Extremism and neo-liberal education policy

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Extremism and Neo-Liberal Education Policy: A Contextual Critique of the Trojan Horse Affair in Birmingham Schools

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Abstract

This paper offers new insights into the effects of neo-liberal education policies on some Muslim majority schools in Birmingham. It critically reveals how the implementation of neo-liberal education policies, pursued by both Labour and Conservative Governments, has contributed to the failure of some mechanisms of school leadership and governance. The move away from agreed collective public and civil values to individualistic and private values as the guiding principles of public education has produced confusion in role, function and relationships. This is considered within the context in which secular liberal education aims to allow different minorities to flourish and recreate themselves. The paper outlines how the State has entered more fully into the lives of children and families through limitless government regulations and how OFSTED appears open to political interference by government regularly changing the framework for inspectors to suit the latest priority. Accordingly, the judgements of OFSTED have become contestable especially as the framework becomes the means through which every aspect of school life is to be considered, including 'extremism'.

Contexts

In March 2014 there was an alleged plot contained in a leaked document, called the 'Trojan Horse' letter, by so called hard-line Islamists to take over some Birmingham schools. This led to multiple formal investigations and emergency inspections of the schools thought to be identified in the letter (Rogers, 2014). There are a number of contexts that need to be understood to make sense of the many reports into the 'Trojan Horse' affair in Birmingham schools. The first investigation was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education and led by Peter Clarke – a police officer and former head of the Counter Terrorist Command at London Metropolitan Police. The second investigation was commissioned by Birmingham City Council and led by Ian Kershaw – a former head teacher. Both these reports together with twenty-one OFSTED inspection reports and a report of the Education Funding Agency led to a national debate concerning a group of Muslim teachers, school governors, education consultants and educational activists allegedly pursuing what has been described as an Islamic fundamentalist educational agenda. However, it is perhaps also important in any contextual critique to examine the neo-liberal education policy employed by successive governments and the Government's use of the inspection regime to examine the part these have played in contributing to the current anxieties that led to policies of combatting 'extremism' in schools.

The article firstly critiques neoliberal education policy in England and offers an understanding of 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'. There has been a deliberate government policy of weakening the power of local authorities in favour of the de-regulation of schools

together with unintentionally encouraging culturally conservative Muslim male leaders with entrepreneurial values effectively to run public schools as private institutions. Both these policies have contributed much to the malpractice found and to the suspicions of 'extremism' attributed to the governor leaders of these schools by the press and others. Secondly, it proceeds to understand the context of the Muslim community in Birmingham and the 'Trojan Horse' affair through the analysis of the investigation reports and 21 OFSTED inspection reports (1). Thirdly, the introduction of British values and the new inspection regime priorities is considered before a conclusion is offered.

The Neo-Liberal Restructuring of Schools

The Neo-liberal movement in education is an ideological project that seeks to re-define the purpose of public education provision. It is recognised at the outset that there is no single conceptualisation of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is often employed in the pejorative sense by progressives and used vaguely in education discussions. There is huge disagreement over the effects of neo-liberal policies in education but more centrally there is disagreement about the nature of neo-liberalism (Gerwitz, 2002; Hursh, 2005; and Ball, 2012). The concept has different meanings to different observers in different contexts. It is important to highlight that some have advocated 'school self-improvement' and 'school autonomy' and view these moves as a way of teachers having more control over the functioning of schools – escaping bureaucratic control. Townsend (1996) for example, would not necessarily associate such moves as endorsing neo-liberal policies in education. Nevertheless, whilst the concept is fluid it is associated with certain identifiable educational ideas and practices which can be described as follows.

It could be said that neo-liberalism focuses on autonomy and choice transforming some public goods into private goods. Both Conservative and Labour governments have followed a neo-liberal approach in education policy since the 1980s effectively revising the post 1944 education settlement. This revision of the settlement was accelerated under the Coalition Government's free school reforms. Through the neo-liberal lens our understanding of schooling becomes narrowly construed; it is less liberal in the traditional sense and more vocational in orientation and more instrumental in value with a shift from qualitative to quantitative measures of achievement. There is a clear emphasis on the numerical quantification of educational value and success. Such neo-liberal agendas have expanded what are called 'education markets' by employing market principles across the school system. These principles are now at the heart of English education policy and are essentially about the commodification of all aspects of education provision. As Ball (2012: 4) says: 'education policy is being 'done' in new locations, on different scales, by new actors and organisations'. State schooling is no longer a public sector monopoly.

