BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES OF TERRORISM AND POLITICAL AGGRESSION
https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2024.2417011

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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'None-the-wiser'? Citizenship education in preventing radicalisation: contrasting European and Middle East perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Radicalisation towards violent extremism within educational settings has emerged as a high profile and critical issue in many contemporary societies. Debates around the appropriate role of educational institutions should play in this regard have attracted intense media and public debate both in the UK and internationally. This research involved face-to-face interviews with 51 education sector professionals in Europe and the Middle East to establish an evidence base regarding current practice regarding the understanding of radicalisation and building young people's resilience to violent extremism through Citizenship Education (CE). The results highlighted a range of the limitations and shortfalls perceived by staff in CE provision and delivery including failings with how CE was delivered; the negative impact of limited time allocation on CE activity; and staff apprehension regarding their role and the role CE potentially plays in countering extremist behaviour. Some implications in terms of policy and practice in this area are identified.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 May 2024
Accepted 11 October 2024

KEYWORDS
Radicalisation; citizenship education; countering extremist behaviour/activity; interviews; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); snowball sampling

Introduction

Since 2011, the United Kingdom's official counterterrorism strategy has argued that certain environments represent a significant risk of radicalisation. As outlined in the government's PREVENT Strategy:

> … radicalisation tends to occur in places where terrorist ideologies, and those that promote them, go uncontested and are not exposed to free, open and balanced debate and challenge. Some of these places are the responsibility of Government, some are Government funded but have considerable autonomy and others are both privately owned and run (HMG, 2011, p. 53).

The institutions particularly singled out in this regard have been education and healthcare providers, universities, faith groups, charities, and prisons. Following this perception, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, for example, required that a range of

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organisations – including schools – must fulfil a duty of care to detect and prevent radicalisation within their settings. Similar concerns from other governments have been expressed in other countries.

One element in how schools might fulfil such a function rests in relation to how schools provide and facilitate Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship Education (CE). Thomas (2016) argued very strongly that CE could play a crucial positive role in this space, though to date there has been very limited follow-up research. Some initial findings suggest that PSHE and CE can have a positive impact (for example, Sklad et al., 2022; or Edwards, 2021), though critics have also questioned the appropriateness of CE, for example, having this type of role (for example, Sjøen, 2019; or Sjøen & Mattsson, 2020).

Certainly, those most susceptible to adopting extremist religious ideologies continue to be young people between the ages of 15 and 25 who are at a developmental age where they seek to uncover their own identity, look to bolster self-confidence, and are in search of meaning in their lives (for example, Cherney et al., 2022; or Bronsard et al., 2022). For some, this means then that education should be at the heart of anti-radicalisation plans (Gagne, 2015), with an emphasis being placed on educating children in a way that would be conducive to their economic, social, and personal well-being by developing resiliency in students.

Throughout history, school-aged youth have participated in a variety of organisations that promote or carry out acts of violence. Socially- or politically frustrated youngsters may go through quite different paths of radicalisation into militancy and terrorism; the process by which they become involved in these groups also varies, with some being born into radical environments that promote violence, some being 'talent-spotted' and directly recruited by groups, some self-selecting into a group, whilst others may be forced into membership. They may have limited education or other forms of social capital and may suffer from unemployment and economic hardship.

Violent extremism and radicalisation

Despite a fast-growing number of academic books, articles, chapters, and Government think tank reports on radicalisation, research based on empirical findings is still not very broad (Pisoui & Ahmed, 2016). While most researchers and policymakers agree that 'radicalisation' is a problem, there is no universally acceptable definition of what it entails. Much of the research over the last decade has focused on Islamist radicalisation. The term 'radicalisation' is used widely, but the search for what exactly 'radicalisation' is, and what causes it, is contested (Neumann, 2013).

In parallel, radicalisation towards violent extremism within educational settings has emerged as a high profile and critical issue in contemporary British society (for example, see 'Trojan Horse Affair' – House of Commons, 2015). Cases of radicalised individuals and debates around the appropriate role of educational institutions have attracted intense media and public debate. As a process, radicalisation is not specific to any particular extremist ideology (political, religious, nationalist, social) which adds to the complexity of identifying general characteristics of those potentially vulnerable to being radicalised to an extremist ideal. Consequently, the number of proposed models describing the radicalisation process are as numerous and complex as the various groups of radicalised individuals.

The Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (Alonso et al., 2008) established by the European Commission in 2006, tasked to analyse the state of academic research on radicalisation to violence, in particular terrorism, utilised a concise working definition of violent radicalisation, '*socialisation to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism*'. As expected in such a complex field research, where there are many factors and triggers that could lead to the radicalisation of individuals, most research proposes there is no single cause but a composite mix of influences. Understanding the 'how' and 'why' individuals become radicalised can inform and guide counter-radicalisation/de-radicalisation programmes but, more importantly, deter those vulnerable to such ideologies from starting the process in the first place.

Citizenship education

Children spend a significant percentage of their time in school. The school represents a complex set of values, traditions, ethos, and purpose – the accumulation of which becomes many individual's values and norms, continuously evolving through these inter-personal and social interactions. Education also includes peers in school, family networks, neighbourhood communities, online, play, travel, and in other social interactions; and it includes commercial organisations through advertisements.

Interventions in the context of education, instead of promoting values such as inclusion and tolerance for diversity are *de facto* encouraging the stigmatisation of communities and are often considered the main counterproductive effects of anti-radicalisation programmes (Richards, 2011). Such interventions could assume that it is possible to detect and recognise radical attitudes and behaviour, and that teachers and school leaders have the skills and training to do so. There is a risk associated with personal interpretations by individual members of staff at a school who could themselves act out of prejudice or have personal reasons to refer or not to refer a child to the authorities (Macaluso, 2016).

