

# Unpacking British values:

a case study of a primary school in east London

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores British values in the context of the new requirement for UK schools to actively promote the following specific ‘fundamental British values’: democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and respect and tolerance of those of different faiths and those without faith. A consideration of the socio-political influences leading to the identification of British values offers a backdrop to the debate on the contested nature of how these values are linked to the notion of Britishness and how they might be linked to the primary curriculum. The research setting is a mixed community primary school located in the London borough of Newham, where observations of key lessons and a review of school policies and displays with reference to British values took place. The findings illustrate that a lack of clear school-based leadership, the complexities of personal politics and an absence of training that embeds British values securely into the curriculum are all factors that should be addressed in order to deliver on this government directive.

## KEYWORDS

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

HYBRID IDENTITIES

PREVENT STRATEGY

CONTESTED

LEADERSHIP

PERSONAL POLITICS

## INTRODUCTION

The Department for Education published guidance (DfE 2014) on promoting British values in schools to ensure that young people leave school prepared for life in modern Britain. These values were first set out by the government in the Prevent Strategy (HMSO 2011), the government’s counter-terrorism strategy, and include democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. This paper unpacks British values as a contested notion and reflects on how a primary school in east London has addressed the inclusion of British values in the curriculum

## BRITISH VALUES: A SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2001, a series of race riots broke out in Britain’s cities. The first of them, in Oldham, was sparked by tensions between the White and Asian communities (Uberoi & Modood 2010). In the soul-searching that followed, segregation was identified as a contributing factor to violence (Cantle 2001); the search for new methods in bringing communities together began. Gordon Brown, former prime minister, saw schools as the front line in enforcing an overarching sense of Britishness (Uberoi & Modood 2013). Accordingly, citizenship classes were introduced

to tread the fine line between celebrating differences and instilling shared values (DfES 2007). After more years of social unrest, the Coalition government introduced ‘British values’ and a new history curriculum centred on selective aspects of Britain’s past that will nurture pride and a sense of Britishness (Modood 2014).

David Cameron has listed British values as freedom, tolerance, respect for the rule of law, respect for British institutions and belief in personal and social responsibility (Cameron 2014). This renewed political movement came as a response following an investigation into claims of Islamic extremism in schools in Birmingham. The operation codenamed ‘Trojan

Horse' alleged that extremists had installed new headteachers at several schools, one of which was previously rated as outstanding by Ofsted, and where 98% of pupils were Muslim. The impression across the country is that in Birmingham, there were British Muslims who were trying to indoctrinate a specific school of thought (Ainley & Allen 2014). Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw, said a culture of fear and intimidation had become rife in the 21 schools inspected, all of which, it was believed, could be easy targets for extremists (Clarke 2014). All the schools had their Ofsted ratings demoted to inadequate. The report also said that efforts were needed to raise pupils' awareness of the risks of extremism, placing six of the schools in a special measures category, meaning they had failed to provide exceptional education levels, and could be closed if they did not improve (Clarke 2014). Nevertheless, it was the plot known as 'Operation Trojan Horse' that paved the way for British values to become a statutory aspect in the new curriculum. But what does it mean to be British?

## BRITISH VALUES A CONTESTED NOTION?

In a United Kingdom made up of hybrid and layered identities, it seems easier to define oneself as Scottish, Welsh, Christian, northern or a Londoner rather than British (Parekh 2000). Waves of immigration have enriched the British landscape as today's Britain is one of the most diverse nations in the world (Vertovec 2010). Shakespeare, cream teas and the monarchy share space with a Britishness projected through the literature of Monica Ali and chicken tikka masala, Britain's favourite dish (Uberoi & Modood 2013). So, how does a teacher or a school impart this melting pot in the form of four fundamental values? An expert subject advisory group found that there is confusion as to what British values are (ESAG 2015). This obscurity has led to teachers feeling deeply sceptical about the idea of imparting these values and how best to address them (Jerome

& Clemitshaw 2012; Rhamie et al. 2012). To illustrate, in Maylor's (2010) research the underlying factor in the scepticism expressed by the teachers was hugely to do with the ambiguity surrounding the term 'British values'. Their major concern was that the government's definition of British values proved limited. Maylor's (2010) findings resonate with the findings of Osler (2008) who has also alluded to the ambiguity and ambivalence of the term British values and the difficulties it has presented to those who have attempted to impart them. It can be suggested that British values, despite the four fundamental values ascribed by the government, can mean so many different things to so many different people.