The policy results of such neo-liberal approaches in the English education system are far reaching in scope. Schools have been converted into academies run by private academy chains independent of local democratic control. Effectively private groups (currently not for profit) have taken over the running of schools which become charities with separate legal entities. These academies are free to set their own curriculum – they do not have to follow the

National Curriculum or an Agreed Syllabus for religious education. They also do not have to employ qualified teachers. They can set their own pay rates for teachers and incentivise teacher performance through bonuses. The position of governors is strengthened and most importantly these governing bodies are free from national standards of financial management. Governors became responsible for outsourcing catering, counselling services, and special needs and these choice policies made by the governors have involved them in negotiating and agreeing commercial contracts. It has brought them directly into major financial decision-making and indirectly influencing teacher appointments. Groups with specific religious agendas could also apply for the establishment of faith schools in an area – even if the area is already well provided for in school places.

It could be argued that the net effect of these policies has been to break down the institutionalised interests of teachers, trade unions, and local democratic control mechanisms: anything that supports a public sector as part of the state-civil society social contract. The cumulative effect of all these policies is to weaken and disconnect local schools from the locally elected authority. Paradoxically, such policies appear to have increased central government control through a system of standards, testing and measuring watched over by the inspection regime of OFSTED. Government can also issue statutory regulations that seek to govern without specifying exactly what must be done. So while the Government claims that schools are being set free, the reality appears to be that there is increasing control over schools from the Department for Education.

Extremism and Radicalisation

Extremism and radicalisation are not illegal within a democracy. However, there is difficulty in understanding them fully because both words lack an objective or universally accepted definition. Something that is considered extreme or radical will inevitably depend on the shifting culture, time and context from which they are being judged. Normally something regarded as extreme is the opposite of what is considered to be ordinary, common or prevalent within society. Radicalisation can be viewed as a process by which someone adopts an extreme position, but it may not involve violent behaviour in support of the position adopted. Extremism therefore involves holding beliefs considered by the majority in society as being at odds with the core beliefs of the whole. Indeed, 'extreme' can be defined as holding a fixed set of views outside the norm that may prevent compromise and exclude other perspectives, but this is not illegal. Extremism can take different forms and be characteristic of an individual or manifested in an institution such as a school. The term 'extremism' is also not value neutral and certainly open to misinterpretation. Ultimately, who is responsible for defining someone or some institution as 'extremist'?

Governments have been naturally concerned with the perceived growth of extremism among young people, particularly the process of becoming extreme (radicalisation) to the point of exhibiting violent behaviour. In 2008 the Government published it's PREVENT strategy to combat people turning to extremism. This document, whilst not specifically intended for schools, sets out in Section 10 advice and guidance for schools to prevent extremism. Its purpose is to integrate youth into national life and to encourage schools to develop policy

statements on combatting extremism. It sets out essentially to encourage and persuade because the PREVENT strategy is not a statutory policy of government and many schools do not have anti-extremist statements on their websites. Phillips (2011), who reviewed how schools responded to PREVENT, makes clear that most of the schools he looked at were more concerned with social cohesion rather than with extremism. Of course parental education and beliefs, home ethos and many other variables play a part in radicalisation. Non-school factors can lead to radicalisation and the question arises of how schools are to educate students who already hold and exhibit extreme views. However, extremism and radicalisation are not the monopoly of any single religion (see Juegensmeyer, 2003). It is worthy of note that more than 20 young Muslims from Birmingham have been prosecuted in terrorist trials and some attended the schools under investigation (2), although there is no evidence that the schools radicalised them. Schools are now expected to identify 'extremism', take steps to minimize 'radicalisation' and reduce the motivation to radicalise through 'schooling'. In other words not simply prevent 'extremism', but to 'de-radicalise' children.

The Muslim Community in Birmingham

There are 2.5 million Muslims in Britain which represents 4% of the population. In the census of 2011 in Birmingham there were 234,000 Muslims in the City representing 22% of the population mainly residing in the east of the City making Birmingham the largest Muslim community in the UK. The majority of the Muslim population is derived from rural areas of northern Pakistan whose religion is embedded in traditional tribal or clan systems (see Abbas, 2006 and Goodhart, 2013: 235f)). The community is socially conservative, but generally votes Labour in local and general elections. Muslims in this area are family orientated and look after their elderly as well as knowing who their neighbours are. In a survey of young Muslim attitudes to virtues (Arthur *et al*., 2009: p.89) in the area of the 'Trojan Horse' inspections it was found that they subscribe to traditional virtues, such as loyalty, trust and honesty, which they exhibit to a greater extent than the non-Muslim population in the City. The Muslim community's focus is largely local with an emphasis on religious faith, traditional family and community values. Much of this virtue positive response would not be out of step with the values of an older British generation. It can be difficult to see who better reflects traditional British culture and values, conservative Muslim communities or secularised materialist youth groups. However, many within the Muslim community live in an almost wholly Muslim world without much contact with outsiders, in effect a segregated area.