Concerns around the stigmatising of particular communities in a counterterrorism context have often been pitched in terms of a 'suspect community'. Hillyard (1993) coined this expression to describe the experience of Irish people living in Great Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s while the conflict in Northern Ireland was at its height. As Hillyard noted, a suspect community 'is treated in law and in police practices very differently from the rest of the population' (p. 258). Many later researchers identified and highlighted parallels between this Irish experience in the twentieth century with the experience of Muslim communities in the UK following the 7/7 attacks in 2005 (e.g. Hickman et al., 2011). The later research also expanded on the concept and how it applied in the lived experience of the affected communities.

Breen-Smyth (2014), for example, argued that suspect communities were not just created by 'legislation and security practices', as had been flagged by Hillyard, but also by 'cultural, political and ideological discourses'. She highlighted that being a 'suspect community' had an impact not just in terms of how that community was perceived and treated by outsiders but also in terms of how the community saw itself and its different constituents. This was a perspective developed further by Ragazzi (2016) who argued that the concept of 'suspect category' perhaps worked better than 'suspect community' as this reflected that the external society typically, in practice, perceived that there could be 'risky' and 'trusted' constituents within that community.

The UK PREVENT strategy tended to provide the context in which most of this analysis and debate occurred and the general conclusion was that the suspect community (or suspect category) dynamics were driving significant alienation between wider society and Muslim communities (e.g. Taylor, 2018). A frequent view in this research stream was that PREVENT had either already failed or was in the process of failing (e.g. Thomas, 2017). This led some to identify alternative models for approaching counter terrorism and counter extremism work particularly in educational settings. The key focus for the alternative approaches was to reduce alienation and increase resilience. For Thomas (2016), citizenship education was fundamental to the success of such an alternative framework. As he argued:

> Only [through] citizenship education, with a human rights framework at its core, will young people be equipped with the individual and peer group resilience to examine and reject ideologies that promote hatred and violence.

Citizenship Education (CE) is arguably the most commonly used method by which governments aim to prevent the radicalisation of young individuals in the first place or to divert those already along a radicalisation pathway away from developing extremist ideologies (Gholami, 2020). Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) – of which Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) is a part – and CE are a planned part of a school's curriculum that is also reflected in whole school activities and experiences. PSHE gives children knowledge, understanding, and skills and helps them manage feelings, learn about how to be healthy, and understand about relationships. CE helps children develop political literacy and explore social and moral issues making a positive contribution to their local, national, and global communities. In this research, PSHE will be included under the CE classification, as most experienced teachers interchange these terms when describing these learning experiences within the curriculum. Furthermore, the development of CE policy and practice in schools did not take place in a vacuum; it was (and is) influenced by on-going developments in general education policy and world events. Such policy shifts directly and indirectly influence the context in which CE is implemented.

Opportunities for young people to discuss difficult concepts can often be limited due to teachers' reluctance to deliver a topic objectively (their own beliefs being imparted), or at all (reluctance to deliver potentially polemic material). This can make it difficult to deliver and engage with resilience-building activities as these are often sensitive in nature or elicit challenging behaviours in the pupils (Pratchett et al., 2010). Related to this, is ensuring sufficient time is allowed to explore student concerns when these topics are actually delivered because the interruption of some conversations can have very adverse impacts on the students' resilience.

Another key barrier to effective understanding of CE concepts is recognising when children are able to understand these concepts. Understanding the processes by which children learn is important to identify *when* concepts can be introduced in the curriculum just as much as *how* such key concepts should be approached. Children develop their cognitive abilities at different rates based on their respective physical growth and is influenced by their own experiences, values, and beliefs. However, such concepts are delivered in a given school academic year with the students organised in a way that is governed by age and not ability.

How countries both regulate and fund their CE provision can have a significant impact on its provision and can drive the relationship between government policy and the government's political education ambition. In many of these countries, there are centralised governments – meaning they have significant influence via national, regional, local and/or municipal governance. Whereas in those states with federal governments, the education provision is devolved to regional governance.

Methodology

The main aim of this research was to examine staff attitudes to various aspects of the National Curriculum, notably Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship Education (CE), and how these could potentially impact on, or act as a source of potential triggers for, radicalisation. Added to this, the research aimed to assess potential difference in the interpretation, implementation, and perception of CE between Europe and the Middle East.

The participant sample

The current study relies on data obtained via interviews from participants who had been involved in some aspect of the provision of CE in the last 10 years. The interviewees included teachers, school leaders, and education policy advisors (education and security).

51 individuals were interviewed from 10 countries. The participants included 24 classroom practitioners, 16 school leaders, and 11 policymakers for PSHE/CE provision. The average number of years of professional experience working in the sector was 17 years. The nationalities of the participants are described in Table 1. In terms of gender, 53 per cent of the sample were female (27), and 47 per cent were male (24).

Initially, the participants were an opportunistic sample of stakeholders that were known to the researcher from his previous experience of working in the teaching profession (initially as a classroom teacher, then as a school leader). Contacts with international participants were made from attendance at teaching conferences, examiners' meetings, international exchanges, and research opportunities overseas. Snowball sampling was then used to identify further participants.

The interview process

Each participant was interviewed in a one-to-one (face-to-face) interview. The length of each interview varied significantly and was dependent on the discussions and the respective participant's availability. The interviews were all in excess of 2 hours

Table 1. The nationalities of the research participants.

