How To Detect Radicalised Youth in Your School in 2017

John Hamilton

Do we know what’s going on in our children’s school yards? Is it really a reality that radicalised youth may be preaching to our young and vulnerable teenagers?

It seems it may be for 19 New South Wales based schools that the Government has identified as potential breeding grounds for future terrorists as of March 2017.

Educators have unrivalled contact with today’s youth. Accordingly, in the face of a growing number of students radicalising, school authorities have an increasing responsibility to detect and prevent potential violent extremism. Radicalisation does not happen overnight; it begins with vulnerability and ends with extremism, sometimes over the course of many years. In the crucial development period of an adolescent’s life, it is the role of an educator to provide support, reduce marginalisation and challenge violent, extremist influences.

What we know about Radicalisation

Radicalisation is a broad term and does not apply to the actions of a single faith or group. It happens when a person’s opinions and behaviour become significantly different from how most of the members of their society view social issues and participate politically. Those who become radicalised sometimes turn to violent extremism to achieve their goals.

Research indicates that the following key characteristics exist in most radicalised individuals:

- a sense of injustice or humiliation;
- a need for identity; and
- a need to belong.
These characteristics predominantly develop in the adolescent years and are shaped by the dynamic environment of home-life, school and cyberspace. Extremist recruiters commonly target vulnerable individuals with promises of social status and a sense of belonging. They are easily able to harness the power of social media to direct unfiltered propaganda to these individuals.

For this reason, there is an overwhelming consensus that education is the key to countering radicalisation. Educators have incomparable day-to-day contact with today’s youth and can use this contact to identify worrying changes in behaviour and offer students alternative avenues toward feeling significant. Further, schools can focus on developing critical consumption skills in students so that they can see through extremist propaganda independently.

**Radicalisation in Australia**

The Australian government is yet to enshrine positive obligations on schools to report and manage radicalisation. However, in 2015, as part of the “Living Safe Together” initiative, the Australian Government distributed the “Radicalisation Awareness Kit” across Australia. The kit was designed to support the community, particularly individuals who encounter vulnerable youths, to detect involvement in extremist behaviour and aid in disengagement from violent ideologies.

As part of this initiative, 19 New South Wales schools were listed as being “at risk” of radicalisation and added to the Government “Schools Working Together Program”, which required schools to implement a range of anti-extremism initiatives. Notably, Mr Chris Griffiths, the former-principal at Punchbowl Boys’ High School, allegedly refused to implement the Program. Mr Griffiths was sacked a week later amid concerns that the school had "lost its way".

In an address in October 2016, Justice Minister Michael Keenan reiterated that institutions such as schools are the frontline of defence against radicalisation and threats to social cohesion. Justice Keenan emphasised the efforts made by government in this regard, including:

- The Council of Australian Governments agreement to progress initiatives to provide training and support to those at the frontline of radicalisation intervention, including schools, families and prisons;
- budget allocation to tackle violent extremism propaganda online; and
- the implementation of the “Report Online Extremism” tool launched in 2015, which is designed to detect and remove propaganda.
Curriculum material which supports teachers in discussing violent extremism and radicalisation is also on the budget radar, however nothing concrete has been released as at the date of this article. That said, the ever-growing presence of radicalised individuals in Australian schools is undeniable. School authorities must be able and prepared to detect students “at-risk” within their own walls. Whilst schools are not subject to specific legislation in this regard, Mr Griffith’s situation indicates just how serious the Government is taking this issue.

**Where to from here?**

Schools need to implement measures to manage youth radicalisation. However, there are a number of legal and practical issues associated with this.

Educators need to understand the complexity of this issue and be prepared to differentiate between potentially radicalised behaviour and conventional teenage angst. Oversimplifying this issue may cause further alienation and result in a breach of the school’s duty of care to the student concerned. On the other hand, educators across Australia have a duty to safeguard all students from harm. The reality is that a school’s duty of care now includes both an obligation to support youth at risk of radicalisation and to act to prevent acts of violent extremism, where required. It is a fine line and one that will not get any easier moving forward.

Whilst educators wait for government resources, they should consider implementing practical measures to address potential radicalisation. Providing a safe space for students to debate controversial issues is an effective way of detecting unusual violent ideologies in an individual, whilst promoting healthy discourse.

To manage the competing best interests of radicalised youth and other students, schools should consider implementing an anti-extremism policy. The most essential aspect of any policy is to ensure further stigmatisation and targeting of individuals does not occur, as this leads to increased identification with the radicalised community. Importantly, the policy should outline the process for staff members who believe they are dealing with a potentially radicalised student.

Radicalisation is a real issue. Take steps to ensure your school is not ignorant in the face of changing times.

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Please fill out the form below to obtain a draft short form policy suitable for implementation in your school. We will email the document through to you within one business day.

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The author wishes to acknowledge Boneka Somers and Adelaide Towler for their contribution to this article.


[3] Adolescent and family development: Autonomy and identity in the digital age, November 2016, Erica D. Shifflet-Chila, PhD, Rena D. Harold, PhD, Victoria A. Fitton, PhD, Brian K. Ahmedani, PhD.

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