



Theoretical approaches to the study of fundamental British values (FBV)

Jane Louise McDonnell

School of Youth, Childhood and Education Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
(j.mcdonnell@mmu.ac.uk)

Received: 05/12/2020

Accepted for publication: 30/05/2021

Published: 06/07/2021

Abstract

This article explores some of the critical instruments available to researchers investigating civic nationalist policy and practice via a review of the theoretical approaches that have been brought to bear on one such instance of national education policy, i.e. 'fundamental British values' (FBV) in England. The article offers a review of some key theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the study of FBV before offering some reflection on additional theoretical resources that might extend and compliment the insights that these provide. Specifically, I argue that concepts and interventions from the theoretical literature described as 'radical democracy' might be of particular use in complementing and extending some of the analysis of FBV in the existing literature.

Keywords: Fundamental British values, radical democracy

1. Introduction

This paper explores some of the critical instruments available to researchers investigating civic nationalist policy and practice via a review of the theoretical approaches that have been brought to bear on one such instance of national education policy, i.e. the adherence to, and promotion of, 'fundamental British values' (FBV) by teachers and schools in England. It is now over eight years since FBV were included in the revised Teachers Standards, as values that teachers must not undermine (DfE, 2011) and over six years since the government directed schools to 'actively promote' these values (DfE, 2014, p. 3). In the interim, a diverse body of research has emerged in response to the FBV policy framework

and its enactment in schools. This paper offers a review of some key theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the study of FBV before offering some reflection on additional theoretical resources that might extend and compliment the insights that these provide. Specifically, I argue that concepts and interventions from the theoretical literature described as 'radical democracy' (see, e.g. Amsler, 2015) might be of particular use in complementing and extending some of the analysis of FBV in the existing literature.

2. Background to FBV policy in England

Fundamental British values (FBV) are defined by the government as, 'democracy, the rule of law, individual

liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Home Office, 2011, p. 107). FBV first appeared in an educational context as part of the revised Teachers Standards enforced from 2012 - as values that teachers 'must not undermine' (DfE, 2011). However, they originated in the government's anti-terror legislation, specifically the revised Prevent Strategy of 2011 (Home Office, 2011). Since 2014, all schools in England have been expected to 'actively promote' FBV as part of their existing provision for pupils' 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' (SMSC) (DfE, 2014, p. 3) and since 2015, have a legal duty to do so (Home Office, 2011).

3. Critical race theory, post-colonial theory and Foucauldian analyses of power

A combination of critical race theory (CRT), post-colonial theory and Foucauldian analyses of governmentality and surveillance have been put to use to interrogate both the origins of FBV and its impact on pupils, teachers and head teachers in schools.

On the formation of the policy, Lander (2016), Crawford (2017) and Winter and Mills (2020) have all drawn on concepts from CRT and post-colonial theory to illustrate where FBV sits within a longer history of racialized education policy in Britain. Lander (2016), for example, draws on Kapoor's (2013) application of the concept of 'racial neoliberalism' to the British policy context. Lander's (2016) work outlines how FBV forms part of a racialized approach to policy legitimated by the 'war on terror', which simultaneously targets minoritised citizens (principally British Muslims) while muting discussion of structural racism. Winter and Mills (2020) and Crawford (2017) also employ concepts from CRT to argue that FBV represents an instance of 'white supremacist' education policy (Gillborn, 2005 as cited in Winter & Mills, 2020, p.57). Winter and Mills (2020) also draw on innovative work from post-colonial theory (e.g. Fanon, 2005, as cited in Winter & Mills, 2020, p. 47) to offer a 'psychopolitical' interpretation of *how* the dynamics of racism work through FBV. They identify processes of disavowal, white amnesia and fantasy operating within the policy to argue that FBV operates as a white defence mechanism against the perceived threat of the Muslim 'Other'.

Foucauldian concepts of the surveillance, governmentality and disciplinary logics also inform these analyses of how FBV operate within the education system as part of racialised education policy. Empirically, researchers have drawn on this combination of theoretical perspectives to investigate the securitising effects of FBV in schools, as teachers are effectively asked to become 'instruments of surveillance' (Lander, 2016). Elton-Chalcraft et al. (2017) explore the stereotypical understandings of Britishness and processes of racialised 'othering' amongst student teachers of education within a performative, standards-driven landscape of initial teacher education that allows little room for critical engagement with either racism or Britishness. Panjwani (2016) has reported on how the racialised logic of surveillance affects Muslim teachers in particular, framed as both a threat to security and as agents of state security. Farrell's work with student teachers of religious education (RE) (Farrell, 2016; Farrell & Lander, 2019) illustrates how teachers are subjected to the racialised, securitising agenda of FBV but also how they find ways to resist such discourses, often with reference to the critical pluralist tradition of phenomenological RE.