Europe	Middle East
UK x12	Bahrain x5
France x5	KSA x3
Sweden x4	Qatar x3
Ireland x9	UAE x7
	Kuwait x1
	Oman x2

(ranging from 2½ to 3¼ hours). Each interview was conducted in a semi-structured manner as it allowed a more fluid discussion and reportedly provided the best data for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008). A form of IPA was applied for this research as a methodological tool to analyse the opinions expressed in the interviews. The IPA methodology enables research to establish what is relevant within the context of PSHE/CE in the opinion of different interviewees.

The IPA methodology proposes people are not just passive perceivers of an objective reality, but rather that they come to interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them (Chapman & Smith, 2002). IPA research has tended to focus on the respondent's account of the processes they have been through and the exploration of participants' experiences, understandings, perceptions and views (Reid et al., 2005). Unlike some techniques it does not aim to produce an objective record of the object or event itself (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In essence IPA is broadly concerned with how people think and what they believe to be important and relevant about the issue under discussion.

IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with an individual's own personal perception of their experiences of events or their '*subjective report*' of an event rather than the formulation of an objective statement about the event itself (Smith et al., 1999). IPA recognises that such research is a dynamic process (Smith, 1996). It is acknowledged in this methodology that interpretations are thus bounded by the participants' abilities to articulate their thoughts and experiences adequately (Baillie et al., 2000) because what is important is that the factors which the participants have deemed to be important come to the fore in the research. Therefore, the researcher's own ability to reflect and analyse what the participant is communicating is essential in this process. Whilst the researcher attempts to access the participant's interpretation of their sphere of experience, the researcher's analysis must not be influenced by 'their own conceptions and cogitation' (Smith et al., 1997). The term IPA is, therefore, used to signal the dual facets of the approach and that the joint reflections of both participant and researcher form the analytic account.

The semi-structured approach of the interviews enabled the participant to be at ease as the discussion followed their interests and reflections and facilitated the exploration of areas of interest which arose. The specific ordering of the questions was not controlled and were introduced when appropriate to the ongoing discussion. Indicative questions are outlined in the Appendix.

It should be noted that – the questions were intentionally open-ended so that the answers provided by participants were solely a reflection of their own opinions and interpretations of their experiences and not prejudiced by the wording of the question or the activities of the researcher. Follow-up questions or ones to seek clarity on the participant's intent behind an opinion or belief were used, as necessary. The interview, therefore, was akin to a natural conversation.

Ethical issues

The research methodology was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee for the University of East London (where the research was initiated). In general, the research followed the ethical guideline frameworks set by the British Psychological Society and the British Society of Criminology. In the context of this study, this especially

focussed on appropriate informed consent from each participant guarantees that the participants' identities would remain confidential and that the participants' responses would be anonymised, and a clear right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Analysis of interviews

Although there were many concerns expressed in the interviews, **ALL** 51 participants expressed a general acknowledgement that CE was a positive thing. Its inclusion in the syllabus was valued, notwithstanding the various concerns. When delivered correctly, it was viewed as an effective enrichment activity. CE was, intentionally, interpreted broadly by education professionals to enable them to prepare their charges for their future roles and responsibilities in society. Many teachers acknowledged the aims of CE and support it when it is delivered effectively, with the necessary level of resourcing, and when time is given to the teacher to plan, research, and deliver the lesson.

With over 175 hours of interview data and commentary collected and analysed, it is not possible to include ***all*** the corroborating narratives in this article. Therefore, only examples that were of key relevance to the themes identified (for or against) have been included here. Of particular note in all the interviews, was the surprising candour the participants communicated their responses, with some, comfortably sharing 'inappropriate' opinions (for education practitioners) which were definitely contrary to the aims of CE, but also in the context of countering extremist views.

Thematic analysis identified four major themes across the interview responses were identified. These were: (1) How the CE Programme was Delivered; (2) Time Constraints Affecting Delivery; (3) Challenges to the CE Implementation; and (4) Countering Extremist Behaviour/Activity. The identified themes and the frequency of them in the interviews are described in Table 2 and are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

How the CE programme is delivered

The predominant delivery model for these lessons at the primary and secondary levels was through discrete lessons. This was found to be the case in the majority (83%) of the responses for the UK participants:

Table 2. The themes and their frequencies by the research participants.

	Frequency (% of each sample)			
Theme	UK	Europe	Middle East	Total
1. How the CE Programme is Delivered				
○ Timetabled Lessons	83	57	100	86
○ Ad hoc	17	36	–	16
2. Time Constraints Affecting Delivery	**89**	**86**	**81**	**88**
3. Challenges to the CE Implementation	**89**	**86**	**76**	**82**
○ Teacher knowledge of subject matter	67	64	81	75
○ Pupil understanding of concepts	67	64	67	69
○ Polemic Content	67	64	48	61
○ Access to Citizenship Training	61	57	43	57
○ Political agenda	56	43	62	57
○ Classroom dynamics	56	43	62	57
○ What it means to be a citizen	39	43	76	53
○ Austerity/ Budget Constraints/Funding education resources	44	29	14	29
4. Countering Extremist Behaviour/Activity	**78**	**71**	**81**	**80**

The bold was used to highlight these as the four main themes - the other values were the sub-themes.