The religious identity of Muslims in particular has been regarded as suspect by many in the press and wider society. It should be remembered that religious believers may appear extremist to hard line secular liberals; for a religious person who gives their overriding or total commitment to truth claims concerning transcendent reality may well be viewed as suspect. This is especially the case when one considers one's faith to be the only true and final religion. Still, much of this perception of religious people is based on a lack of understanding. Lynn Davies (2008: 1), for example, says that: 'formal education does little to prevent people joining extremist groups, or to enable young people critically to analyse fundamentalism'. Her use of 'fundamentalism' ignores the fact that the very word has its

origin among hard line Protestants in 1920s America who were so named because of their opposition to the drift to liberalism in religious beliefs. Muslims object to the use of this original Christian word in relation to their own religion (see Lewis, 1988: 117). Davies (2008: 7) goes on to equate religion with extremism and says that: ''human rights' are both more direct and less dangerous than theist forms of the 'ultimate good''. She calls for a secular morality and a kind of 'cultural secularity' in schools (Davies, 2008). She even asserts that the more religious one is the more likely one is to be less tolerant of gay and lesbian people (Davies, 2009: 186). Davies appears to have a clear ideology – it may be called 'secular liberalism' and it could also be said that she has what Habermas (2006:17) calls a 'narrow secular consciousness' that is an ideological understanding of 'secularity' which excludes any contribution of religion, not just politically, but also philosophically, to society. She also provides practically no evidence to justify her claims which in effect treat religion as if it was a relic of pre-modern societies and no longer has any right to exist. For many in the West, Islam is often taken to represent the antithesis to conceptions of national identity and liberal secular lifestyles.

Kadt (2013: 119f) has argued that many mainstream Muslims are convinced of their unique correctness and are unwilling to compromise and therefore reject ideas that underlie multicultural societies. In a study of Muslim elites, identified here as counsellors and community activists, Klausen (2007) found that 70 percent of them were 'neo-orthodox' – they regarded liberalism as anti-Islamic. Husain (2007) goes further and claims that many of the leaders in the Muslim community are barely distinguishable from British 'Islamists'. Husain's use of 'Islamists' in this context would suggest a form of extremism in mainstream clothing and increases the perception of Muslims as being a 'suspect community'. British Muslims are more likely, it appears, than Muslims in other developed countries to place their religious allegiance before their national identity. Eighty-one percent thought of themselves as Muslim first and British second, whilst the figures for France were 46 percent and 47 percent for the United States of America. Policy Exchange in 2007 found that embracing their religious identity was even more pronounced among young Muslims in Britain. Feeling that one belongs to Britain was higher among the over 45 year olds than among the 18-24 year olds. In summary, many Muslims regard their Islamic identity as the one identity that should dominate their lives. Nevertheless, it is important, as Mustafa (2015) says, to avoid simple stereotyping of Muslim communities and examine more deeply the key drivers of identity formation and political engagement.

Is it possible that young Muslims are exaggerating their religiosity when questioned by pollsters? Some young British Muslims have sought networks outside of their school which offer them greater social solidarity and a clear narrative or world view which has led them to violent extremism. The Muslim community has typically responded by asserting that these young people have a distorted view of Islam (see Abbas, 2011), but is there an 'authentic view' of Islam? Are there 'moderate' Muslims? The response of the Islamic community is often to refer to suspected extremism as not representative of Islam. This response implies that there is an 'authentic Islam' to which the misrepresentation can be contrasted. This is not

a credible position and merely serves to foreclose debates about contentious political and cultural practices within some Muslim communities.

The idea of the 'moderate' or 'mainstream Muslim' that can be trusted to run schools raises the question of how this phrase can be understood - politically or religiously. What is the definition of a moderate Muslim? It suggests different expressions of the Muslim faith – that there are different shades of Islam which together give the appearance of plurality. There are divisions among Muslims created by different generations, cultural, national and linguistic backgrounds that make it impossible to present the Muslim community as a unified body. There are some Muslims who refuse to accept difference and diversity; whilst others tolerate it. There are also some Muslims who want to re-anchor themselves in a particular traditional cultural version of Islam (see de Kadt, 2013: 124ff). In this latter group their first allegiance is to God and family while they are ambivalent about the State, viewing it as distant and impersonal. They do not recognise the State as the prime educator and are suspicious of government regulations that compel their children to participate in educational processes which they may question on good grounds. Muslim parents are not alone in questioning these processes in schools as many of Christian and Jewish faith share the concerns of Muslim parents about certain educational approaches and curriculum content. However, in a democratic society the promotion of exclusiveness and the imposition of viewpoints from any sectional interests are considered to be threatening to educational institutions.