This body of research and scholarship has been important in highlighting how FBV operates within the 'racialised and performative context' (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2017, p. 33) of education policy. An important concern within this literature is the increased securitisation of education, though Winter and Mills (2020) caution against this, arguing that it risks presenting education as innocent rather than recognising its long-standing institutional position in the militaristic project of colonialism. This work has also been important in exposing the contradictions, tensions and hypocrisy inherent in a policy that purports to promote democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual tolerance and respect, while eroding democracy and often denying security, freedom and equality to certain sections of the population. While Foucauldian analysis often focuses on constraint, some of the research adopting these perspectives has also been significant in analysing teachers' resistance to the policy, for example through 'agonistic' classroom approaches in certain areas of the curriculum such as RE (Farrell, 2016; Farrell & Lander, 2019).

4. Theories of national identity, political community and democratic education

Theories of national identity and political community have been combined with political theory to explore the possibilities inherent in FBV for contributing to democratic and citizenship education, variously understood.

In terms of the policy's formation, Starkey (2018) has argued that, through the introduction of FBV, a closed, ethnically nationalist conception of political community has replaced the more open, dialogical and civic conceptions previously found in citizenship education. Developed through the Crick report (1998, as cited in Starkey, 2018, p. 150) and modified to explicitly address diversity following the Ajebo report (2007, as cited in Starkey, 2018, p. 155), citizenship education in England, Starkey argues, provided a dialogic and constructivist pedagogic space for the promotion of critical thinking as part of a pluralist approach to democratic education. He posits education for cosmopolitan citizenship, in which political community is conceived more broadly and human rights are privileged, as a preferable alternative to FBV. Healy (2019) similarly questions the possibility of FBV overcoming essentialist, ethnic and cultural conceptions of citizenship because of a lack of theoretical engagement with theories of national identity and political community. Drawing on conceptions of liberal nationalism (Miller, 1998 as cited in Healy, 2019, p. 425), she argues that for FBV to achieve any potentially unifying liberal or civic nationalist agenda, it would need to engage more seriously with dimensions of political belonging, including formal membership, a sense of belonging and the perception of belonging from others.

Empirically, McGhee and Zhang (2017) draw on theories of liberal democracy, which view the cultivation of critical thinking skills and autonomy as important pre-requisites for creating and maintaining a liberal democratic society (e.g. Macedo, 2000 & Gutmann, 1987, as cited in McGhee and Zhang, 2017, p. 943). They apply this theory to their empirical work investigating the responses of schools to FBV, arguing that despite the 'top-down' approach policy, schools are finding ways to mitigate the securitising elements of FBV and incorporate the kinds of skills and attributes that contribute to liberal democratic citizenship education. Vincent (2019) draws on the theories of

national identity referred to in Healy's (2019) work, amongst other theoretical perspectives, in her large-scale investigation into schools' enactment of FBV. She finds that any potential for FBV to contribute to a liberal nationalist project based in dialogic consensus over shared civic values are undercut by the essentialist rhetoric surrounding FBV and the tendency of schools to represent Britain in culturally stereotypical terms.

Sant and Hanley (2018) also address extant theories of national identity to explore the potential of FBV in terms of a civic nationalist project in education but combine this with concepts from radical democracy in their analysis. Specifically, they work with Laclau's understanding of the democratic sphere as one of hegemonic struggle between competing versions of identification with an external political order (Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Zac, 1994, as cited in Sant & Hanley, 2018) in their research with student teachers. This perspective on the unstable, incomplete and constantly contested nature of the democratic and political sphere allows them to shift the focus from the competing versions of Britishness (in terms of content or identity) to processes of identification. They argue that teachers' existing perceptions of the nature of political community are important in their interpretations of FBV. If teachers already understand national identity as being constantly in a process of formation, contestation and struggle, then that democratic struggle can be brought meaningfully into classroom practice via engagement with 'British values' (Sant & Hanley, 2018).