Conversely, in a more recent and contrasting survey, Jerome & Clemitshaw (2012) found that newly qualified teachers who have recently entered teaching feel confident in teaching British values and diversity. It can be suggested here that there seems to be a renewed enthusiasm to teach about diversity which was not previously identified. Nevertheless, as the notion of British values is relatively new, there is a lack of research which explores the experiences of teachers and the opportunities and challenges teaching about British values presents. However, one conclusive assumption can be derived from the literature, and that is that the term British values is a contested term. This raises the question, how can schools be put at the front line of solving the problems of helping create social integration when no one can agree what British values are?

## BRITISH VALUES AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

This new requirement for UK schools to actively promote fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance of those of different faiths and religions has caused a sense of disillusionment for teachers and schools (DfE 2014). Research conducted by Davies et al. (2005) which surveyed over 500

teachers in England concluded that while teachers supported the notion of British values in the citizenship curriculum, there was little or no enthusiasm displayed on the part of the participants as they felt they were imparting 'patriotism' and 'cultural indoctrination', as described by the teachers. In relation to the patriotic agenda, numerous headteachers have argued that they have already been actively promoting British values for years in the form of behaviour policies, school councils and staff meetings (Moortown 2014). However, they accept that the challenge for teachers and schools is to capture and describe the ways in which they are promoting British values for Ofsted (ESAG 2015). Furthermore, in later research, Maylor (2010) found that teachers avoided teaching about diversity as they felt overwhelmed and underprepared. Those teachers that did elect to teach about diversity refused to teach about specific groups with pluralistic identities due to the fear of ostracising other cultures.

## BRITISH VALUES IN THE CURRICULUM

At this early stage, there is very limited academic literature on the provision of training on British values in teacher education and implementation of British values in the primary setting; this fact was an additional driver to address this topic by the authors. Relevant literature suggests that some schools are now making cross-curricular links between British values and subjects such as English, religious education, history and geography and personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) (Rogers 2014). In other words, a PSHE lesson may be about friendship and being kind to each other, which may then be linked to mutual respect and tolerance. In a further illustration, Hatch End High School is noted as an exemplar of good practice as it sets out how to promote British values 'across the entire curriculum and all aspects of school life' (Hatch End 2015). Furthermore, in order to

promote democracy, some schools have developed a pupil parliament where one child from each class is chosen to be a representative. Every month, they hold a meeting and discuss concerns and issues regarding everyday school life (Wormley 2015). In addition, there are several initiatives schools have taken to promote British values, such as pupil councils and using pupil questionnaires to promote democracy; visits to or by local fire services, police services and life services to promote the rule of law; and a review of the school's behaviour policy and how it is important for schools to adhere to this and how the rules of the schools can be linked to the rule of law (Bolloten 2015).

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

One-to-one interviews were conducted with the six members of staff at school A, a mixed community school located in the London borough of Newham. In addition, observations of key lessons and a review of school policies and displays with reference to British values took place. In order to maintain a sense of focus, this paper will reflect on the views and experiences of the teachers.

When teachers at school A were asked what they thought the drivers for British values being taught in primary schools were, the responses differed in terms of teaching experience. Teachers who were in the first five years of their teaching career axiomatically cited the 'Trojan Horse' scandal. However, teachers who had been in post for more than five years cited other reasons as well as the Trojan Horse plot. The following extract was cited by one senior member of staff:

*'What's the big deal about values right now? Why are we getting so excited now? Weren't we teaching them for the last ten years? I've been a teacher for 15 years, and not once did we talk about values. Since 9/11, there is a growing concern. Values are now linked to security. We are creating a discussion about values; something as essential to our collective citizenship and our collective identity as British people, but we're creating it*

*in the context of a security crisis. Were we not British before the introduction of British values?'* (British, male, 15 years' teaching experience)

This statement allows for a whole new discussion about terrorism and extremism; however, the most pertinent point made by the participant in relation to this study is the fact that, in his opinion, some schools have been actively promoting the so-called British values for many years (Osler 2008). This point was outlined in the literature review section where headteachers of good schools have challenged the new 'British values' subject on the curriculum (ESAG 2015). It can be suggested that the challenge now is how schools and teachers will capture and describe the ways in which they are promoting British values. This brings the discussion to the next theme which is the opportunities and challenges faced when planning for and delivering sessions on British values.