It was the Muslim leaders who commanded most respect and status within their religious communities that led the move to run local schools in Birmingham: their leadership was clearly associated with their religion and their version of Islam was generally conservative in orientation. The Muslim community in Birmingham appears to be organised around a hierarchical social and religious system within different groups. The general run of these communities will have highlighted their religious identity irrespective of their level of commitment to religious practice whilst giving support to Muslim leaders in running their local schools. They wanted Islam to be influential in schooling through Muslim prayers and to understand sex education from their religious perspective. The Government should have been aware of this context when it awarded the running of schools to these specifically male groups. Muslim children's education and their non-Islamic schooling were worrying parents and Muslim leaders in the City. Many Muslim parents found themselves caught between two cultures – the home and the local school – and sought to bring the school into conformity with the ethos of the home. Their overriding concern was about the practice, continuation and transmission of the Muslim faith. As Ba-Yunus (2002) declares for a Muslim to live as a Muslim what is required is 'an institutional environment'. There was also a concern among parents about academic achievement and a desire that schools should increase levels of attainment. Many Muslim parents sincerely believed that religious values would aid academic attainment and such educational concerns were at the root of the crisis. It is within this context of Muslim identity and concerns about schools failing their children that we might understand how these educational issues inspired the most passion, received the strongest reaction and widely varying media attention.

The Trojan Horse Episode

The Trojan Horse affair concerned allegations in an anonymous letter in March 2014 that some schools in Birmingham were being taken over by a hard-line group of Muslims to impose a strict Islamic ethos. Many irrational anxieties about these Muslim majority schools were expressed in the press at the time. The Government-commissioned investigation into the schools by Sir Peter Clarke, neither sought nor found 'evidence of terrorism, radicalisation, or violent extremism' in the schools; it did however conclude that 'there are a number of people, associated with each other and in positions of influence in schools and on governing bodies, who espouse, endorse, or fail to challenge extremist views.' Twenty-one schools were inspected in Birmingham out of a total of 430 in the City. This comprised seven secondary, twelve primary, one primary/nursery and one nursery. All these schools are located in a socio-economically deprived area of the City.

All the schools investigated had a majority Muslim student population, but none were faith schools. There is a Muslim secondary voluntary aided school in the same area, Al Hijrah School (inspected 10/12/13), which was already in special measures after an earlier OFSTED inspection. It was known that the chair of governors of Al-Hijrah School had been employed as a consultant to one of the twenty-one schools investigated and that some governors of the twenty-one schools had been employed as consultants in the Al-Hijrah School. At the time of the inspections there existed malpractice, according to OFSTED, in this Muslim faith school, but it was not included in the Government or local council investigations. The school itself is overwhelmingly popular with Muslim parents and is one of the most oversubscribed schools in the UK. The school's over-subscription indicates the desire of parents to retain traditional values and a sense of security in a disorientating world. More importantly, it indicates the level of cultural conservatism among Muslim parents in the area and the support for those who wish to provide institutions that reflect that conservatism. After the publication of the two main reports into the 'Trojan Horse' affair the local authority sought the removal of the governing body of this faith school on the grounds that the school had been alleged to have spent one million pounds on a school in Pakistan to further Islamic principles. The Muslim community have had particular difficulties running Muslim faith-based schools in Britain as the example of the Al Madinah School (inspected 3/12/14) in Derby testifies. The school was deemed 'chaotic, dysfunctional and inadequate' by OFSTED and was ordered to close its secondary provision by the Secretary of State in 2014.

At the conclusion of the emergency OFSTED inspections in Birmingham no evidence of 'extremism' was found, but five of the twenty-one schools were placed in special measures. These five schools were at the centre of the affair: three were academies run by the Park View Trust, which comprise two secondary, Park View (inspected 5 and 17/3/14) and Golden Hillock (inspected 2/4/14), and one primary, Nansen (2/4/14). The other two were Saltley (inspected 9/4/14), a local authority school, and Oldknow (inspected 7/4/14) a free-standing 7-11 academy.