This body of literature, while not ignoring the important contributions on the racialised and securitising aspects of FBV, addresses the policy from a different perspective. These authors address the policy's stated intention to promote liberal democratic values and interrogate the extent to which this is possible within the current policy framework. This research is particularly helpful in highlighting what possibilities for democratic education may be inherent in the policy *despite* its origins in the securitising 'war on terror' agenda. These studies approach democracy from different perspectives—liberal, dialogic democracy in McGhee and Zhang's (2017) work, cosmopolitan democracy in Starkey's (2018) research and radical democracy in Sant and Hanley's (2018) study. Arguably, however, all conceptualise democratic education via processes that Biesta (2006) has described as 'education for democracy' (teaching young people the

skills and dispositions needed to become democratic citizens) or 'education through democracy' (providing experiences of democratic processes for young people in educational settings that they might extend to their lives beyond school).

5. Theories of religion, secularism and values education

Some researchers have explicitly drawn on theories of religion, secularism and values in relation to FBV. Panjwani (2016) applies concepts from both political theory and the study of religion to analyse Muslim teachers' responses to FBV. He refers to the tradition of modernist Islam, along with Rawls' concept of 'overlapping consensus' (Rawls, 1993, as cited in Panjwani, 2016, p. 334) to interpret the views expressed by teachers in his study that there was no fundamental incompatibility between Islamic values and British values and, in the case of some teachers, that these were complementary. In doing so, Panjwani's (2016) work challenges the theories of incompatibility between Islam and 'the West' that have been influential on the policy discourse surrounding FBV. Panjwani's work is significant in taking religion seriously, on its own terms, and drawing on important theoretical concepts in the study of religion. In describing the interpretative process behind modernist Islam that might explain the views of the teachers in his study, Panjwani (2016, p. 33) reminds us of, 'the continual role of interpretation in the life of a religious community'.

Vincent's (2018) work also addresses religion overtly. Here, she draws on theories of post-secularism (Dillon, 2012, as cited in Vincent, 2018, p. 229) to illustrate how FBV positions different religions and religious adherents - both the implicitly, though 'de-theologised', Christian values sanctioned by the policy and its 'othering' of Muslims. Empirically, there is evidence not only in Vincent's (2018) research but also in McGhee and Zhang's (2018) work that schools (both faith and non-faith schools) are adopting FBV as part of their overall school ethos and/ or approach to values education in ways that are either implicitly or explicitly informed by (Christian) religious values. There is less published evidence to suggest that Muslim and other faith schools are also adopting FBV in this way, though this would be an interesting area for further research.

This body of literature opens up up broader questions about the place of FBV within values education. Vincent (2018, p. 2) has described FBV and character education as 'two forms' of the 'current wave of values education' gaining hold in schools. As Panjwani (2016, p. 331) has observed, 'with hindsight, we may say that the focus on the adjective 'British' stole the limelight leaving very little space to discuss more important issues around the utility and adequacy of the proposed values themselves'.

6. Overlaps, omissions and insights

Clearly there are a number of overlaps between the theoretical perspectives and as I have outlined them above. A number of the research studies cited appear (or could appear) in more than one of the three main combinations discussed. There are also other theoretical perspectives that have been omitted (see, e.g. Revell & Bryan's (2016) study of staff appraisals via Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity'). The above review is not intended to be comprehensive or definitive. However, I would argue that it does reflect some of the major theoretical insights that have been brought to bear on the study of FBV thus far. All of the theoretical approaches outlined above have shed light on the formation and enactment of FBV as an instance of civic nationalist education. They have illuminated some of the main problems of the policy, indicated some alternative approaches and asked important questions about how teachers, schools and pupils are being affected by this initiative. In the concluding section of this paper, I outline some additional theoretical tools that might be applied to the study of FBV to complement these perspectives.

7. Insights from radical democracy?

As noted above, Sant and Hanley's (2018) study of FBV represents an application of ideas from 'radical democracy' to the sphere of civic nationalist education. They proceed from a theoretical framework which makes space for the possibility that the external political order (in this case the nation) is something that is never defined, complete or resolved but is constantly in the process of being constructed, through hegemonic struggle (Sant & Hanley, 2018, p.322). Other theoretical

tools drawn from the sphere of 'radical democracy', which also view the political order in contingent, unstable and volatile terms, might be helpful in opening up further questions in relation to FBV. Specifically, I want to suggest three ways in which insights from 'radical democracy' might help to add to the theoretical analysis of FBV.

