

How do you beat radicalisation? With polar bears at primary school

A 98% Muslim school in Birmingham aims to counter extremism of all kinds by starting with the youngest pupils

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Shazia arrived in Britain from Pakistan in 1990, settled with her husband in Birmingham and felt safe. They built a comfortable life together and had four children; the eldest is now at university and the youngest is a pupil at Parkfield community primary school.



But Shazia, a Muslim, no longer feels safe in the UK, she says. It's not because of racism – she works for a large company where her headscarf is not an issue – but through constant fear of terrorist attacks. They may be carried out in the name of Islam but, she says, they are in direct contradiction to the faith's pacifist teaching and compassion.

She says it's a hard message to get across when the word "Muslim" is splashed across the media next to the words "terrorist" "bomb" and "murder" and confusing for children, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. That's why she's here at school at 8.45am on a cold, wet Monday to support her daughter at a workshop to show parents how the school promotes equality and diversity. The hope is that by making sure all children feel welcome and part of society at an early age, they are less likely to be seduced by militant ideology later on.

"When we came to this country everything was so safe but now when we go out we are scared. People of all religions find bombs frightening," says Shazia. "Children go off to college or to university

or to work and say goodbye to their families in the morning and then they never come back. When my daughter goes to college I am not relaxed until she gets back.”

Parkfield is an unusual school. It's larger than the average primary with 775 pupils from 23 nationalities, and more than 98% of them are from Muslim homes. It serves an area of east Birmingham where three inquiries were held into an alleged “Trojan Horse” plot by Muslim governors to take over schools, but Parkfield was not involved.

Fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles join their children in the classroom. The lesson is designed to promote diversity and cohesion, and is devised by Andrew Moffat, Parkfield's assistant headteacher. He uses age-appropriate books and world events to teach children that at school there are “no outsiders”, everyone is welcome, regardless of the colour of their hair, or their race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or whether they like curry or roast beef. Wearing the hijab is not controversial here – girls can choose one in the school colours.

As word spread about Moffat's methods other schools began to use the materials, and the City of Leicester and Leicestershire county council have begun a pilot in nine schools with the hope of rolling it out across the region.

Radicalism is not only about young Muslims, it is also about young people being radicalised by the far right, says Phil Harbour, an educational psychologist who is leading the Leicester pilot. Harbour says: “We have to be careful we do not stereotype radicalisation. He says celebrating how wonderful it is that society has so many different kinds of people is at the heart of No Outsiders [the name of the materials] and the government's Prevent agenda to promote cohesion.

“We have children in the primary stage for six years and if we can teach them that we are all different but that we can all get along then it is less likely that they will grow up to want to harm someone else just because they come from a different faith or culture. If you teach it at the primary stage when children are developing their belief systems and moral values then, hopefully, as teenagers they will be less susceptible to radicalisation.”

But for now, parents and children are not thinking about terrorism, they are deciding how they would welcome a polar bear from the North Pole escaping from melting ice caps to take refuge in their jungle. How would he feel leaving his home and what could the jungle animals do to make him feel welcome? What can they learn from each other? Does having new people from different places make the class better?

There is standing room only as families help their children with art work and messages to welcome the polar bear. Some paint Norwegian flags and icy scenes, others write messages. “You are welcome at this school where there are no outsiders,” writes one girl, while her mother uses her phone to look up “welcome” in Norwegian.

Moffat is careful to ground the teaching in British law, building the lessons around the Equalities Act 2010 which puts an equality duty on schools. He had already written a book focusing on sexual orientation – which also proved popular among parents and children. Now, in his second book, Reclaiming radical ideas in schools, he is looking at counter-radicalism.

“The first time I talked about terrorist events was after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, when I showed images of people standing together, he says. A 10-year-old put up his hand and asked me why the terrorists kill people. I was a bit stumped, 150 faces were looking at me for an answer. I told them that there are some people who don't want people to be different. They want one race, one religion, one type of person. That is the opposite of what we want.”

Back in the classroom, Abdul, the father of twin girls, says: “Islam is about peace, you are not allowed to harm a human or even a little insect. It is about people living together and respecting each other’s beliefs. There are nearly three million Muslims in the UK and this is just one violent person or two people hurting others. It is completely unacceptable to our religion.”

Children are upset when they see reports blaming Islam, he says. “When that terrible bomb went off at the Manchester Arena, killing all those young people, my daughter saw the news. She said to me, ‘they are saying on the news it was a Muslim that did it. It can’t be. It’s such a horrible, cruel thing to do.’”

What does Moffat tell the children? “We look at the community cohesion that comes after the attack and study photos of a vigil or demonstration calling for peace. I ask the children what they see. Is everyone the same race? Does everyone here have the same faith? Gender? Age? What does this photo show us about the UK today? It shows people who are different and who want to live in peace together.”

Farzana, here with her two sons, says it’s better for children to learn about things at school rather than get the wrong idea from outside. “My children talk to me about different religions. When they grow up they will have a good mindset.”

Schools on their own will not make everything right – parents, too, have a role to play, says Abdul. “But if we direct the new generation along the right path, maybe we won’t have these sorts of problems 20 or 30 years from now.”

‘If you teach it when they are developing belief systems, then as teenagers they will be less susceptible’ Phil Harbour Educational psychologist