

‘I knew what was going on the news, but I didn’t know how to understand it’: is the Prevent policy helping students learn about terrorism?

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When it comes to understanding and learning about terrorism and extremism, what young people [say they want](#) and many of the [educational resources](#) they are provided with do not match up.

Our contribution to a [recently published book](#) shows that young people generally support the values of democracy and reject the use of political violence, but they want their teachers to help them to develop their [critical media](#) and political literacy.

[Despite what students have told us](#), we found that leading government endorsed education resources currently fall short of such aims. The [Educate Against Hate website](#) has been developed by the Department for Education and the Home Office ‘to provide practical advice, support and resources to protect children from extremism and radicalisation.’

Our review of the site suggests that counter-narratives within these resources tend to be simplistic and lack criticality or nuanced engagement with a range of perspectives, e.g. a [PowerPoint slide](#) with the guidance “don’t be racist”. This criticality stood out as one of the key requests of young people in our research – they trusted teachers to tell them the truth and introduce them to multiple perspectives. Whilst teachers [are among the most trusted professionals in young people’s lives](#), it seems to us that such trust might be squandered if teachers use it to promote simplified and simplistic thinking, where students want critical and open thinking.

More broadly, the book we have contributed to explores the impact, enactment, and implications of the [Prevent Duty](#) across statutory educational settings. Drawing on extensive research with more than 1000 staff, children and young people, it provides new insight into how this high-profile – and highly contentious – policy has shaped educational practice in Britain today.

It’s worth remembering that all young people currently in school were born after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA. For most of them ‘terrorism’ has been generally associated with Islam. This is an [inevitable connection](#) given the [dominant media](#) and policy framing of Islamist extremism, and the promotion of Britishness and British values in various guises as a form of antidote to extremism or radicalisation.

Students in [our research](#) (which involved surveys and focus groups with more than 200 secondary students) routinely told us that they had few opportunities to discuss terrorism, extremism or the media portrayal of these issues, either in school or at home. Young people want to learn about terrorism and extremism to build their religious, political and critical media literacy. Students told us they wanted to move beyond partial media representations and to get the ‘whole story’ including the views of those involved in terrorism:

“Before I didn’t know, I knew what was going on the news, but I didn’t know how to understand it.”

“Lessons help you understand why they’re doing it... sometimes when you hear things on the news you think ‘why are they doing that?’” (student quotes).

If schools don’t offer this kind of educational approach, it’s difficult to imagine where else young people might get such an education.

British values are presented in policy as something to be 'promoted' whereas the young people we spoke to were clear that they want opportunities for critical, open-ended discussion. Some of the resources on the [Educate Against Hate website](#) simply imported [government definitions of British values](#) ('democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs') and the definition of extremism as 'opposition' to them. At times some [resources](#) slipped into [narrow cultural representations of Britishness](#), such as [Big Ben, the Queen, fish and chips](#).

We argue that a genuinely [educational approach](#) will take more heed of young people's opinions and engage in a more critical exploration of the issues. Their requests seem obvious – they want to build their understanding of terrorism and extremism so they can develop a better understanding of what is happening around them:

"Terrorists want us to be scared... and we just can't be scared of it, so we need to talk about it more." (student quote).

To develop their resilience to radicalisation they find specific information valuable, such as examples of different types of terrorism; the perspectives of those involved; the way the media and social media operate in relation to recruitment and reporting. Yet the materials on offer to teachers to help them address this demand largely fall short.

Both our chapter – 'Student perspectives on teaching and the Prevent policy' – and the whole book on the Prevent Duty across education settings, can be downloaded for free [from Palgrave](#).