Evaluation report on the ACT Building Resilience Project

SUMMARY REPORT

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ACT’s Building Resilience Project

The ACT ‘Building Resilience’ project involves teachers in schools across England developing innovative teaching strategies to build children’s criticality and resilience to extremism and being drawn into terrorism. The project aims to develop and disseminate examples of best practice in the form of case studies including practical classroom materials, teaching ideas and appropriate pedagogies to support schools nationally in creating their educational response to the new Prevent duty. The ambition of the project is to support teachers working in different school contexts across England in developing the skills and knowledge pupils need to:

- think critically, explore and discuss controversial and sensitive issues
- recognise and challenge extremism and terrorist ideologies
- build resilience to radicalisation; and
- understand the value of democratic citizenship.

Nine schools developed their own project to reflect the local context and the teachers’ views about what kind of response would be most appropriate for their students. The following list summarises the focus of each project:

- Extremism and terrorism as reported in the media.
- Political ideologies.
- Community people.
- Exploring issues of extremism and radicalisation through enquiry.
- Immigration and protest - a case study of the local area.
- Exploring extremism.
- Violent conflict in the community.
- Questioning perspectives on terrorism and radicalisation.
- Challenging prejudice and extremist views.

The projects varied in scale with the shortest taking place in one week of tutorial time and the longest lasting a half term of weekly Citizenship lessons. All the classes were in key stage 3 (11-14 years of age).

A key challenge for schools is how to respond effectively to the Prevent duty and how best to develop critical thinking skills and resilience among pupils to challenge extremist ideas and counter the division and fear created by terrorism. In essence there are two important roles for schools:
1. A security role that concerns the duty of care schools have to identify children vulnerable to radicalisation as part of their wider safeguarding responsibilities.

2. A wider educational role to build the resilience of all children to radicalisation and enable them to recognise and challenge extremist views. The DFE and Ofsted recognise that Citizenship education has a unique and particular contribution to developing pupils' capacity as active, informed and responsible citizens based on a commitment to the values that underpin democratic citizenship.

Much of the work to date and much of what is on offer to support schools has been in response to the first role - security and safeguarding. This project focuses on the second role of schools in developing an educational response to the Prevent duty. Drawing on the principles set out in guidance from the Expert Subject Advisory Group for Citizenship and ACT (ESAG, 2015), teachers have been supported to develop innovative teaching strategies and lesson ideas. These use best practice in citizenship pedagogies to explore sensitive and controversial issues and to develop the critical thinking skills and resilience of their pupils.

Below is the Executive Summary and recommendations to key groups. A full version of the evaluation report can also be downloaded from ACT.
Executive summary

Evaluation methodology
Ten schools joined the project and nine were able to complete their activities within the time-scale. Information for the evaluation was collected in the following ways:

- One of the evaluators attended the project meetings with teachers at the beginning and towards the end of the project.
- Teachers completed a questionnaire in each of these meetings to assess the kinds of concerns they had about this project.
- Students were asked to complete a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the project to enable us to assess the impact of the project and how the students had experienced the lessons. These questionnaires were administered by the teachers and posted to the evaluators. In total we were able to match up 232 ‘before’ and ‘after’ questionnaires.
- The evaluators also undertook eight school visits during which lessons were observed, the lead teachers were interviewed, student focus groups were organised and, several members of senior management were interviewed, including two head teachers.

Key messages from the teachers’ perspective

Key issues from teacher evaluations
1. Teachers were generally happy they could undertake the project and by the end they were even more confident overall.
2. The main area of concern related to supporting other colleagues, especially non-specialists. This continued to be the main concern by the end of the project.
3. Responding to this area of concern took considerable time and effort, especially to support non-specialist colleagues.
4. Schools planned to continue the work, and in most cases were planning to spend more time on the lessons and in several cases to roll out similar work to more year groups.
5. One of the main issues mentioned by teachers at the end of the project was how important it was that students have opportunities to engage in such discussions.
6. Although few teachers identify subject knowledge as a major concern, most of the lead teachers reported having to undertake additional research to build their own subject knowledge as part of their planning and teaching.
**Some common issues in teachers’ planning**

1. All of the teachers had a clear idea of the distinctive contribution of the curriculum projects and how this complemented or improved upon the safeguarding response to Prevent.