Some have suggested that the OFSTED reports simply redefined extremism to equate with Muslim cultural conservatism (Miah, 2014). The Muslim Council of Britain put this by complaining that the reports were 'conflating conservative Muslim practices to a supposed ideology and agenda to Islamise secular schools'. Subscribing to an ideology of course does

not mean you are extreme – it simply means you have come to some conclusions about how the world works at some basic level. It seems contradictory to say that religious faith can inform your conceptions of the cosmos and your place in it, morality and human purpose, but then to say that your religious faith should have nothing whatsoever to do with your decision making as a governor of a school. If you set schools free of local accountability then you are replacing the ethos of the local authority with some other political agenda. Small numbers of governors were able to make significant changes to the schools without full consultation with parents and teachers because the system they found themselves in allowed this to happen; indeed they may claim that it encouraged them to make such decisions. The Kershaw report makes clear that many teachers felt that the schools had been pressurised to become academies by the Government and that the Department for Education failed to identify the risks to these schools in turning them into academies.

Clarke found no evidence of terrorism, radicalisation or violent extremism in any of these schools, but he did find 'conservative religious beliefs and behaviours' among governors and some teachers. Kershaw found that some had 'common ideological stance among key linked individuals' and that some were promoting and encouraging certain Islamic principles. OFSTED reported from one school (Oldknow Academy OFSTED Report 7-8 April 2014 p.1) that 'they [governors] are endeavouring to promote a particular and narrow based ideology in what is a maintained and non-faith academy'. No description of what was meant by a 'narrow based ideology' was provided in the report. It was reported in a number of schools that the Governors had exerted 'inappropriate influence' by manipulating appointments and not having a broad and balanced curriculum. But what is a broad and balanced curriculum to the Muslim governors when schools are told that they do not need to implement the National Curriculum or the Agreed Syllabus for religious education? In the absence of any other curriculum guidelines the Governors made their own proposals.

In the series of OFSTED reports published it was noted that the local authority did not monitor these schools well and that governors had bullied head teachers. A few schools had introduced a call to prayer and had posters in Arabic in classrooms advertising the virtue of prayer. Other schools taught Arabic and one had used school money to go on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. It was found that there was unequal treatment of girls, there was in one school anti-Christian chanting at assemblies whilst other schools were being dismissive of other faiths. This level of perceived intolerance was described in evidence to the Select Committee on Education (14th October) by the Secretary of State for Education as 'non-violent extremism'.

However, it is important to look more closely at these findings in the OFSTED reports to understand to what extent they can be considered 'extreme'. First, all the Muslim majority schools within the 'Trojan Horse' affair could seek a 'determination' from the Local Authority Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education (SACRE) which would allow the daily act of worship and religious education to reflect the predominant major world faith in the school. In schools with over 95 percent of the students belonging to the Muslim faith holding a collective worship assembly that was mainly or wholly Christian would have seemed odd if not objectionable. Most of the schools in the Trojan Horse case had previously

sought a 'determination' although at the time of the inspections most of these 'determinations' had expired and some schools had not requested an extension (Education Funding Agency, 2014). The Education Funding Agency report on the Park View Trust – the trust that ran three of the twenty-one schools under investigation found that the Trust itself had an Islamic focus even though none of the schools it ran were faith designated. Did the Department for Education not know this when it authorised the trust to run the schools? The point is clear that these schools, whilst non-faith, had been authorised at different times to have assemblies, collective worship and religious education in line with the Islamic faith. This would inevitably influence the ethos of these schools along Islamic lines and was in no way illegal. What is key here is that for those schools at the heart of the 'Trojan Horse' affair the authority to make a 'determination' was removed from SACRE and given to the Secretary of State for Education who made no determinations nor enquired into what was happening in Muslim majority schools in regard to collective worship and religious education. It suggests a lack of scrutiny from the centre and is another example of neo-liberal policies that freed schools from the established requirements of the law to provide an agreed syllabus based on moderation and consensus. The Department for Education did not take seriously the collective worship and religious education responsibilities it had acquired. Felderhof (2014) goes so far to say this was a subversion of the carefully crafted education laws built up over a century.

Second, the teaching of Arabic was entirely at the discretion of the governors and other schools teach Arabic without this being particularly noted in an inspection report. Posters extolling the virtue of prayer in Arabic would not be unusual in a school that allows Islamic assemblies and indeed reflects the religious background of the children. School visits are also common and one such visit to Mecca in Saudi Arabia may reflect the interests of the school community rather than opting for a skiing trip to Switzerland or indeed a visit to Rome by another school. The use of funds is also regularly used by schools to subsidise school visits. The fact that OFSTED inspection reports commented on these activities without placing them within the broader ethos of the schools is problematic and may be interpreted as inspectors looking for reasons to paint a poor picture of these schools. The net effect was to feed press speculation about perceived 'extremism' associated with schools comprising a majority of Muslim students. It perhaps even helped facilitate the construction of the Birmingham Muslim population as a 'suspect community' or even the 'enemy within'.