> We have one period a week (30 minutes) for PSHE/Citizenship. We have regular INSET sessions and at almost all of them we have a session from an outside speaker on one of the topics we cover (usually from a charity associated with the topic). We have a great uptake (and great results) for GCSE Citizenship. We, as a school, are very active in our wider community and I think we are very sensitive to the disparate views in our student body to those in the wider UK … Participant 47 – Headteacher (UK)

However, 39% of UK respondents indicated that although they had a 'designated' period for this, it was also used for administration functions so the CE programme was not continuous nor clearly structured:

> Form periods are used for us to cover other topics such as poverty, slavery, government corruption, water shortage & famine, bullying – but this isn't the only focus for these. They could also be used for other general admin functions for year-group or wider school things that need doing (checking exam entries, homework checks). Each year-group has a general set of topics that can be covered – usually the lesson plans are prepared by one of the NQTs [newly-qualified teachers], student teachers that we may have, or from one of the teachers that may have outside interests (such as Amnesty International). We do have a member of staff that oversees the programme in the school and who would write the school's policy and be prepared to meet with any outside inspection agency about such things … By not doing this properly, I think, can let them [the students] find their own means of making sense of their place in the world and that may be counter to all we're trying to achieve. Participant 42 – Headteacher (UK)

Others (17%) indicated that although the CE lesson was indicated in the timetable, it was rarely used as such with the content covered in other lessons. **All** 12 of the UK education professionals echoed these were the three ways CE is delivered in their respective schools but not the subsequent assumption this is where there is an opening for extremist ideologies to become established. When challenged on why CE was not taught as discrete, timetabled lessons as laid down in Government direction, issues with time, training, the polemic nature of some discussions, funding, and political interference were regularly quoted (these issues are covered below in the respective sections).

A majority of the European participants (57%) echoed the experiences of their UK counterparts:

> I think ours is pretty much the same as over there; I used to teach in England and what we do here is pretty similar. We cover such topics as part of lessons or during what you would call form periods. The kids do ask questions from time to time about world events and I know some of the staff then try to cover those topics in the daily muster [assembly], their own subject lesson, or in form period … I don't think the kids get the answers they're looking for and I know of at least one girl who did her own research on the web – even to the point of joining an anti-vivisection group on Facebook. Participant 19 – Classroom Teacher (FRA)

Some (33%) also commented on the CE provision not always being taught as distinct lessons:

> We have never had the time to have them as its own lesson, but I think we do a good enough job of covering the content as part of our job as a teacher … I think it's inevitable some will end up with dodgy views because of it but society will beat that out of them. Participant 28 – Classroom Teacher (IRL)

The education professionals in the Middle East were quite definite about the provision of CE in schools. **All** 21 Middle East participants commented on how their respective State

was clear in its direction that schools included CE in their curricula and, in some, that the schools were expected to report any pupils/families that resisted Government policy.

> [CE] is taught here daily. I couldn't put a figure on what percentage of the timetable is set aside for it, as it is also included in other lessons … I would say about 5 hours a week. The boys quickly learn not to speak out of turn about their own opinions – they keep them to themselves, and we encourage that. Participant 5 – Classroom Teacher (Bahrain)

Time constraints affecting the delivery of citizenship education

One of the primary issues raised by the interviews with the UK and European participants was not necessarily the lack of quality provision – many thought that what they provided was of a good quality – but rather, the respondents claimed, that overall, there was perceived to be a lack of timetabled provision in the curriculum that has caused the problems with CE delivery. From the discussions, this was due to staff availability or being able to find time to undertake any additional training or to research the materiel, deliver the content, or seek other teachers' advice for guidance on delivery. This delivery was affected, some claimed, by limited time to deliver such complex concepts affecting the students' ability to understand some of the concepts presented.

88% of all the participants (89% of UK, 86% of European, and 81% of Middle East) complained they did not have enough time to deliver effective CE lessons. The issue of 'limited time' in the curriculum to deliver the CE programme of study highlighted a number of other 'sub-factors'. Some participants – particularly the school leaders – claimed a teacher was often 'chosen' to deliver CE lessons solely on their availability to deliver the content rather than their knowledge and competence in the respective area. As one headteacher stated:

> I don't have the luxury of putting the right person into the role, it's whoever I have available sometimes. Let me explain, I would rather have the correct teacher teaching what I've actually employed them for – i.e. history – rather than have someone best suited to deliver the less important citizenship. Teachers don't have the time to able to pick which part of the CE syllabus they get. It's what's available at the same time as their free period. I know some girls will end up disadvantaged and will as a result have strong opinions on some things, but I think we equip them with critical thinking skills for them to be able to know when what they are reading is inappropriate. Participant 32 – Headteacher (IRL)

The next sub-factor, refers to the teacher not being able to deliver effective CE lessons because they do not have the time to research the material, deliver the content, or seek other teachers' advice for guidance on delivery:

> I haven't got time to read up on all the background issues in the citizenship scheme of work. I think it's time the school should be employing proper specialists in this area like they do in other subject disciplines so that at least you're only having to research one topic. I don't have enough time to research the detail about some of the stuff the kids read on the Web these days. We need time set aside to prepare properly if we are to challenge them on things. Participant 21 – Headteacher (FRA)

Not allowing teachers time to prepare for such lessons (through research, peer observations, or physical production of resources), undermines the whole counter-radicalisation concept and students are less likely to engage and, therefore, unlikely to benefit from the lessons.

Challenges to citizenship education implementation

Teacher knowledge. Linked to the issue of time constraints, the next most common theme generated by 75% of all participants (67% of UK, 64% of European, and 81% of Middle East) was that of insufficient knowledge to deliver sometimes sensitive concepts. This lack of perceived knowledge was linked to a lack of time allowed to prepare for lessons, a lack of access to training for some concepts, and a lack of funding for the most appropriate resources to be sourced to deliver effective training.

> It's difficult to teach some topics to the students – especially when we [the teachers] haven't got it sorted in our own minds! I think my lack of knowledge in some of these topics is so woeful, I think I'd do more damage. I mean, what if they had questions which I didn't cover in the right way, and they go off misunderstanding which sets them off on some dodgy path? I know from my own subject the importance of teaching a concept in a particular way to avoid common misconceptions. If they don't get it in the early stages of their introduction, it's a much harder job to unteach their misconceptions. I'm positive it's the same with the citizenship stuff. I just don't have the knowledge to teach it. Participant 1 – Classroom Teacher (UK)

Pupil understanding of concepts. The next most common theme generated by 69% of all participants (67% of UK, 64% of European, and 67% of Middle East) was the complexity of the concepts being presented to children not cognitively equipped to really understand the nuances and second-order impacts of such concepts.

