem. This phase involved a stigmatising, large-scale focus on Muslim youth, increasingly directed by the Police and delivered largely through youth and community work, whilst schools were left to get on with their ‘real’ academic purpose. Widespread criticism of Prevent led to significant re-shaping in the 2011 Prevent review but this was largely a down-sizing, rather than a re-think of its fundamental assumptions and purpose. The Trojan Horse scandal has revealed the true direction of ‘Prevent 2’ – the normalisation of large-scale, permanent surveillance of Muslim youth, across society and particularly through formal education institutions. This overt, securitised engagement by counter-terrorism police with schools and colleges (the fact of which will in itself demonstrate compliance by the educational institutions with OFSTED requirements) is based on a contested notion of ‘radicalisation’ and expropriates child protection concepts of ‘safe-guarding’, ‘vulnerability’ and ‘grooming’ to persuade educational professionals to spot and report individual young people ‘at risk’ of radicalisation.

In contrast, the paper argues that there is little evidence of programmes of ‘educating against extremism’ being developed by Prevent or of learning from previous approaches to anti-racist education. It argues for a focus on both curriculum resources and also the skills, confidence and knowledge of educational professionals to engage in the sort of robust, human-rights-based citizenship education processes that are the only genuine way to develop preventative resilience for and between young people.