

WHAT LIES BENEATH?:
EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF
THE TROJAN HORSE AFFAIR
IN BIRMINGHAM

A CONFERENCE REPORT

March 2015

On 5 March 2015 brap, in partnership with the Lunar Society, hosted a roundtable debate to discuss the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham. The event was not a forensic re-examination of the affair, but an opportunity for a more open and honest discussion of the legacy and impact of these events.

Nearly thirty participants from a range of fields attended – they included head teachers, current and former school governors, voluntary sector staff, elected representatives, safeguarding leads, academics, parents, and activists.

The event was held under Chatham House Rules, so these notes aren't formal minutes. And they don't relay everything that was said – just the key messages and areas of agreement.

As ever, let us know your thoughts: contact details are at the back.

1 LIVING WITH THE LEGACY

- The Trojan Horse Affair has created a pressure cooker atmosphere in Birmingham and has had an impact on a generation of young people from 25 schools. There are implications for education, safeguarding, race relations, and parenting – but how we deal with this legacy in the future has hardly been considered in the 'official' coverage so far.
- Teachers feel challenged and unsure, parents feel angry and worried, and pupils are confused. But the issues raised by Trojan Horse stretch beyond education, they touch on all aspects of how we live together in a globally diverse society.
- Trojan Horse will almost certainly turn out to be just the tip of the iceberg – just one manifestation of the pressures of super-diversity that we have to get better at understanding, navigating and negotiating. At present we are doing little, if anything, to equip ourselves, our children, or our politicians and leaders with the skills that this will require.
- The fall-out from these events could take decades to work through the system. Negative stereotypes gain traction and can take decades to undo. Anti-Irish prejudice and the over-representation of Black men in the mental health system are examples of how stereotyping can have long-term consequences. Looking forward, Islamophobia and stereotypes of terror, radicalisation, and grooming will be others.

2 WHAT SHOULD EDUCATION LOOK LIKE?

- There are bigger questions; what should education look like in modern, super-diverse Britain? Where do the boundaries lie and what is permissible? What values should guide educational leadership? Is there a space to ask these questions? Education is under the microscope, but other public sector areas are also implicated by the demands of diversity. Schools have become unclear about the *right* thing to do, especially when confronted by competing cultural, religious or ethnic demands. Trojan Horse has accelerated this process. Schools are not just factories to get children through education. They must also promote resilience and citizenship, stand for equality, and create space for discussion and enquiry.
- Beyond the huge Action Plan that has been published and ongoing Ofsted inspections, schools are receiving little or no guidance to help them navigate these complex and potentially divisive issues.
- The place of religion in schools is riddled with contradiction and double standards – consider the Trojan Horse investigation vs. the amount of public money that is spent on religious schools (which make up about a third of our educational system).
- Yet many – and even those from devout religious backgrounds – want the same thing from education: a good school and a good education for their children. These values are seen through an educational lens, not a religious lens. But those with different – and extreme – agendas flourish where schools fail.

3 REASSERTING THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUALITY

- Equality and anti-discrimination used to be a key emphasis in the education system and provided guidance and support for many in how to think about and navigate ‘difference’. But equality has been absent from virtually all discussion of the Trojan Horse affair.
- Where the law and equalities legislation (such as the Public Sector Equality Duty) can help us, it isn’t being used (for example, in relation to unrepresentative governing bodies). And where the law doesn’t offer much help – precisely in the kind of grey areas that Trojan Horse highlighted – nothing is being done to develop guidance or help those at the frontline acquire the skills and confidence they need.

- But equality is not just a ‘Trojan Horse issue’, relevant only in religious controversies – *all* aspects of equality matter in schools. Gender equality, for example, is a big issue both in school leadership and the educational achievement of girls and young women.

4 EMPOWERING PARENTS

- Teachers are not the only educators: we are all ‘co-educators’ of our children. A pupil spends only 12% of their time in school. The ability to exercise our rights and responsibilities as parents is therefore a vital part of the solution.
- But the current climate is disempowering parents. Schools are increasingly making the police rather than parents their first port of call in any situations where they feel uncertain – almost as if Prevent referrals have become the default position. Such a climate of fear and suspicion erodes teachers’ confidence in their own judgement and is bad for both education *and* democracy.

5 KEY MESSAGES TO TAKE AWAY/THINK ABOUT

- Is there an opportunity to focus on the potential benefits of utilizing existing equalities and human rights legislation – in governance, teaching and pupil outcomes – rather than re-focusing on British values? Whilst the latter is important, the challenges presented by this affair could be more aptly dealt with if individuals understood their responsibilities under existing laws.
- How do we equip ourselves, our children, and our education system and its staff at all levels with the skills, attitudes and confidence to navigate life in super-diverse cities and societies such as Birmingham? How do we avoid our children inheriting our prejudices?
- Given Birmingham has already sleepwalked into segregation – what do we do about it? How do we actively work against separatism and strategies that promote it?
- Do we have more to offer as a city than the 3 f’s (fun, fashion and food)? We are a deeply unequal city – are we educating some of our children to take a place in society which is less than they deserve?

- How do we increase young people's resilience, skills, and understanding so that they can better cope with the pressures of growing up today (insecurity, religious extremism, vulnerability online, bullying, homophobia, sexism, racism)?
- Consider how this debate can be widened and taken out to the wider public – if we stay in the 'safe spaces' we create then this can be a pointless exercise.

March 2015

brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.

The logo for brap, consisting of the lowercase letters 'b', 'r', 'a', and 'p' in a bold, rounded, teal-colored font. The letters are spaced out horizontally.

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