> I think we introduce some things too early for them to really understand the learning objectives. I mean a kid of 12 is not really going to understand the politics and socio-economic factors behind poverty in Third World countries. Nor are they going to get the emotions around the abortion debate. They then come out with inappropriate comments that they don't really understand themselves that could land them in trouble. Many of the students still see the world in black and white and don't understand that there's a whole range of opinions in between. This is the most important takeaway from these discussions, I think. It's the understanding of tolerance to others' opinions but they need life experience to gain that understanding in the first place. It's 'catch-22'. It's then that misconceptions can creep in and lay the foundation for future extreme opinions. Participant 20 – Classroom Teacher (FRA)

Some of the participants reported, from their experience, the students sometimes did not understand the complexity of some of the concepts being presented. As a result, it is proposed this could have the reverse of the intended learning objective and do more harm than good. The world, in many of the respondents' classes was interpreted in a binary way – there was no spectrum of opinions.

Polemic content. The next most common theme generated by 61% of all participants (67% of UK, 64% of European, and 48% of Middle East) was that the delivery of the CE syllabus was affected by the polemic nature of the CE's syllabus content which affected the students' understanding of some of the more complex concepts. In 31 of the interviews, the participants claimed they were uncomfortable with some of the syllabus content (for example, the most commonly cited were the ethics surrounding animal testing, the issue of migration, and the concept of war). As a result, they did not deliver it comprehensively, did not deliver some concepts at all, or avoided follow-on questions.

For example, 20 of these participants, at some point in their career, had been asked about animal testing by the students following on from classes covering debating techniques, biology lessons, or as part of the CE schemes of work in their respective schools. The teaching professionals complained their own personal beliefs affected their delivery:

> I don't agree with vivisection, and I know many of students wouldn't either, so I don't really teach it to any level of accessibility. I would end up encouraging the girls to get involved in protest activity without meaning to. Participant 17 – Classroom Teacher (UK)

Others (7 participants) complained of the divisive nature of some of the topics:

> I think teaching some of this stuff is divisive and is the opposite of what we're trying to achieve: an inclusive society. I agree that some schools need this sort of stuff, but here we don't. I think it should be up to the teachers to decide rather than be dictated to. Participant 16 – Classroom Teacher (UK)

13 participants were also concerned about others' perception of their lessons if some of the classroom discussion was taken out of context:

> I do worry about people [staff, parents] hearing about some of the stuff we discuss, taking it out of context, and then me facing a disciplinary because I allowed so and so to say something that offended someone else … or how a discussion goes off at a tangent and before it can be brought back on topic, something is said that is a bit 'iffy' … I really worry about that sort of stuff so really don't like these lessons. Participant 19 – Classroom Teacher (FRA)

When the teachers felt uncomfortable delivering a topic, they did not deliver it comprehensively, not delivering some concepts at all, or avoided follow-on questions. The teachers, by not offering effective opportunities to do this at all, limits the students' viewpoints as they will receive such 'education' elsewhere.

Access to training. The next most common theme generated by 57% of all participants (61% of UK, 57% of European, and 43% of Middle East) was the limited access to appropriate training. This was linked to limited time available and/or limited funding:

> It's hard to find relevant and worthwhile Citizenship Inset courses/CPD days, so very hard to keep up to date on some concepts. Any courses I do find in the catalogues, 9 times out of 10 I haven't got the time to take the day off to attend. I think this is a big issue in schools. How many teachers who have to teach citizenship actually have the time to be able to attend any courses? … The government sets great store in initial teacher training in subject areas but still expect non-professionals to deliver what is now compulsory lessons. And they wonder why we have people with extreme views … Participant 30 – Classroom Teacher (IRL)

Political agenda. The next most common theme generated by 57% of all participants (56% of UK, 43% of European, and 62% of Middle East) was the participants' concerns about not actually delivering any effective resilience to potential triggers for, self-radicalisation/marginalisation but rather addressing some sort of political agenda.

> I don't like spouting the Government's justification for its Middle East policies and passing it off as "education". This sort of education is what causes those who are unsure of their identity to go underground and get in with wrong type of people. Participant 17 – Classroom Teacher (UK)

Classroom dynamics. The next most common theme generated by 57% of all participants (56% of UK, 43% of European, and 62% of Middle East) was how the presentation of some concepts affected the staff/student relationship dynamic. This, they said, meant where once they were trusted confidantes to those that needed a sounding board or non-parental advice, the students now associated them with enforcement authorities or 'on the Government's side'.

In some schools, the respect of the students is hard won, and the success of many teachers' efforts are down to a successful relationship with their class. Some topics in the CE were reported by 20 of the participants as being the cause of some souring in this dynamic:

> When talking to the pupils about some of the more sensitive stuff [radicalisation], they think I'm on the Government's side and trying to find out who has sympathies for this sort of thing. They think I'm going to report them … so the ones that would have such inclinations will stay quiet. So, what's the point of doing it the politicians' way? I lose face and we are none-the-wiser as to who is going to get radicalised. Participant 18 – Headteacher (UK)

Since the process of radicalisation is often related to distrust of society and rejection of social norms, having a teacher who is respected by the class take a leading role in the resilience-building activities can legitimise the intentions of such activity from the perspective of the students. If the dynamics in the classroom are not conducive to the respective activity, learning opportunities are limited.