It is true that serious elements of intolerance and poor leadership were found in a few schools and that girls were separated from boys in some classes. However, separation of sexes itself is not evidence of extremist tendencies; though it may in some contexts be evidence of objectionable sexist attitudes. The worldview of many in British education is affected by the strong ethos of secularity in British society that excludes or side-lines religious concepts and discourses/practices in maintained non-faith schools. However, highlighting specific examples of language teaching, choice of school visits and some separation in classes by sex hardly represents 'non-violent extremism'. The House of Commons Select Committee on Education (11th March 2015) concluded that the 'overlapping inquiries contributed to a sense of crisis and confusion' and was critical of the DfE involvement.

British Values in Education

The Government imposed new policies in the wake of the 'Trojan Horse' affair including no-notice OFSTED inspections and the promotion of 'fundamental British values'. As early as 2002 the Labour Government proposed a statement of values setting out what binds British people together. David Cameron in Munich in 2011 spoke about the values of democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, equal rights and freedom of religion and said that these define us as a society and that 'to belong here is to believe in these things'. There has been much thought about what Britishness means and the process of defining and redefining British values has been given renewed energy by the Department for Education insisting that schools must promote 'British values'. Immediately following the 'Trojan Horse' affair the Government issued guidance on promoting British values in schools – all have a duty to 'actively promote' the fundamental British values. Some have, in opposition to this new educational requirement, quoted Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which is binding on Britain and asserts that minorities must not be denied their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language (see Thomas, 2010). They also quote from the Denham Report issued by the Home Office in 2002 (p20) which said that 'There is no single dominant and unchanging culture into which all must assimilate'. Cantle (2001: 10) in contrast asserted that a 'greater sense of citizenship' informed by 'common elements of nationhood' is needed. His emphasis was on commonality, cohesion and integration, but in the end much of this is based on entertainment, consumption and expressive culture – he largely ignored religion.

Meer and Modood (2009) and Modood (2007) have commented on successive governments' integration attempts as being explicitly secular in approach stressing 'lifestyle and consumption-based behavioural identities that are anti-essentialist in orientation and which invalidate 'group' identities in particular'. Muslims who wish to assert their own identity are categorised as self-segregating, adopting isolationist practices, and accused of contravening liberal secular discourses on individual rights. Many Muslims find it difficult to embrace British values if they are equated exclusively with secular interpretations. This might be worrying to some secularists as Caldwell (2009: 286) observed 'When an insecure, malleable, relativistic culture meets a culture that is anchored, confident, and strengthened by common doctrines, it is generally the former that changes to suit the latter'. Many within the Muslim community had given assent to the Agreed Syllabus on religious education in the City of Birmingham and much of the content of this syllabus is in many ways stronger than the confusion in interpretations currently being promoted by British values. Hand (2011:35) has argued that 'patriotism' ought to be taught in schools as a controversial issue, it may be that the only defensible approach to teaching British values is to view and teach it as controversial.

The introduction of 'British values' has created a degree of confusion between different senses or interpretations of the phrase. The main source of confusion seems to be between 'cultural values' and 'political values'. There are clearly locally diverse British cultural customs and practices in the sense of fish and chips, cricket, kilts, Morris dancing and greyhound racing which are almost certainly distinguishable from, also culturally diverse,

Muslim customs and practices such as daily prayer, segregation of the sexes or burqa wearing. But it is not, at least generally, these to which people are objecting when they claim Islam is at odds with British values. Rather, what they are objecting to is perceptions that Islam seems often opposed to Western rather than specifically British liberal-democratic principles of respect and tolerance for the rights and beliefs of others who do not share their own. It is a *political* culture that they have in mind rather than a culture of native customs and practices. There is evidence that at least some Muslims would want to reject, or if possible destroy, the Western political culture and values of liberal-democratic respect and tolerance, precisely in the name of Islam. Core political values are shared convictions about what is important in society, but it does not require that all adopt the same political perspectives. The key value in this core is political tolerance which is a fair and permissive attitude to those whose opinions and practices differ from one's own.

This confusion about British values is increased because western liberal-democracy tends to be confused with secularism. This makes it look as though the issue is between the secular West and the religious East. But one can be a committed Muslim and a committed liberal democrat. But confusion is also compounded by the fact that many secular and religious political liberals find some Islamic *cultural* customs and practices, such as arranged marriages, objectionable and much at odds with fundamental liberal democratic justice and rights. They reject intolerant cultural practices that violate equal rights of others, including 'others' from within the Muslim community. The coercion of children or adults through the closure of choice and opportunities to learn in the name of religion is not a value that a democratic society upholds.

