Provocative and a good read

This month's *TCF News* contains an article about the radicalisation of young people and what might be done in school education to prevent this. It draws on some research and a SMH article by a Year 10 student. It asks some serious questions, pointing to the failure of curriculum, teaching and school activities and suggests some changed directions for all. It also questions whether anyone is listening to student voices.

Also this month there is a book review of *Post God Nation?* a thorough documentation of the influence of Christianity and Christians on the development of Australia. It charts what went wrong to have so few committed Christians in our country today and outlines some suggestions for the future.

Both the article and the book are provocative and a good read.

John Gore

Preventing the radicalisation of young people: Can schools help?

2015 seems to be the year that the radicalisation of students has become a threat to our social fabric. Increasing recruitment to and a desire by some to be recruited to IS has challenged governments to act to prevent travel and to establish programs to protect identified young people from radicalisation.

As commentators have argued there are many reasons for this desire to join a radical group such as IS. But what does the literature have to say about what might prevent these actions and is there a role for schools and the curriculum in prevention?

Literature on preventing radicalisation
Probably the most comprehensive review of the literature is British, Christmann, Kris 2012 study *Preventing religious radicalisation and violent extremism: A systematic review of the research evidence*.

This review found that:
- *the evidence base for effectively preventing violent extremism interventions is very limited*
- *the weight of that literature is focused upon terrorism rather than radicalisation*
- *Islamic radicalisation and terrorism emanate from a heterogeneous population that varies markedly in terms of education, family background, socio-economic status and income*

- risk factors including *political grievances (notably reaction to Western foreign policy) have a prominent role*
- *only two evaluated UK programs…...addressed Islamic radicalisation*
- one study *advocated the adoption of capacity building and empowering young people and interventions that "challenge ideology that focuses on theology and use education/training".*
- other studies in other countries demonstrate *the need for those engaging with radicalised individuals to carry authority and legitimacy and be equipped with profound ideological knowledge.*

While reflecting on this review of the literature and some of the implications for school education, I found a SMH 23/4/15 article by Rizina Yadav, a Year 10 student from Merewether High School in Newcastle. The focus was to criticise the Australian government's *Countering Violent Extremism* program on the basis that young people are resistant to government designed programs and to well meaning attempts by older generations that know what is best for them. Yadav believes that such a program of identifying these young people will only push them further down this path and recommends that given the power and pervasiveness of the Internet *empowering young people with the ability to question what is presented to them, especially in the face of terrorism or extremist ideologies, is another preventative strategy. Ideally education should transform the way people think and act. It must assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies.*

The following suggestions are outlined:
- *making issues taboo and off-limits may well be worsening the situation. Instead open, thorough conversations about the issues of the day empower young people to analyse what is presented to them.*
- involving community leaders
- connecting to networks in which young people find community.

There is also an outline of the sort of thinking and attraction that IS brings to many young people. It's an amazing insight for a Year 10 student and one that needs to be taken seriously.

Can school education address these issues?
Curriculum and classroom practice have always given priority to *the ability to question what is presented.* In particular, the English, history, geography and personal development and health curricula have sought to develop critical thinking and from an early age. However, critical thinking has suffered from the overcrowded curriculum, particularly in primary schools where the excessive focus on literacy and numeracy has crowded out other subjects especially the human society and its environment curriculum where current issues have traditionally found a home.

In secondary schools, the crowded curriculum has been the focus of the Australian curriculum work and the attempts of state curriculum authorities to put together a curriculum that is comprehensive. While opportunities for critical thinking in relation to the content abound, current issues rarely get attention within the curriculum and therefore the classroom. Probably only the Stage 6 (Years 11-12) syllabuses in Society and Culture, Studies of Religion and some options in Modern History provide a limited scope to deal with these matters and none are compulsory.

When attempting to engage a current issue like the radicalisation of young people, teachers will need to have a curriculum niche or, possibly, be the subject of student and/or parent complaint. Secondly, teachers may not feel confident to discuss such issues as their own knowledge base is deficient. So how can school education assure students like Rizina Yadav that it can help prevent the radicalisation of young people. In fact, the more explicit our curriculum and compliant our teaching becomes the more students may believe that their education, by excluding current affairs, is part of the problem and not a solution.