2. The schemes of work included learning intentions which focused on subject knowledge (definitions of key terms and an understanding of core concepts such as rights, freedom and democracy) as well as critical media literacy skills and an understanding of political action for change. These lessons were not *primarily* concerned with attitude change, although teachers often assumed this could be an outcome.

3. Several of the teachers planned a variety of case studies, so that the concrete examples could be compared to elicit more abstract and evaluative discussions. These case studies were also provided to ensure students understood terrorism and extremism beyond the narrow focus on ‘Islamic’ terrorism.

4. Most of the teachers took some aspect of the local context as the starting point for their schemes of work. This included responding to students’ questions, aiming to tackle areas of ignorance, or responding to issues that were of local relevance, often including far right activity.

**Reflections on teaching**

1. Teachers were very positive about the response of their students and felt that most of the young people had significantly developed their understanding of terrorism and extremism.

2. Although everyone had well-developed plans at the start of their teaching, most of the teachers made substantial changes as they taught, altering lessons, re-emphasising certain learning intentions over others and inserting additional material. This underlined the importance of being responsive and flexible in the delivery of the schemes of work.

3. Part of this flexible development of lessons was driven by teachers constantly evaluating the extent to which students were able to transition between the detail of case studies and the bigger picture.

4. Several teachers used a critical focus on the media as a way in to encourage personal reflection about prejudice.

5. Teachers were sensitive to the individual needs of children who had direct experience of radicalisation and extremism and negotiated with them individually to find the appropriate level of engagement in lessons.
Senior managers’ views
1. There was a tendency among SLT to see the Prevent more in terms of referrals and interventions, than was evident among the lead teachers.
2. Some supported the curriculum project as a move towards a more proactive response to Prevent and in some of these schools there were several aspects of the curriculum being brought into alignment around Citizenship goals (including assemblies, tutor time and themed drop days), but some did not perceive the significance of this project and showed little awareness of how this curriculum project might connect up as part of a bigger picture. This indicates that in some schools it may be useful to conduct a strategic review of the role of Citizenship in the curriculum in order to capitalise on the opportunities available.

Key messages from the students’ perspective

Reasons why schools should teach about extremism, radicalisation and terrorism
1. This is simply an important issue and students should have the opportunity to learn about it and develop their own opinions.
2. If discussions about these issues are not organised in schools, students may not have other opportunities to discuss them.
3. Many students trust teachers to handle these discussions sensitively and not close down opinions dogmatically. This represents a faith in the process of critical reflection to demonstrate the problems with extremist positions.
4. There is some specialist knowledge about the concepts (extremism, radicalisation and terrorism) and some important contextual information relating to acts of terror which are essential to being able to understand what is happening.
5. Tackling the issue makes it less of a taboo and starts to demystify it for children.

Suggestions for developing critical media literacy
1. Students value opportunities to engage with specific examples and activities which illustrate in concrete ways the bias, distortion and lies which are evident in media and social media coverage.
2. Students may benefit from learning about the strategies employed by extremist groups to elicit sympathy and draw people into their narratives. Understanding the techniques can enable students to spot them when they are being used.
3. Students also need to be taught the background to issues they encounter in the media, so that they can see for themselves where information is being misrepresented or simplified, and where interpretations are being placed on events which may distort the readers’ perceptions.
4. Teachers can also usefully provide examples of people and organisations which often fall outside of regular mainstream media coverage so that students encounter the bigger picture, and so they can understand how omission also functions as a mechanism for media distortion.

**Towards a political interpretation of terrorism**

1. Students are able to move beyond a simple good / bad moral categorisation and begin to understand terrorism in more complex ways.
2. In doing so they find it helpful to encounter problems of categorisation, which encourage them to think about more complicated and nuanced judgements about what constitutes un/acceptable action.
3. Students also value the opportunity to encounter multiple perspectives, which enables them to understand there are a range of opinions and interpretations. This can avoid simplifying narratives.
4. This does not appear to lead to a relativism in which anything can be justified, on the contrary, students are able to sustain their criticism and condemnation of organisations such as ISIS, whilst developing their own explanation about why ISIS exists and what it seeks to achieve.