Consequently, without any consultation with the public far less a consensus about what these fundamental British values meant OFSTED inspectors began a programme of unannounced inspections.

OFSTED

In 2014 changes were introduced to the way OFSTED was to inspect schools in future. A greater focus on the governance of schools was given new emphasis in inspections. OFSTED inspectors will now consider whether governors ensure that 'they and the school promote tolerance of and respect for people of all faiths (or those of no faith), cultures and lifestyles; and support and help, through their words, actions and influence within the school and more widely in the community, to prepare children and young people positively for life in modern Britain'. The pre April 2014 version of the Handbook for Inspection made no reference to preventing or identifying extremism in schools. By September 2014 OFSTED had changed the inspection criteria to promoting tolerance, respect for people of other faiths, cultures and lifestyles and to prepare young people positively for life in Britain. There was also a new focus on the role of governors. It might reasonably be asked why had OFSTED not discovered any of the problems with governors in previous inspections? Some of the schools had been graded outstanding just months before they were re-graded inadequate. An observation not lost on the Commons Select Committee which noted that OFSTED was

unable to identify problems at Birmingham schools on first inspection and that 'Confidence in OFSTED has been undermined' as a consequence (see Select Committee, 2015).

No-notice inspections were introduced and some of the first inspections were focused on faith schools with surprising results. St Benedict's in Bury St Edmunds's is a Catholic secondary school that was downgraded because the inspectors from OFSTED believed the school did not prepare students for the dangers of extremism and radicalisation. The school in the opinion of the inspectors had failed to uphold British values under the new regulations. The result caused considerable disquiet and many MPs approached the Secretary of State to complain about OFSTED inspectors acting beyond their remit. OFSTED was forced to revise its report on the school and made no reference in the second version to the 'dangers' it raised in the first version. In another inspection of a faith school – the Beis Yaakov High School for Girls, a secondary Orthodox Jewish School in London, the inspectors downgraded the school from outstanding because they believed the school did not satisfy the Equalities Act 2010 which is mentioned in the new regulations by not 'actively promoting' British values. Inspectors questioned the girls on whether they knew any gay people and whether they had a boyfriend and whether they had friends from other religions. Some believe that the very nature of these questions is extreme and that OFSTED was not respecting the religious ethos of faith schools, indeed that these inspections were antithetical to their faith and undermined the whole basis of faith schools. Some would go further and suggest that inspectors were trying to impose a secular worldview that challenged the religious commitment of believing children.

In another faith-based school, Trinity School in Reading, which is an independent Christian School, OFSTED inspected the school only11 months after the previous inspection and downgraded the school for not bringing in a local *Imam* to demonstrate compliance with the new regulations. In Grindon Hall Christian School the inspectors found that there was a 'lack of respect and tolerance for those who belong to different faiths, cultures and communities' and graded the school inadequate even though it had the best examination results in the area. These comments by inspectors are similar to the comments made about the 'Trojan Horse' schools in Birmingham, but there is a major difference. The Christian schools are all legally obliged to promote Christian principles and are not maintained schools expected to support diverse religious groups.

OFSTED had essentially become arbitrary and ad hoc in what it defined as non-compliance with the British values criteria. There was a tendency to equate failure to promote British values with a failure to identify 'extremism'. What is it that is required of Muslim communities or any other religious school? Is it to simply obey the law? In this context it might be noted that the Secretary of State had to clarify the regulations on British values in that faith schools simply had to respect gay people and need not support or endorse marriage of same sex couples. This has led to confusion and contradiction. The Government and its inspection regime proved inadequate in monitoring the effectiveness and risks contained in implementing neo-liberal policies. Eventual blame for malpractice in Birmingham schools was placed on governors with government policies and OFSTED inspections escaping

responsibility. In the process 'extremism' became loosely defined and inspections lost a degree of credibility by the active promotion of fundamental British values.

The 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act has placed a number of legal obligations on schools and set up a series of duties and expectations on teachers. Schools and teachers have a clear legal duty not only to challenge extremist views, but also to prevent young people being drawn to extremism. School governors are required to ensure that their schools work with local authorities and participate in inter-agency safeguarding of children. The Act also requires schools to train staff in recognising extremism and to produce policies on internet filtering and the use of prayer rooms on school premises. The law has a tougher and more rigorous set of expectations of schools and OFSTED will be inspecting these requirements.