So what can be done in school education to engage students in current affairs rather than avoiding them? Here are some suggestions;

1. Provide a curriculum focus
   The writers of national and state curricula have been guided to avoid the very things that might help – a focus on cultural differences and religion. In NSW, studies requiring a focus on culture have always been contested with even the well established Stage 6 Society and Culture syllabus coming under periodic criticism from right wing educationalist and politicians.

   At the beginning of this century, the NSW Board of Studies undertook a review of the Years 7-10 curriculum and recommended that three syllabuses, Studies of Society, Asian Social Studies and Studies of Religion, all with a strong emphasis on studies of culture, but not widely taught, be amalgamated. The resulting course *Communities, societies and identities* was poorly constructed and was rejected by the Minister with a recommendation that the content appear in the "more populous" syllabuses. This point has never been seriously addressed, no replacement course was developed and studies of culture (with the exception of Aboriginal culture) are now almost entirely absent from the Years 7-10 curriculum. The "more populous" (mandatory) syllabuses of history and geography have had their own battles over content without having to address this matter.

   Similarly, when reviewing the crowded primary curriculum, the Board of Studies solution was to delete a number of outcomes and associated content from syllabuses, including most studies of culture from the K-6 Human Society and Its Environment syllabus. The fear behind these decisions needs to be addressed and a curriculum focus provided.

   Unless curriculum writers provide more scope for the study of culture including in current contexts, then few teachers are going to step outside the curriculum and engage students in the way Rizina Yadav is recommending.

2. Address the general religious education issue
   Ignorance, avoidance and stubbornness have been the hallmark of curriculum developers both nationally and in NSW about the place of general religious education in the curriculum. Over the last fifteen years there has been a constant campaign that has fallen on deaf ears to alert curriculum authorities to the neglect of general religious education (*teaching about other religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives*).

In NSW, the Education Act 1990 endorses government schools to have general religious education but the NSW Board of Studies has been reluctant to accept any role in this matter since taking responsibility for the curriculum in 1990. It is still to undertake a curriculum audit to address or confirm the criticism. Similarly, the Australian curriculum minimises general religious education and this has been the focus of extensive criticism. Yet today, an understanding of the major religions and the religious motivation of people is essential to understand the world we live in. Keeping our head in the sand on these matters has resulted in the kicks in the behind we are now experiencing as a society. Creating a focus, not simply an opportunity, for these studies would do much to help teachers engage students in the issues of the day.

In Victoria, the government has decided to include, if only for a period a week in secondary schools, a course on world religions, culture and ethics. At least this is recognition of the problem, if not necessarily an appropriate solution.

The secular interests that have guided the curriculum away from any general religious education have not done any favours for young people or for Australian society. The Christian heritage of Australia, the men and women of faith who formed this country and the role of the churches remain almost absent from the curriculum to the ignorance of future generations and culture and learning about other religions fare only marginally better.

3. <u>Promote existing policy and support teachers with additional training</u>
   The NSW Department has an excellent policy, *Controversial issues in schools,* which acknowledges that issues may arise mainly from the curriculum, hence the plea to widen the curriculum in (1) and (2) above. However, not withstanding this, the policy in part states:
   1. *Schools are neutral grounds for rational discourse and objective study. They are not arenas for opposing political views or ideologies.*

   2. *Schools are places where students are preparing for informed and reasoned involvement in community life, including its politics, by calm and co-operative study of social issues. Schools are not places for recruiting into partisan groups.*

The policy is a triumph for common sense and a great assistance to every teacher and administrator. However, who has read it? I suspect very few teachers and only a handful of administrators when an issue arose in their school. It is rarely promoted in training courses.

With increased curriculum opportunity, this policy could be the basis of further teacher training to give them the guidance and assurance about what they are doing when they engage students in controversial issues. Such training would not go astray even without this increased focus as complaints seem common place about some teachers allowing their own prejudices to dominate classrooms in areas of politics, sex and secular and religious world views.

In addressing such important matters as the radicalisation of students, lessons from the research that *those engaging with radicalised individuals to carry authority and legitimacy and be equipped with profound ideological knowledge* require an extra level of training.

An associated matter is the recent concern the Department expressed about some materials being used for special religious education (SRE) by churches. Citing their duty of care policy and inferring the psychological harm that was possible from some of these materials in the hands of inexperienced teachers, it would seem ironic if SRE became the one area of the curriculum that actually engage students in things they were really interested in. Is this another case for strengthening SRE in secondary schools?