What it means to be a citizen. The next most common theme generated by 53% of all participants (39% of UK, 43% of European, and 76% of Middle East) was that of the question of identity. Some of the respondents in the UK (7 participants) and Europe (6 participants) were concerned with the then growing nationalism agenda and increase in far-right group membership. The subsequent normalisation of right-wing rhetoric in the political classes and media was of particular concern.

> I know we've got to teach British Values – whatever that really is – but the whole point of school education is allowing the child the space to develop their own identity in a non-judgemental, safe, space. To then say to them, "No, that's not how you're supposed to be" is a bit contrary. Kids are going to say things that are unacceptable as they push boundaries in their development. Our role [in the education sector] is to nurture this journey, offering guidance and challenging extreme opinions and values. We don't want to create a Nation of robots with some sort of homogenised identity. How boring. Participant 49 – Education Policymaker (UK)

In the Middle East participant group, their interpretation was more in line with their respective State's policy and all 21 participants subscribed and said they 'bought-in' to this direction. Any students they felt were not conducting themselves as expected of an Arab citizen were given particular attention to redress this perceived failing. Many respondents did not envy the freedoms enjoyed in the West.

> I think you make it hard for yourselves. Most of your problems come from you have too many freedoms [sic]. People don't know what to do with them. I'm quite open-minded about the women's rights movement, but I think there has to be limits. As a result of all of this, the West has so many problems. We gave a little to the people and look at the demonstrations we have now. Not everyone can be equal. Some will always be richer than others. Giving some of these

> people [referring to the Shi'a population] freedoms caused the uprising and gave them an expectation of entitlement. They are not the same as us. They never can be, but they don't understand. Even the boys here know this. It's simple. Participant 13 – Headteacher (Qatar)

From the interviews, 92% of all the participants identified that they enabled their students to reflect on their identity and uniqueness. The Middle East participant group was particularly noticeable in their representation in this theme – 76% of participants expressed '*what it was to be a citizen*' as being a key factor in CE provision – stating that it was the central concept around which the subject was designed. Their interpretation was more in line with their respective State's policy and in their responses they all subscribed and 'bought-in' to this direction.

Austerity/budget constraints/funding education resources. The next most common theme generated by 29% of all participants (44% of UK, 29% of European, and 14% of Middle East) was the limited funding available for purchasing training or appropriate resources.

> The school up the road has speakers in all the time, but we don't have the same influence to get them to visit us. We definitely don't have the budget to get the same speakers to talk to our pupils, yet it is our students who would benefit most from their time. Who's more likely to be an extremist, a rich white English man or one of the kids from our school? The lack of money to offer effective resilience training is what needs to be addressed instead of dealing with it once they've been radicalised. It's like treating everyone's splinters instead of sanding the desks. It'll keep happening until the money is put into the right areas – it's all very well telling us to deliver this message but without the money, we can't. Participant 48 – Headteacher (UK)

Countering extremist behaviour/activity

The fourth and last major theme (after concerns with time constraints and challenges to CE implementation) that was generated by 80% of all participants (78% of UK, 71% of European, and 81% of Middle East) was how should they actually go about countering perceived extremist behaviour/activity? The participants acknowledged their respective Governments had given advice, resources, and support to education in order to counter extremism but argued that without subject matter experts or specific support it was difficult. Furthermore, there was also concern with 35 of the participants that they did not want to refer a pupil to police or local agencies without significant justification.

> The very nature of the PREVENT debate/agenda elicits arguments and division. I think it stops the student body from joining in some of the more challenging discussions for fear of them or their family's opinions are being monitored [sic]. It's like, "Here's the stick, but there's no carrot". How does a teacher guide pupils through this political minefield? Some parent will always complain if anything you say is taken out of context. At the same time if you don't challenge them, you get in trouble. You're damned if you do. You're damned if you don't. Participant 2 – Classroom Teacher (UK)

Analysis of the results

Research on the role of education in radicalisation prevention has highlighted the role of general contextual features of the education environment. This current research

highlighted how hard it is for some classroom practitioners to counter these behaviours regardless of government initiatives and teaching strategies described in other research.

Having a student believing extreme ideologies which go unchallenged arguably increases the risk that these ideologies could contribute to the development of extremist activity. Conversely, not allowing a 'safe space' for children to have a constructive debate, or discuss sensitive concepts, risks compromising the very nature of preventative measures for radicalisation and teaches the child to hide their views.

In Jerome et al.'s (2019) review of research on education practitioners and the impact of the PREVENT policy in schools highlighted the importance of teachers in the delivery of these concepts. The work identified the influence teachers have, how teachers interpret and deliver on government policies, the context in which they work, and the availability of resources. Although the review was through the lens of the UK's PREVENT duty, it highlighted similar themes and challenges felt by teachers in the current study.

The first of the four themes identified from the interviews was perceived to be a lack of timetable provision in the curriculum that has caused the problems with CE delivery. CE is supposed to be a planned part of a school's curriculum that is also reflected in whole-school activities and experiences and the predominant delivery model for these lessons at primary and secondary level was through discrete lessons. However, as the interviews revealed, such lessons were often used for administration functions so the CE programme was not continuous nor clearly structured.

The lack of mandated opportunities to do this, limited the students' viewpoints and they would instead receive such 'education' from alternative external sources. These alternative sources may not be as suitable – such as social media sites – and this potentially could increase the risk of empathy for extremist ideologies.

The UK and European participants, particularly, complained that although they had 'designated' periods for CE, in practice such time was often used for administration and other functions. The end result was that the CE programme was not continuous nor clearly structured. When challenged on why CE was not taught as discrete, timetabled lessons (as laid down in government direction), issues with a lack of time, funding, and training, as well as the polemic nature of some discussions and political interference were regularly cited.