Conclusion

Neo-liberal education policies have changed education policy and practice in England, but the lessons from the 'Trojan Horse' affair in Birmingham suggest that these policies have their limits. The Government's academies and free schools programme awarded school governors freedoms from local authority control and from national guidelines. Were these new freedoms exploited by some for ideological reasons or were the levels of mismanagement and incompetence that were unveiled simply side effects of these policies? It needs to be recognised that malpractice has been unveiled in other academies and free schools. The Public Accounts Committee produced a report in May 2014 indicating concerns about financial management in a number of free schools and the report outlined the risks to good management. Three of these free schools had already failed on account of their malpractice and incompetence and were closed, but none were considered to have been 'extreme' in any way. The quality of leadership and management was inadequate in these schools in the same way as some of the 'Trojan Horse' schools. It would appear that many of the governors who ran these schools had not been trained to secure the development of good governance nor were they trained in good appointment and employment procedures or even the proper use of public funds. What due scrutiny did the Government carry out on these individuals to whom it awarded millions of pounds of public money to run schools?

The poor governance and leadership in the schools that led to serious malpractice was attributed largely to the governors, but was not discovered by OFSTED until 2014 when it entered the schools with a new agenda. Although in a somewhat contradictory note, Clarke commented in his report that he had seen no evidence to suggest a problem with governance generally. The neo-liberalisation of education has had consequences for the governing of schooling producing negative outcomes together with a set of contradictions and paradoxes. At best one could say that these neo-liberal policies had unintended consequences for the schools in Birmingham. It is interesting that an internal review by Chris Wormwald (2015) at the Department for Education into the Department's handling of the 'Trojan Horse' affair found that the DfE did not act 'inappropriately'. Nevertheless, it was recognised that complaints had been received about Muslim influence on non-faith designated schools. The DfE has now strengthened its unit on extremism in schools. However, the weaknesses discovered in the governing system in some Muslim majority schools in Birmingham have

been partly caused by neo-liberal education policies. Local authority monitoring was largely absent because there oversight powers were removed depriving the local authority of resources and senior leadership to monitor and make schools accountable. It should be noted that the local authority in Birmingham did act previously to remove governors of Moseley School for not dissimilar issues that arose in the 'Trojan Horse' affair. Governors of the academy schools were now given control of finances and appointments with different interests and a different vision of education. There was simply non-existent local accountability of the governors and interestingly OFSTED inspections up until 2014 repeatedly graded these schools good to outstanding, even in their governance and management.

It is also to be observed that many educational progressives appear to support and are in alliance with conservative Muslims whilst simultaneously promoting ideas of 'diversity', 'human rights' and 'tolerance'. These liberal notions often collide with the lesser rights some minorities assign to women, gay and lesbian people which they consider oppressive practices. There is also a tendency for liberal minded educationalists to believe that religious ideas are largely irrelevant to education and they look for explanations of extremism in grievances such as poverty, poor housing or discrimination rather than in ideology. The debate about Muslim majority schools has become polarised: either issues are viewed through the lens of extremism or any criticism of Islamic influence on public education is seen as Islamophobic. Two schools of thought are clearly present in the debates around extremism: one seeks to address grievances whilst the other seeks to deal with the underlining ideology. The role of religion is crucial in these widening divisions and the role of government in allowing self-appointed 'leaders' of Islam to run schools. OFSTED has also gone beyond the regulations allowing varying interpretations of inspectors who then go on to inspect and measure compliance to these interpretations. OFSTED has found itself to be the sole arbiter of what constitutes extremism which has called its credibility into question.

Whilst pluralism demands that religion be given space in the public education realm (non-faith designated schools) it should be recognised that secular education is neither value free nor neutral and can be indifferent or hostile to religious notions in educational practice. Liberal progressives in education often have difficulty grasping the 'binding' moral and religious concerns that engage religious people and too easily judge them as 'not mainstream'. The law allows State schools the freedom to promote particular worship and religious education and therefore the Government and its inspection agency has no authority in law to aim at the creation of a secular public consciousness in schooling. It cannot function to undercut religious loyalties and advance non-theistic belief systems. There appears to be an uncontested acceptance of the idea that the State should control the educative process for all except for the most privileged. The Muslim community in Birmingham sought from their local schools higher academic attainment, the preservation of their faith and some kind of public enforcement of traditional values.

Note:

(1) This paper is partially based on a review of the 21 OFSTED reports linked directly to the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham. A full list of these schools and their inspection dates/reports are contained in a letter of the Chief Inspector of Schools to the Secretary of State for Education dated 9th June 2014. The article also uses the OFSTED Inspection Handbooks, particularly the revised issue of April 2014.

(2) Birmingham Mail 4th May 2013 reported that Birmingham had become a byword for Islamic extremist terror and the article gives profiles of the Birmingham Muslim men who have been convicted of terror offences including the alleged Saudi financier of the 9/11 attacks, the first suicide bomber in Britain and the country's first Al Qaida terror plotter.

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