Increased engagement of young people in controversial issues within the framework of policy and with additional teaching training would greatly address the concerns of Rizina Yadav.

4. <u>Promote teaching strategies that engage students</u>
   The explicitness of the curriculum and the need for teachers to complete it often leads them into teaching strategies that avoid prolonged discussion. Investigation from a variety of sources, writing in different text types, completion work, problem solving, note taking, summarising and sometimes group work are all worthy strategies, but do they engage students in talking about the things that most affect them? Some strategies that might help if applied to controversial issues might include:
   - Discussion putting up a topic or proposition and seeing where it goes
   - Debates – both formal and parliamentary
   - Values continuums where students have to take and justify a position
   - Moral dilemmas where various positions are explored
   - Lickert scales – completing, tabulating and discussing the results
   - PMI - Pluses, minuses and interesting reflections on statements
   - SWOT analysis – Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats.

   These and other strategies are known by most teachers but rarely used. If students are to be engaged they will need to be given greater prominence.

5. <u>Provide structures for out of class debate</u>
   Schools have various lunchtime and after school groups including sport, dance, debating, craft and religious groups. In all cases, if they are school activities, they require teacher supervision and most require parental permission to participate. Schools could establish groups that allow for the discussion of current affairs or debate about social issues. Such groups would ideally be student-led with teacher supervision to ensure that policies related to controversial issues, discrimination, and duty of care were implemented. These groups would provide a forum for students to both express their views and learn from others.

   Recent concerns about proselytising for IS at Epping Boy's High School simply highlight the need to both provide a structure and suitable supervision. The Department's concern that groups within schools, particularly prayer groups, might be used for expressing terrorist views or for proselytising has led to an audit. Some schools are not happy about this and don't want to act as policeman, but they do have a supervisory role to perform. But the problem at Epping Boys High apparently arose from playground discussions not organised groups and these can't be effectively

monitored nor, one would argue, should they be. For ad hoc playground meetings for discussion or prayer, monitoring is very difficult even if you wanted to.

In short, providing suitable structures for discussion is desirable, but there are few schools with such structures. Yes, there are risks if student groups are encouraged – more media stories, more parent concerns, more rhetoric from interest groups and many more damaged egos, but the greater risk to Australian society of not engaging young people has already been demonstrated.

I remember some years ago that teachers of geography in a south coast town were not prepared to teach about conservation and the woodchip industry for fear of the different community groups who held opposing views. Rather than helping students to understand different viewpoints through rational discussion, prejudice remained entrenched. Young people need to hear a variety of voices and schools provide a safe environment for them to engage in real discussion of the things that are affecting their lives. If they can not do this at school, where can they do it and what will be the consequences for Australia's future?

Rizina Yadav has a real point, but is anyone listening?

John Gore

BOOK REVIEW
Post God Nation? Roy Williams, ABC. Harper Collins 2015.
Available from ABC Bookshops or ABC online.

Roy Williams is already known for several books with the most popular being *God Actually*. In *Post God Nation?,* he has taken up the challenge of explaining what has happened to Australian society that today only a small percentage of people identify themselves as church attending Christians and why the Australian census continues to show a declining percentage of people identifying themselves as Christian.

His analysis is firstly historically and Part 1 of the book goes back before Australia was occupied by the British to consider the influences of Christianity and Christian people on the development of the nation. The detail is impressive and the referencing makes me wonder how a single person could read so much. If nothing else he is thorough.

The history of Australia is outlined as religious and the powerful impact of Christians is convincingly documented. Australia would not be the country it is today without the influence of Christians and Judaeo-Christianity.

In Part 2, Williams examines what he calls *The Secular Juggernaut* attacking the ignorance of Australians about their heritage which is fostered by the education system, outlining the negative the effects of war and nationalism and examines the belief killers of scientism and prosperity. Throughout this analysis he is critical of the role the traditional churches have played and their inability to respond quickly to changes in Australian society.

Finally, Williams suggests some areas in which Christians might be able to reclaim some of the lost ground and ensure their relevance in the broader Australian community. This section while not as convincing as the historical analysis, is at least an attempt to address current issues proactively and not from the traditional reactionary positions of churches. Some additional contributions from similar forward thinking Christians would be a help to all Australians.

The book concludes with two appendices: Biographical sketches and key theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism plus over fifty pages of references and end notes.

Recommended.

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