In contrast, the education professionals in the Middle East all commented on how their respective State was clear in its direction that schools included CE in their curricula. Furthermore, in some cases, the schools were expected to report any pupils/families that resisted government policy. As part of the conversations on the provision of the CE, the Middle East participants referred to it within the context of the Arab Spring that had taken place in 2011 and Shi'a protest activity. Every participant in this region brought it up a number of times during the course of their respective interview.

This brings us to an important issue. Unlike their European and UK equivalents, the Middle East interviewees expressed whole-hearted support for not only their government's desire to use CE in a counter extremism framework, but as importantly, they expressed complete agreement with how the government defined extremism and defined what attitudes were acceptable.

This presents a starkly different picture to the views expressed by the UK and European staff, where doubt and scepticism about government approaches and interpretations were frequently expressed. As evidenced in the interviews in this study, but also in much other

work (e.g. Lakhani & James, 2021; Scerri, 2024; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2020). UK and European staff frequently do not entirely 'buy-in' to the official government view. Indeed, hesitancy and scepticism have often been key recurring themes identified in earlier work.

In contrast, such hesitancy and scepticism was entirely absent from the Middle East interviewees in this study. For them, there was complete buy-in to their respective government's positions. They may have perceived challenges in implementing the policy but there was no doubt expressed about the legitimacy, accuracy, or validity of the messages and policy the government was pushing.

In this element, the findings from this study thus present quite a stark departure from the results of previous work. A considerable amount of research has been focused on the UK experience in particular and there is a growing body of work looking at other European countries. The findings from such work has often echoed with each other, and indeed, those echoes are seen again in the UK and European samples in this study. On some important elements, however, they do not echo with the findings from the Middle East interviews.

This will inevitably have important consequences in terms of how we assess what role CE could and should have in countering extremism. Thomas' (2016) call that it is CE '*with a human rights framework at its core*' which would be effective lacks traction in a Middle East context. It is likely that significant divergences from the hitherto dominant UK/European perspectives and experiences also exist in other regions. This is surely a critical issue future research will need to grapple with more directly.

The second major theme identified in the current study related to how time constraints affected CE delivery. 88% of all the participants (89% of UK, 86% of European, and 81% of Middle East) complained they did not have enough time to deliver effective CE lessons. The issue of 'limited time' in the curriculum to deliver the CE programme of study highlighted a number of other 'sub-factors'. Restrictions on time could take a variety of forms including staff availability to take classes, being able to time to undertake any additional training or to research the materiel or having time to seek other teachers' advice for guidance on delivery.

The limited time affected, some participants claimed, the ability to deliver such complex concepts affecting the students' understanding of the concept. Not allowing teachers time to prepare for such lessons (through research, peer observations, or physical production of resources), undermines the whole counter-radicalisation concept and making students less likely to engage. Teachers just did not have the time to deliver the material in the detail the concepts required.

The third most common theme identified related to the challenges to CE implementation. 82% of all participants (89% of UK, 86% of European, and 76% of Middle East) expressed this as a significant concern. Again, this theme generated a number of 'sub-factors'; teacher knowledge of the subject matter (75%); the pupil understanding of the concepts presented (69%); the polemic nature of some of the content (61%); access to citizenship training (57%); the political agenda behind the implementation of CE (57%); how the content and implementation of CE affected the classroom dynamics (57%); the question of citizenship and identity (53%); and, the funding of CE (29%).

This is a common theme across the research in this area. In interviews with teachers across 225 institutions in the UK in 2017, Busher et al. (2017) found that more training and supporting material were flagged by staff as what they needed most in relation to the PREVENT duty. In Moffat and Gerard's work (2020), interviewing teachers' attitudes

and experiences in the PREVENT duty in 6th form colleges, training was one of the five main themes identified. Teachers did not feel confident delivering the concepts.

As part of the interview responses in this current study, a significant challenge to CE implementation was the participants' perception that they had insufficient knowledge to deliver sometimes sensitive concepts and this lack of perceived knowledge was linked to a lack of time allowed to prepare for lessons, a lack of access to training for some concepts, and a lack of funding for the most appropriate resources to be sourced to deliver effective training.

This finding echoed recent research by Scerri, who found that a sample of UK teachers wanted to be equipped with '*sound knowledge of what violent radicalisation entails, and pedagogical tools to help them prevent radicalisation through educational teaching practices and their subject curriculum*' (Scerri, 2024). Scerri's work involved interviewing teachers and PREVENT practitioners to examine whether teachers were implementing the PREVENT duty correctly. She found that effective teacher training, and their perceived competence to deliver such sensitive material, was a key theme in empowering them to be confident in their abilities to deliver effective lessons.

Some of the participants reported that in their experience, students sometimes did not understand the complexity of the some of the concepts being presented to them. For these participants, the children were not cognitively equipped to really understand the nuances and second-order impacts of such concepts. As a result, in such contexts, CE could have the reverse of the intended learning objective and do more harm than good. The world, in many of the respondents' classes was interpreted in a binary way – there was no spectrum of opinions.

Other participants argued that the delivery of the CE syllabus was affected by the polemic and divisive nature of the CE's syllabus content which affected the students' understanding of some of the more complex concepts. In a number of the interviews the teachers claimed they were uncomfortable with some of the syllabus content (for example, the most commonly cited were the ethics surrounding animal testing, the issue of migration, and the concept of war). One outcome of this was that the teachers did not try to deliver CE comprehensively. Some concepts were not delivered at all, or teachers avoided follow-on questions from students.