When asked whether teaching British values posed challenges or provided opportunities, teachers at school A stated more challenges than opportunities.

*'It's very interesting because we have to jump through hoops. We sit here after school discussing what Ofsted require us to do and evidence. We don't know what they want from us exactly.'* (British-Asian, female, newly-qualified teacher)

*'It's not necessarily questioning the four fundamental values per se, but the way in which they are being taught and the ways those values are being enforced. That is the fundamental problem.'* (British, female, seven years' teaching experience)

*'I think it's a brilliant idea. At a time, when society is in turmoil, it is essential that we share a set of values that bind us together. It's worth a shot because let's face it, there aren't any other alternatives to British values.'* (British, female, two years' teaching experience)

*'How can we teach something that lacks clarity? Its four values that are to be taught. On the face of it, you think brilliant, there's nothing with it except when you come to the idea of actually*

*teaching the values. First of all it's not an exhaustive list, but the approach to them might prove problematic. For instance, when it comes to the rule of law, it can be misinterpreted by telling students that everyone has to obey the law when in fact the law is there to be challenged.'* (British, female, eight years' teaching experience)

It is clear that the staff at school A have a difficult time imparting British values. Some of the responses suggest that Ofsted have not made it clear enough what it is they want to see from schools. In addition, some of the responses demonstrated that teachers with more teaching experience found it more difficult to deliver lessons on British values in comparison to the newly qualified teachers. This finding can be corroborated with the research of Jerome & Clemitshaw (2012) who found that newly qualified teachers who have recently entered the teaching sector feel confident in teaching Britishness and diversity. This may be because they have had updated training in planning and delivering sessions on British values as opposed to those who have been in the profession for a long time. However, the most interesting finding is that British values are ambiguous for all teachers: regardless of age, experience and gender.

Teachers were asked what their understanding of British values was. Some of the key responses have been documented below:

*'This is a really diverse school. What's striking is that when I talk to other teachers about what's important to them, they broadly want the same thing for their children. You know, they want respect, tolerance, discipline and all those kind of things. These are a set of values which we might not hold up as high as British values, but they are important values. I'm not convinced we'd want to instil from the top down values prescribed by an edict. I would quite like leadership from the school, but also a conversation with families about what is important to us.'* (British, female, nine years senior member of staff)

*'I would prefer to think in terms of universal values, human rights. These*

are the values that I think we should be talking about, probably British values does mean these, but it's a slightly worrying term because it almost panders to a nationalism, a sort of you against us kind of thing. I'm not sure it's very helpful in this particular context.' (British-Asian, female, five years' teaching experience)

'It's not like maths where there's one answer. British values are interpreted differently for every individual and this could prove a problem for students.' (British-Muslim, female, ten years learning mentor)

These responses show that teachers have different understandings of British values. Teachers at school A believe schools are not the platform to teach about social engineering as it will create more damage than cure. This is because the term 'British values' is highly contestable and interpreted differently by every individual. In turn, this would lead to some cultures feeling ostracised, subsequently leading

them to hide their identity. This point can be validated by Davies et. al.'s (2005) research where it was concluded that from a sample of 500 teachers, 75% felt that schools were not the place to teach citizenship and diversity. Perhaps, the government ought to unpack and elucidate the four fundamental values further.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of the data demonstrates that teachers who had been in post for more than five years cited reasons other than the Trojan Horse controversy as drivers behind British values. They spoke of a link to wider social unrest and the fact that such values were previously included in the whole school ethos, though not explicitly identified as British values. They also reported a lack of clear leadership, training and practical guidance, other than the need to address the subject in order to meet the needs of an Ofsted inspection; to add further confusion, teachers at school

A felt that Ofsted were ambiguous in what they wanted to see from schools in terms of the implementation and delivery of British values.

In contrast, newly qualified teachers felt more comfortable than their experienced peers in imparting British values. This may be because they had benefited from recent training on British values and could apply (during their training) cross-curricular planning to the delivery of British values, thus making it a more subtle part of their delivery. Interestingly, all the teachers interviewed at school A had mixed interpretations and understandings of British values; their views differed greatly and were interconnected with personal politics, leading to the conclusion for some teachers that schools are not the place to teach 'British values'. Finally, school A does not make a mention of British values on its website; however, the identical British values display can be found in every classroom. ■

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