



Centre for Personalised Education

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Radicalisation of Home Educated Children

Introduction

Home educated children have long been the subject of media attention and rhetoric, with publications presenting them variously as gifted geniuses, isolated waifs, or feral strays akin to those in the 'Lord of the Flies'. On 10th December 2015, Sir Michael Wilshaw was quoted in the media, as having raised concerns in respect of unregulated and illegal faith schools, suggesting that children were being 'abused and radicalised' in them⁽¹⁾. The BBC picked that story up reporting: *'It is likely the children being sent to some of the centres breaching that threshold are registered as home-educated'*.⁽²⁾

The story was followed on 20th December 2015 by Education Secretary Nicky Morgan, being quoted in media articles as stating that home educated children were at risk of radicalisation through attending illegal faith schools. A government source was quoted as stating that: *'for every parent doing a brilliant job, there may be someone filling their child's mind with poison'*⁽³⁾

Subsequent articles were published which presented home educated children as being at significant and genuine risk of radicalisation, holding 'non British values' and becoming terrorists. This research examines that claim and seeks to answer the question: Are home educated children at particular risk of radicalisation?

Method

Freedom of information requests were sent to all 152 local authorities (LAs) in England to ask: *'Please state whether you have any evidence within your Authority area to suggest that any home educated child (a child educated by their parents not by Local Authority or registered school provision) has been radicalised.'* Follow up questions were asked to clarify the suggested source of that radicalisation for those who responded affirmatively.

In addition, freedom of information requests were sent to Nicky Morgan MP and the DfE, asking for details of the basis of the press statement and requesting copies of

any document, statistics, data, or research information upon which the announcement was based.

Online searches were conducted using the terms: 'radicalisation', 'radicalise', 'terrorist', 'terrorism', 'illegal school' and 'unregulated school', in connection with the term 'homeschool'. This search was repeated for the term 'home education'. A further search was made within Interpol databases for terrorism.

Results

Of the 152 LAs sent freedom of information requests, 6 declined to respond, including after appealing the decision to decline to do so in two cases and seeking support from the Information Commissioner's office to obtain a response. 146 LAs provided a response to the request.

Of the 146 LAs providing a response 146 (100%) stated that they had no evidence to suggest that any home educated child in their region had been radicalised. Consequently, no LA responded to the supplementary questions, which related to the details of the radicalisation, where radicalisation was evidenced. Significant numbers of respondents provided additional information in their response, primarily to state that had there been any such evidence it would be immediately reported to the Police and to Social services.

Online search and analysis revealed several repetitions of both Sir Michael Wilshaw's and Nicky Morgan's statements and only one other article which connected home education with radicalisation of a young person. This article related to a case of a radicalised teenager who had left school to join ISIL and who was not home educated, but mention was nonetheless made of home education by the journalist.

Results were less readily obtained from the requests made to Nicky Morgan MP and to the DfE. Ms Morgan did not respond and has at no point since responded, despite follow up requests being made. Extensive enquiries were made over several months, with civil servants and MPs, to try to ascertain the basis for the public statements made by Ms Morgan. These enquiries elicited the response from several sources that evidence would not be forthcoming, because there was no such evidence.

Enquiries with the DfE were repeatedly declined on different grounds and follow up complaints made. Limited disclosure was eventually made on 30th November 2016, with some information said to be withheld under s36(2)(c), which is an exemption to protect the effective conduct of public affairs and 36(2)(b)(ii), an exemption to protect the free and frank exchange of views.

The information supplied consisted of copies of a letter written by Sir Michael Wilshaw to Nicky Morgan MP on 10th November 2015⁽⁴⁾ and a second letter sent to Ms Morgan on 22nd May 2015⁽⁵⁾, from the Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS).

The letter from Mr Wilshaw makes two references to home education:

'From conversations with some of the children and young people my inspectors spoke to, there is evidence to suggest some of these schools are using the freedoms afforded to genuine home educators as a cover for their activities'.

And asking Government to:

'review the arrangements for home education to ensure that they cannot be exploited in order to avoid registration.'