**Thinking about Islamophobia**

1. Whilst policy documents may adopt a formal language of neutrality, it seems essential in the classroom to engage with the context of Islamophobia, which provides the backdrop for debates about terrorism and radicalisation in the UK.
2. Students who were looking at ISIS were able to see how criticisms of ISIS could connect to a general prejudice of, or fear towards, Muslims more generally. The students in the focus groups understood this elision was taking place and sought to distance themselves from it.
3. Similarly, schools considering the extremism of far right groups would have to engage with the Islamophobia expressed by these groups.
4. Students value the opportunity to learn about the concept and the processes by which Islamophobia develops and is sustained.
5. Students are also able to reflect on how Islamophobia affects them, both as Muslims who are judged by others, and as non-Muslims who find themselves making unwitting judgements.

**Explaining radicalisation**

1. Some students at key stage 3 are able to engage in fairly sophisticated ways with the problem of what causes radicalisation. They have moved beyond simplistic accounts of how individuals are radicalised and are able to engage with complex explanations of how multiple factors play a part.
2. Explanations offered by students considered the immediate mode of engagement (social media and peers) but also incorporated more critical perspectives such as young people’s experience of marginalisation in the UK. Some of the lessons included detailed case studies to help students think about these processes.

3. Some of the students were also able to understand the ways in which organisations interpret events from their own perspective and incorporate them into their own justificatory narratives.

4. There is some evidence that students are able to think both about (i) the causes of extremism, and (ii) how the way different groups account for those causes becomes implicated in their own extremist positions (such as the EDL focusing on Islam or immigration as a security threat).

**Some implications for teachers of the survey data**

1. Whilst this group of students compare favourably to earlier surveys in relation to their citizenship skills, there is still a significant minority who struggle with basic concepts such as distinguishing facts from opinions. This presents a challenge for teachers in terms of ensuring lessons are accessible, especially when using media sources.

2. The data about civil liberties and the degree to which freedom can be constrained to protect order indicates there are some internal inconsistencies in students’ answers. This may indicate there is still more scope for teachers to ensure that the discussion of case studies connects explicitly to the underpinning concepts and principles (democracy, freedom, rule of law etc.).
Recommendations
There are detailed summaries and several points of recommendation in the executive summary at the front of this report. In this final section we have sought to distil some of the core recommendations for the different audiences.

Recommendations for government
1. Policy, and the guidance associated with countering extremism and preventing radicalisation, should clarify the educational role of teachers (in terms of building knowledge and skills) in addition to their safeguarding role. Such clarification should emphasise the need for teachers to devise curriculum responses which are sufficiently flexible to take account of local contexts.
2. Schools should be encouraged to provide a high quality citizenship education curriculum, within which such issues can be taught.
3. Teachers should be supported with appropriate training and resources to enable them to develop curriculum provision in this area.
4. The review of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and the call for a review of citizenship education in the Education White Paper (2016) provide opportunities to promote high quality citizenship specialist teachers who can lead this work in schools.

Recommendations for senior management
1. Schools should provide a planned and coherent programme of teaching and learning to ensure pupils have opportunities to critically engage with extremism and radicalisation. Such a programme should fit within a broader commitment to promoting democratic citizenship.
2. Citizenship subject leaders are key to ensuring the school develops a clear curricular response, which is aligned with other aspects of anti-extremism policy, and that other less specialised staff are well supported.
3. Citizenship subject expertise is required to tackle such controversial and sensitive topics in lessons to ensure young people acquire the knowledge and skills required to understand and engage with these issues.
4. Staff need to be trained to enable them to teach about radicalisation and extremism and have time to support one another to monitor and enhance the quality of provision.
Recommendations for teachers

1. Teachers should discuss their concerns about teaching these topics and collectively agree a way forward which the whole school can support. This is important to give teachers the confidence to teach young people about extremism and radicalisation.

2. Teachers need to take account of their students’ backgrounds, experiences and perceptions and plan lessons which respond to their needs and the local context.

3. Teachers should plan lessons which allow students to develop informed opinions and debate a range of contrasting perspectives.

4. Teachers’ lessons should focus on the development of knowledge and skills and not foreground their own ethical judgements. Students valued this approach and felt knowledge functions as a form of resilience.

5. Teachers need to plan their use of contrasting case studies and examples carefully to ensure students have time to process and analyse the information and make connections to the underlying citizenship principles and concepts including democracy, freedom, justice, the rule of law and identity.

For further information

To find out more about this project visit the project website: www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/act-building-resilience-project

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