
Prevent and 'British Values'

ALEX KENNY & BALJEET GHALE

ABSTRACT At the recent National Union of Teachers' conference the role of the Prevent strategy and the introduction of 'British Values' in the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills framework emerged as key issues for delegates. Two of the speeches made at the conference are presented here.

Alex Kenny

The Prevent strategy is the cornerstone of the government's policy to halt the 'radicalisation' of Muslim youth. It is becoming increasingly significant in the experience of students and teachers in schools. More recently, problems have been exacerbated by the introduction of 'British Values' into the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection framework.

There are three aspects of these developments I want to address. First is impact on the relationship between teachers and students; second is the concept of 'British Values' itself and third is the role of Ofsted in policing all of this. I want to argue that Prevent is a blunt instrument that will inhibit discussion and do more harm than good and that Ofsted should be allowed nowhere near these matters. I want to explain why.

We live in a very damaged and volatile world and, like us as teachers, young people are trying to make sense of this. Like us, they are exploring ideas of cause, effect and possible solutions. And, like us, they want a space in which to discuss these issues.

Schools are ideal places for discussions on ethical and political questions to happen and teachers are very well placed to facilitate this. But these discussions must be allowed to take place in a spirit of enquiry, openness and trust and we must accept that young people may say things which are challenging or unacceptable; students may voice support for the English Defence League (EDL) or ISIS, and we must be ready to take this on and show them where some of these ideas lead and to steer them away. This requires some

skill and sensitivity and it is vitally important that teachers are given advice and high-quality training on dealing with controversial issues. Where a teacher has concerns about a student being at risk or vulnerable, schools already have procedures and mechanisms in place for addressing these. These can be adapted and modified to take account of new circumstance. What we don't need is a strategy which can lead to young people feeling that they are, or actually being, criminalised for expressing a viewpoint.

The problem with the Prevent strategy is that it has lashed together a concept of British Values with a rather elastic notion of 'non-violent extremism' in such a way as to close down the space for discussion of important issues. The guidelines are so vague that teachers don't know where the boundaries lie and are therefore becoming nervous or afraid of allowing discussion for fear of the consequences for them and their students. We have heard of teachers saying that they no longer want to allow discussion in class because they are afraid they will have to report students. We have also heard of young people telling teachers that they have been told not to discuss such matters in school in case they get reported – in one case a young student, who was offended by the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, was not prepared to say this in class in case it got reported. We have also heard, very recently, reports of schools withdrawing long-standing invitations to groups such as Palestine Solidarity Campaign because they don't know how that would be viewed by Ofsted or the Prevent team.

So you can see how, despite what the government says, the guidance for schools is already having the effect of shutting down discussion in schools – where discussion was happening it is now being closed down. And here is the danger – if students don't feel able to discuss things in school then they will go elsewhere, and look elsewhere, and we will then have less chance of making sure discussions take place openly and in ways where different views can be challenged and critiqued.

And what of 'British Values'? We are now told by David Cameron and Theresa May that values such as decency, tolerance, respect for individual liberty, and so on, are 'fundamental British Values'. How many more times do we have to spell out that there is nothing uniquely British about these values – they are human values held by people all over the world; they are the values of my Iraqi dentist and Pakistani doctor. And let's pause to think about British Values in years gone by:

- 25 years ago 'British Values' supported the Apartheid State that was keeping Nelson Mandela in prison;
- 60 years ago 'British Values' was chemically castrating Alan Turing and thousands like him;
- 100 years ago 'British Values' was imprisoning and force-feeding the suffragettes fighting for votes for women.

So the past does not look good for anyone who wants to claim such values as 'fundamentally British'.

However, the real problem with this is that the debate about these values starts outside the communities it is hoping to influence – and then imposes these views upon them. That is a recipe for pushing people away rather than reaching out to them.

David Cameron and others lecture the Muslim community about integration and tell them they must stop leading segregated lives. But look at the schools they went to: hidden behind high walls and iron gates and segregated by race, gender, class and probably religion too. David Cameron should stop lecturing us about values and start building a more just and fairer society.

Finally, on Ofsted – if ever there was an organisation less suited to intervene or comment on matters such as these it is Ofsted. This is an organisation that has no qualms about creating a media scrum outside secondary schools in Birmingham on the day hundreds of students were arriving for their maths GCSE examination. It is an organisation that says that schools teaching sex education in separate classes is evidence of extremism. Finally, it is an organisation that claimed a school which had established separate play areas for boys and girls – at the request of the girls – was ‘not preparing the students for life in modern society’ when they have never offered a comment on the existence of separate boys’ and girls’ schools. So Ofsted has already shown that it is incapable of acting independently and is instead happy to twist the facts to fit a government agenda of generating suspicion about schools with a high proportion of Muslim students and staff.

