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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## THE OTHER CURRICULUM IN PESANTREN: EXPLORING POSSIBLE TRIGGERS OF RADICALISM

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*The curriculum and subjects taught in pesantrens attended by Muslim terrorists have been of interest in educational research. In the absence of direct connections between the school curriculum and students' involvement in radicalism, what sociologists call the "hidden curriculum" should be given attention.*

HAVING BEEN linked to the 2002 Bali bombing executed by its graduates, Pondok Pesantren Islam Al-Mukmin in Ngruki, Java became one of the most notorious pesantrens in the region. While the school does endorse a strict version of Islamic thought, it was cleared of any links to terrorism in 2006 by KH Ma'ruf Amin, Head of the Counter-terrorism Desk of the Indonesian Council of Ulama. While not denying their graduates were involved in terrorism, the former students or *santris* were said to be acting in an individual capacity. This judgement begged the question: could the school curriculum be a cause of their terrorism, and if not, what triggered their actions?

A partial answer is offered by Azyumardi Azra, Rector and Professor of History at the State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah (UIN) Jakarta, Indonesia, who applied the term "hidden curriculum" to the pesantrens. The curriculum offered by the *Depag* (Religious Department) and *Depdiknas* (National Education Department) is often integrated into the curriculum of pesantren, he said. But what is often not conspicuous is the hidden curriculum that usually takes place after congregatory dawn and evening prayers in pesantrens.

The notion of hidden curriculum is not new; it originated in 1968 when sociologist Phillip Jackson examined the socialisation process that takes place within education. Michael Haralambos expressed in his book, 'Sociology: Themes and Perspectives' (1991) that "the hidden curriculum consists of those things pupils learn through the experience of attending school rather than the stated educational objectives of such institutions".

Social interaction between and among students is the most influential factor in creating certain behaviours. Repentant Bali Bomber, Ali Imron, declared in his book that the first instant that turned

him from a normal *santri* to a sympathiser of Muslim combatants in Palestine and Afghanistan was when he joined his friends who were watching a video depicting the suppression and struggles of the Muslims.

### **Detecting the triggers**

In *The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education*, Marina Gair and Guy Mullins suggested that “the hidden curriculum is not something that we must look behind or around in order to detect; in most cases it is plainly in sight, and functions effortlessly”. This unintended curriculum appears when students translate their experiences in school using their own conscience, which is oblivious to teachers or peers. This scenario is similar to Meighan’s concept of “haunting” or “ghosts” of social structures. Examples of scenarios where hidden curriculum could be detected are the physical environment of the school; authors of textbooks; social inequality; and use of language.

Studies by Elizabeth Jago and Ken Tanner (1999) revealed that “students in an open space facility demonstrated a tendency to exhibit less disruptive behaviour in school and students in traditional schools tended to be more disruptive in class”. Besides space and facilities, wall decorations such as calligraphic painting of Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet would serve as either positive or negative reinforcement to reach a desired behaviour in students. In this case where no teaching is involved, information processing and translation of values would be up to the students.

Another area to understand is the use of traditional textbooks written by famous scholars of Islam between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. If the students are studying the texts and biographic materials of the authors, but with no effort to contextualise the lessons to present day, this could both create a formal trigger for radicalisation. But more insidiously, this lack of context can reinforce the hidden curriculum by legitimising the unknown cognitive structures.

Critical to the radicalisation is how the school deals with grievances and social inequality. While the textbooks may not frame the world in a black and white way, the teachers and school may perpetrate that view simply through offering a school that is exclusively Muslim. In this environment, the use of the term “*Kafir*” (infidels) to refer to non-Muslims in pesantrens is definitely inevitable. When taken together, it is not surprising that radicalisation occurs, even if there is no intention.

### **Regulating hidden curriculum: Some suggestions**

Thus, is it the hidden curriculum and not necessarily the formal teaching that may cause radicalisation, which manifests only fully upon graduation? Here, the alumni may want to replicate the former learning environment and transmit either “learning experience” and thus join radical groups, or form their own and ultimately drift into violence. What is to be done?

Having identified some of the potential causes, some practical suggestions to address the issue are as follows:

1. Introduce explicit lessons on terrorism and radicalism. Examples would be exposing students to the destructions terrorism has brought to the world; teaching the genuine Islamic ideology that does not support “permissive Jihad”; the unacceptable acts of suicide bombing; and ways to identify violent radical movements.
2. Modify *halaqa sessions* -- the traditional learning method where a small group of pupils gather in a circle to study Islam -- that exist in some traditional pesantrens to unveil the hidden curriculum and ‘rescue’ affected students. This would require a trained mentor and a structured content to help teachers or mentors detect symptoms of radicalism. Structuring the relationship between mentors and mentees could also reveal any personal or unique ideologies.

3. Make co-curricular activities more inclusive in terms of participation. Such exclusive environment could trigger the idea that, for example, vocational lessons are to equip students with competent skills so as to level up their economic condition and thus overtake the 'infidels'. Inviting children of other religions and cultures to participate in pesantren extra-curricular activities would interrupt such information and cognitive processes.
4. Form a strategic team to explore areas of hidden curriculum. This could begin with a research on past experiences that have triggered other former pesantren students to get involved with radicalism, such as Ali Imron.

Exploring and regulating triggers of radicalism by detecting hidden curriculum would reduce the vulnerability of students to even become sympathisers of Muslim extremists. Schools, henceforth, need to address the hidden aspects of the radicalisation process. Otherwise even if the formal aspects are caught, books are changed and factuality is dismissed, radicalisation can and still will occur.

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