Mr Wilshaw also states:

'Regional Directors continue to express concern that there are far greater numbers of children hidden away from view in unregistered schools across the country'.

and

'The arrangements for closing down unregistered schools are inadequate. Despite our reported findings, I understand that no individual has ever been prosecuted for operating an unregistered school.'

The letter of 22nd May 2015 from ADCS was approximately 50% redacted, with sections relating to home educated children left visible. Disclosure was made for research purposes only, with specific restriction on publishing the document. Given that restriction, this research does not quote at length from the letter.

ADCS referred in the letter to undertaking work in relation to elective home education and radicalisation, as part of an ambitious programme of other work. It then went on to ask that the DfE look again at its approach to home education:

'as we believe there are quality and safeguarding issues that must be addressed in order to re-balance the discourse around elective home education so, whilst it recognises the importance of parental choice there is greater focus on children's needs'.

Reference is made to the ADCS Educational Achievement Policy Committee undertaking work to understand the educational attainment of home educated children and a specific request made that the DfE:

'look again at this aspect of policy, particularly the matter of a statutory register of home educated learners'.

In respect of radicalisation, ADCS refers to the first serious case review being launched to examine radicalised young people, which review relates to two boys who died in Syria in 2014. Those boys were not home educated⁽⁶⁾. ADCS expresses

particular concern about the vulnerability of young people to radicalisation in schools, including *'illegal, unregistered schools'* and goes on to state:

'The quality of local authorities' links and relationships with all schools in their local area is a critical success factor in tackling radicalisation and extremism (for example, access to school attendance data can help to identify patterns of concern). But the limited powers local authorities have to intervene in independent, unregistered 'illegal' schools and elective home education settings (with either safeguarding, health & safety, pastoral or curricular concerns) is of mounting concern. We urge your department and the Home Office to engage with us to address the concerns around the lack of necessary checks and balances associated with unregistered schools and elective home education. We need more practical tools to draw upon than having to rely on the Health & Safety Executive or the Fire Service to close down unregistered schools.'

Discussion

The first public announcement of a purported connection between radicalisation and home education, appears on the evidence to have been a misrepresentation by the BBC, of a comment made by Sir Michael Wilshaw in a letter sent to Nicky Morgan MP. Mr Wilshaw had stated that illegal and unregulated *'schools are using the freedoms afforded to genuine home educators as a cover for their activities'* and that he felt that home education arrangements should be reviewed, in order to prevent such unregulated schools from exploiting those arrangements, to continue to operate. Clearly, Mr Wilshaw was concerned with unregulated schools and not home educated children, yet later media discourse centred around home educated children, including a suggestion that those children are invisible. Mr Wilshaw had referred to *'children hidden away from view in unregistered schools'*, not to home educated children being 'hidden', yet later media rhetoric continued to cite those home educated children as being hidden.

It is clear from reading Mr Wilshaw's letter, that his call was one to enable his officers to investigate and prosecute illegal and unregulated schools and he lamented that *'that no individual has ever been prosecuted for operating an unregistered school.'* Nowhere, did Mr Wilshaw suggest that his OFSTED officers had evidence that any home educated child had been radicalised.

No public announcement was made in respect of the letter from ADCS, which letter has been withheld from publication by the DfE. However, it appears that the content of that letter influenced Ms Morgan's later statement on 20th December 2015. The ADCS letter in turn, indicates that the ADCS was influenced by rising fear of terrorism in a climate of increasing numbers of incidents occurring in Europe. Numbers of suspects arrested for jihadist or religiously inspired terrorism, had risen

from 159 in 2012, to 687 during 2015. By late 2016 this figure was 718⁽⁷⁾ and that period saw the public witness frequent media reports of increasing terrorism.

This fear is exemplified by ADCS calling for greater regulation in order to prevent terrorism, whilst simultaneously referring to the first case review involving radicalised young people, notably young people who were not home educated. That fear is understandable, as terrorism by its very nature instils terror into the hearts of reasonable human beings; nonetheless members of ADCS are professionals, who should be able to look beyond the emotive to the rational and factual basis for any fears that they hold. Clearly, one SCR relating to schooled young people, is not a rational basis for a call to regulate home education. More rationally, it could be argued that the very fact that home educated children are closely monitored by their parents, leaves them considerably less susceptible to radicalisation than are young people away from parental oversight for a great part of their lives.

