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The problem with teaching ‘British values’ in school

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Amanda Spielman, head of Ofsted, claims British values are being “actively perverted” by religious extremists. In a recent speech, she suggests extremists are using schools to:

Narrow young people’s horizons, isolate and segregate, and in the worst cases to indoctrinate impressionable minds.

Spielman’s speech has already come under fire for lack of evidence and has been taken by some as the latest attack on Muslim children in British schools. But what are these “British values” she speaks of? A love of tea drinking? Queuing? Supporting the Queen or the NHS?

The government defines “fundamental British values” as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths. Since 2014, teachers in English schools must promote these British values and their promotion is inspected by Ofsted.

The initiative was a response by Michael Gove – then secretary of state for education – following the “Trojan Horse Affair”, where it was alleged that Islamists were trying to take over state schools in Birmingham. No evidence was found to support the accusation of conspiracy, despite numerous investigations.

‘Our values’

As Britain has no written constitution, these basic common values had to be identified afresh. The government’s identification of particular values as “British” is the outcome of ministerial choices – with the wording taken from the Prevent anti-extremist policy.

The British values have not been discussed by parliament, nor the wider public. The values are both broad and vague, allowing many people to sign up to them. This avoids more precise definitions that might generate controversy.



A fundamental British value? Shutterstock

At a recent event, academics from UCL and University of Bristol’s departments of Law and Education argued that asserting particular values as national values is an expansion of state power, as the state seeks to manage increasing diversity. Speakers underlined the importance of considering the context – the why now – of the promotion of these values.

A British obsession

The idea of “fundamental British values” feeds into broader narratives of “Britishness” which played a significant role in the UK referendum vote to leave the European Union and Conservatives’ call for a British Bill of Rights to replace the protection offered by the European Convention on Human Rights, under the Human Rights Act.

In this political context, the fixation on Britishness is likely to generate suspicion toward the “other”. As it is, the period after the EU referendum saw a rise in hate crimes across the UK. Government data also shows hate crimes spike after terror attacks. Our current research has found these fears and suspicions also have repercussions in the classroom, as teachers report hearing that Muslim pupils are called “terrorists” as they travel to school.

The recent imposition on teachers of the legal duty to “prevent children from being drawn into terrorism” – known as the Prevent Duty – only adds to risks of stigma. Despite revisions to Prevent, controversy still remains about it targeting – and potentially tarring – Muslim children. And in among all this, teachers must make sense of and promote, British values to young people.

Bunting with fish and chips

Given the brevity of the current policy guidelines, teachers have considerable freedom as to how to promote these values, “translating” national policy to fit their own setting.

Some fall back on Union Jack themed displays, featuring the Queen and fish and chips – confusing British values with British symbols and stereotypes.

Spielman noted in another recent speech that “craft[ing] a picture of the Queen out of sequins” is “charming” but “that’s not teaching children about our common values”.



English teacups, the Queen and worn out cultural stereotypes such as fish and chips and cucumber sandwiches are the reality of many ‘British values’ lessons. Shutterstock

Britain's history of colonialism and racial arrogance may well affect how talk of "our" values is received by minority groups. This is why teachers, teaching children from diverse backgrounds, often talk instead of "our school values" or "universal values" in an attempt to smooth over the potentially nationalistic and exclusionary idea of "British" values.

Similarly, many schools absorb British values into existing school practices, such as learning about democracy via the school council. Some schools go beyond this, with progressive initiatives that emphasise global interconnections and human rights.

Liberal values

All too often, though, discussion with pupils around "fundamental British values" is limited. The school timetable is already crowded, and some teachers are understandably wary of potentially controversial topics.

Arguably, these values are minimal values for schools to promote. After all, research suggests that support for liberal values is already strong among young people – including those from ethnic minorities. But surely if schools want to encourage critical thinking in young people, teaching needs to go beyond symbols and stereotypes.

Rather than broad accusations of extremists undermining "our" values, schools should be encouraged to develop political literacy and citizen engagement in all young people. As a first step, teachers should be given the time, training and resources they need to develop spaces for debate with school students as part of an expansive programme of citizenship education.

This is important because, after all, the most fundamental of British values is arguably that schools develop a willingness in their pupils to engage in important moral questions – through reasoned and wide ranging argument – to encourage genuine commitment to fundamental democratic values.