Some participants complained that the presentation of some concepts negatively affected staff/student relationship dynamics. This, they said, meant where once they were trusted confidantes to those who needed a sounding board or non-parental advice, following CE classes this dynamic changed because the students now associated them with enforcement authorities or '*on the government's side*'. In some schools, the respect of the students was hard won, and the success of many teachers' efforts was perceived to be down to a successful relationship with their class. Some topics in the CE were reported by the participants as being the cause of some souring in this dynamic.

From the interviews, 92% of all the participants identified that they had enabled their students to reflect on their identity and uniqueness. This is a crucial part of a child's development – being self-aware and comfortable in themselves.

Some of the respondents in the UK and Europe were concerned with the then growing nationalism agenda and increase in far-right group membership. This finding very much echoed the results reported by Lakhani and James (2021) who, in interviews with school and college staff, also found that staff were seeing and worried about increased linkages between nationalism and far-right extremism. In the current study, the perceived

normalisation of right-wing rhetoric in political classes and media was of particular concern. When no sanctions are imposed for racist, xenophobic, or antisemitic statements, for example, such activities are then presented as permissible and, therefore, no longer subject to correction. Societal change and activities are often repeated in the classroom, making the concerns of the participants all the more alarming and noteworthy.

Interestingly, 76% of the Middle East sample cited this as a concern. In the Middle East participant group, as has already been flagged, their interpretation was more in line with their respective State's policy and in their interviews they all subscribed and 'bought-in' to this direction. Any students they felt were not conducting themselves as expected of an Arab citizen were given particular attention to redress this perceived failing. Many respondents did not envy the freedoms enjoyed in the West.

The fourth major theme identified related to the countering extremist behaviour/activity. 80% of all participants (78% of UK, 71% of European, and 81% of the Middle East) expressed this as a significant concern. The participants acknowledged their respective governments had given, advice, resources, and support to education in order to counter such activities, but without subject matter experts or specific support it was difficult to articulate how exactly they should actually go about countering perceived extremist behaviour/activity.

Conclusion

Radicalisation towards extremist activity remains a critical issue in many contemporary societies. Debates around the appropriate role of educational institutions should play in this regard continues to prompt media and public debate both in the UK and internationally.

The focus of this study was to establish an evidence base on current practice and perceptions regarding building young people's resilience to extremist ideologies.

This current study agrees with similar research that when it is delivered '*effectively*', CE leads to the development of a resilient community where schools can effect change in children from marginalised groups that allows these groups to break down educational barriers and makes schools better equipped to resist the influence and ideology of extremism (for example, Bonnell et al., 2011, or Barclay, 2011; or European Commission, since 1998). Furthermore, the current study also agreed with contemporary research that when CE was not delivered effectively, many students were disengaged.

Ultimately, the current study identified that teachers and educational professionals *do* understand the rationale for CE but responded to the ethical dimensions differently; some making decisions based on professional judgment and some on personal beliefs.

Although there were many concerns expressed in the interviews, there was a general acknowledgement by participants that CE was a positive thing. Its inclusion in the syllabus was valued, notwithstanding the various concerns. When delivered correctly it was seen as an effective enrichment activity. Many of those interviewed welcomed the CE curriculum and felt that their students welcomed its learning objectives.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the tolerance and support of the participants for this research. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate and seek the strength of many friends and colleagues during the course of my research – thank you all. Above all, I am grateful to my family who have

persevered with me as I spent much of the limited '*family time*' reading, making notes, interviewing, and arguing with my IT … and without whom would have submitted this article two years ago …

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix: Exemplar questions from the interview process

- How is the National Curriculum – PSHE/Citizenship Education (NC-CE) implemented in your establishment/(non-teachers: how do you perceive the NC-CE is implemented in schools?)
  - *Discussion and follow-on questions resulting from this discussion.*
- In your opinion have you experience of what some may consider 'extremist concepts' represented in some way in the **NC-CE**? e.g. animal testing, 'Islamisation', nationalism, homophobia?
  - How were these presented?
  - What format?
  - As part of which subject?
- How did learners react?
- Any examples/case studies?
  - *Discussion and follow-on questions resulting from this discussion.*
- Same question but how about in other **non-NC** lessons such as PSHE/liberal studies/debating clubs?
- How were these presented?
  - What format?
  - As part of which subject?
- How did learners react?
- Any examples/case studies?
  - *Discussion and follow-on questions based on this discussion.*
- Have you had an adverse reaction to the presentation of potentially polemic concepts?
- How did learners react?
- How did you react?
- Did it affect your re-presentation of that concept to another class?
- What did you do differently? Why?
  - *Discussion and questions resulting from this discussion.*
- Have you heard of the term 'institutionalised racism' used in the context of education?
  Have you heard of the Guy Lambourn's research on this?
  How did you react to this label? Why?
  How has it affected your teaching practice/learning strategies?
- *Discussion and follow-on questions resulting from this discussion.*
- Have the recent events in the Middle East affected your teaching strategies?
  - How so?
  - How did the learners react?
- Has this had an impact on how you interact in NC-CE/non-NC lessons?
- Has the reporting regarding 'Trojan Horse' schools affected you?
  - How so?
- How did you react?
- Has this had an impact on how you interact in NC-CE/non-NC lessons?
- Has the reporting regarding students travelling to Syria schools affected you?
- How so?
- How did you react?
- Has this had an impact on how you interact in NC-CE/non-NC lessons?

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‘None-the-wiser’? Citizenship education in preventing radicalisation: contrasting European and Middle East perspectives

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2024-11
Taylor & Francis
https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2024.2417011
Gaffney F, Silke A. (2024) ‘None-the-wiser’? Citizenship education in preventing radicalisation: contrasting European and Middle East perspectives. Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, Available online 21 November 2024

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