In conclusion, the Prevent strategy is a mechanism for creating suspicion and uncertainty that will almost certainly lead to Muslim students being profiled and scrutinised. It is an inappropriate strategy for dealing with complex issues and schools and Ofsted is an organisation that is demonstrably unfit for purpose in commenting fairly on how schools address such matters.

Baljeet Ghale

Eight years ago, almost to the day, right here in Harrogate, I delivered my Presidential speech. In the speech I highlighted many of the Government’s failures in education, which included comments on class size, SATs, privatisation, funding cuts, and inequality between private and state schools. The speech lasted around 40 minutes but the only part of it that was extensively reported by the media was when I spoke about the ridiculous notion of ‘Britishness’ that was being foisted upon us by politicians. I commented on the then Secretary of State for Education’s proposals to force us to teach ‘Britishness’ in schools. Alan Johnson, the Secretary of State, explained that Britishness meant ‘values we hold dear in Britain: free speech, tolerance, respect for the rule of the law’. I asked what made these values *uniquely* British and in what way were they not values held by people of other countries and cultures.

The press had a field day as I had talked about my affiliations to India and Kenya in various sporting events. However, to have affiliations to anywhere

other than Britain, clearly in the eyes of some, meant that I must be anti-British. However, what really upset them was when I said: 'I have no doubt that for some, behind notions of what it means to be British stands the shadow of racism. For them this is not about integration, participation and pride in the country in which you live, but more about a failure to assimilate or indeed who should be here in the first place'. And 'to demand that people conform to an imposed view of Britishness only fuels that racism'. Now, we come full circle and these same notions of Britishness have returned – if indeed they ever went away – and we are once again being expected to teach them in school!

This time the Tories have added their own touch and we are now told that democracy, the rule of the law, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs are '*Fundamental* British values'. Apparently the idea eight years ago, as it is now, is aimed at helping to overcome extremism. It is obviously preposterous to suggest that students in our schools, from diverse backgrounds come with none of these values. If we keep hammering that these are uniquely British values, all this will do is alienate, be counterproductive and create division, as the implication is that one culture's values (in this case British) are superior to another's (that is, everyone else's). Surely, the premise we must start with in our schools is that our students bring many, if not all these values, and that in the school environment we will reinforce them in every way that we can. Let's talk about them being good values that we hold and will uphold. Let's not talk about 'tolerance'; instead let's talk about accepting, respecting and appreciating all faiths and beliefs.

Teaching British values is a core part of the Prevent agenda. The Department for Education (DfE) in its document 'Promoting Fundamental British Values' suggests actions in schools such as: 'provide students with the opportunity to learn to argue and defend points of view'. Good idea. Talking and discussion, open channels of communication are absolutely key to ensuring that our students become independent thinkers. How about bringing back the speaking and listening component of the English GCSE as part of the final assessment as opposed to a stand-alone unit? How about talking to, and working with, communities that are being maligned? Another suggestion by the DfE is to use a wide variety of sources to help pupils understand a range of faiths. Good idea. How about making religious education part of the core curriculum and not sidelining it by enforcing a policy which no longer makes the subject a part of humanities and therefore not having to be studied? Let's also tackle the bigger issues such as inequality, Islamophobia, racism, overcrowded homes and poverty. Let's tackle government foreign policy and the effect it has. Young people see the lack of fairness, equity and social justice, and it leaves them angry.

We cannot allow politicians to alienate a whole group of people, leaving them feeling disaffected, marginalised and the focus of unwarranted negative attention. It is incumbent on us to take a stance and:

- to value our students for who they are and what they contribute;
- to bring some sense to a skewed and distorted narrative;

- to resist the temptation to take the easy path and that of least resistance.

And, yes we will face scrutiny, but we'll rise to the challenge because we owe it to our students to do so.

Let us acknowledge and celebrate the multifaceted human beings that we all are, who can align ourselves to identities we find important. For me:

- I am proud to be a Londoner;
- I am proud to be Kenyan;
- I am proud to be Indian;
- I am proud to be a member of the National Union of Teachers.

Correspondence: alexkenny59@gmail.com, baggy.k@virgin.net