Ms Morgan, in formulating her media statements, had the Wilshaw and ADCS letters to hand and was well able to note the lack of evidence of radicalisation of home educated children contained therein. Notwithstanding, Ms Morgan was quoted in media articles as stating that home educated children were at risk of radicalisation through attending illegal faith schools and a government source was quoted as stating that: *'for every parent doing a brilliant job, there may be someone filling their child's mind with poison'*.⁽³⁾ Although Mr Wilshaw had expressed concern about unregulated schools abusing home education regulations and ADCS had expressed concern that they wished to see more regulation of home education, nothing within the material available to Ms Morgan supported her statements.

Not only did announcements by Ms Morgan reported on 20th December 2015, appear to have had no basis in research evidence, or factual data, as research only elicited the two letters from Mr Wilshaw and ADCS, but also, several sources within Westminster advised that evidence of a basis for her statements would not be forthcoming in response to freedom of information requests, because there was no such evidence.

Factual data was obtained through freedom of information requests and found that 146 LAs (100% of respondents) stated that they had no evidence to suggest that any home educated child in their region had been radicalised. Had any child been radicalised, home educated or otherwise, those LAs would have been aware, as social services would have been involved with an investigation relating to children.

Home office data⁽⁸⁾ indicates that during the 15-year period from 2001 to 2016 a total of 26 under 18s were convicted of terrorism related offences, including theft, fraud and public order offences. None of those under 18s was home educated.

Interrogation of media online found no evidence of any home educated child being radicalised and no evidence was found from any source of a home educated child having been radicalised, including from a search of Interpol databases for terrorism. Had such information existed, it would have come to light, not least because members of the home education community were alert to this research and monitoring the internet for any such reports.

Conclusion

In early 2015 the climate in the UK and Europe was one of escalating terrorism and attendant escalating fear of terrorism. Professionals in ADCS are no less susceptible to fear than are members of the public and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this fear overtook the requirement to base policies on factual data and resulted in a letter seeking policy changes for home educated children, based on that fear.

Sir Michael Wilshaw appears to have held genuine concerns about illegal and unregulated schools, which appear to be justified. He expressed concern that those illegal organisations could exploit home education regulations to avoid closure, but this is not an issue which should lead to censure of, or further regulation of home education. Rather, it is an issue which requires strengthening of regulation of unregulated schools. The BBC's misrepresentation of Mr Wilshaw's letter as being about home educated children appears to have influenced Ms Morgan's later statements.

There are no cases of home educated children being radicalised and no evidence to suggest that any home educated child has been radicalised, nonetheless a Government spokesperson refers to parents of home educated children as '*filling their child's mind with poison*'. Governments are responsible institutions, statements from which carry weight and are influential, this influence is magnified when referring to issues of terrorism in a climate of rising fear of terrorist attack.

This research cannot avoid concluding that home educating parents are likely to believe that they have been unjustifiably stigmatised by untrue announcements made in the media, to suggest that their children are at risk of being radicalised. If stigmatisation of those children and their parents were the extent of the impact of these statements, it could be ameliorated by promoting information showing home education in a positive light, but that is not the extent. These announcements emanate from the executive and as such are compelling, accepted as accurate and acted upon. There is no doubt that in the near future, these inaccurate and misleading statements will be used to support a call from greater monitoring and regulation of home education, which would impact upon the rights and civil liberties of families who value home education as an efficacious and legal form of education provision.

Caution must be had by Government and particularly the DfE in acting on these fears of radicalisation and any call to act should be tempered by independent research. Further research over the coming years would be a valuable tool for policy makers in this regard, enabling them to target resources appropriately. At present, there is no indication that targeting resources to monitoring of home education, is either necessary nor fiscally desirable. This research examined whether there was any evidence to suggest that home educated children are at particular risk of radicalisation. No evidence of risk of radicalisation of home educated children was found.

Wendy Charles-Warner. March 2017

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