Along with Laclau, Mouffe (2005) has argued for a radically altered view of democracy based on "the creation of a vibrant, 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation, where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted" (2005, p. 3). Mouffe (2005) stresses that an agonistic public sphere would be founded on the democratic principles of liberty and equality but would simultaneously allow for disagreement over interpretation of these values. For Mouffe, these values are not fixed or universal values but are themselves subject to contestation. Meanwhile, Rancière, whose work has also been characterised as belonging to the field of 'radical democracy', characterises democracy as a disruptive and dynamic movement that ruptures the existing political order, leaving traces of equality in its wake (Rancière, 2006). For Rancière, political change happens when those who are excluded from playing a full role in the government of a community claim their equality with those who do, thereby expanding the public sphere and supplementing the range of political subjectivities already visible. He refers to disputes between striking workers and their masters in nineteenth century France (Rancière, 1992), the civil rights movement in the USA and revolutionary declarations on the rights of woman (Rancière, 2006) as examples. For Rancière such moments are also aesthetic, since they disrupt the 'distribution of the sensible' causing a shift in what is 'sayable, doable and visible' (2004, p. 13).

Firstly, insights from the application of CRT and post-colonial theory to FBV have highlighted the contradictions inherent in a policy that purports to promote democracy, while simultaneously undermining that democracy and denying freedom, equality and security to certain sections of the population (Lander, 2016; Winter & Mills, 2020). For Rancière, such contradictions in declarative governmental statements about democratic rights provide important opportunities for political action. He refers to 'syllogisms' (2006; 1992) that can be brought into play to force the expansion of the public sphere

and the creation of supplementary political subjectivities. For example, Rancière argues that it was the contradiction inherent in the constitution of the USA, which claimed equality for all while denying that equality to African Americans via state laws, that the civil rights movement brought into play, creating new political subjectivities and leaving traces of equality in its wake (2006, p.61). Similar contradictions within FBV, as an instance of education policy, might also be brought into play to expand the equality and freedom it purports to promote.

Secondly, insights from Foucauldian analysis have highlighted the ways in which FBV exerts power over teachers but also how teachers resist the securitising logic of FBV through critical work in classrooms, sometimes involving 'agonistics' (Farrell, 2016). Mouffe's concept of 'agonism' as the contestation between radically opposed political projects, and even between competing interpretations of liberty and equality, have the potential to strengthen such insights. Framing educational spaces as the site of agonistic contestation over differing and sometimes competing values could be one critical and creative response to FBV.

Thirdly, insights from political theory, as applied to FBV, have included discussions of the possibilities inherent in FBV for democratic education, despite its securitising origins. Such work has tended to adopt an understanding of democratic education as a process of 'learning for' or 'learning from' democracy (Biesta, 2006). McDonnell (2014) has combined Rancière's (2006) insights into democracy with Biesta's (2010; 2006) approach to democratic education as a process of *learning from* experiences of democracy in everyday life. Viewed through the lens of Rancière's writing, democratic learning can be understood as learning from significant moments of rupture in the existing political order, moments that also have an aesthetic impact in terms of what become visible, sayable and doable (McDonnell, 2014). When applied to FBV, this perspective suggests further questions for future research, including, for example, to what extent does FBV allow for learning from disruptive moments of democracy that pupils encounter in their everyday lives – both within and outside school?

8. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have outlined some theoretical perspectives that have been brought to bear on FBV, as an instance of civic nationalist education. This outline is neither comprehensive nor definitive but highlights some of the key theoretical tools available to researchers in this area. These include combinations of CRT, post-colonial theory and Foucauldian analysis, theories of national identity and political community addition, and theories of religion, secularism and values. In addition, I have offered some suggestions as to where theories of 'radical democracy' might help to supplement, strengthen and extend analysis of this policy area. These suggestions relate to extensions of the first two combinations of theoretical perspectives outlined above. With regard to the third set of theoretical perspectives (theories of religion, secularism and values), I would simply remark that this is an important but, as yet, relatively under-researched aspect of FBV. Further studies addressing the role of FBV within the broader nexus of values education policy would be a welcome addition to the field.

9. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

10. Open Access Policy

This journal provides immediate open access to its content with no submission or publications fees. This journal article is published under the following Creative Commons Licence:



This licence allows others to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to this article (and other works in this journal), and/or to use them for any other lawful purpose in accordance with the licence.

PRISM is also indexed in the world largest open-access database: DOAJ (the [Directory of Open Access Journals](https://www.doaj.org/)). DOAJ is a community-curated online

directory that indexes and provides access to high quality, open access, peer-reviewed journals.



11. References

- Amsler, S. S. (2015). *The education of radical democracy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Biesta, G. J. (2015). *Beyond learning: Democratic education for a human future*. London: Routledge.
- Crawford, C. E. (2017). Promoting 'fundamental British values' in schools: a critical race perspective. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 37(2), 197-204.
- DfE [Department for Education] (2014). *Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-fundamental-british-values-through-smsc>
- DfE [Department for Education] (2011). *Teachers' standards*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665520/Teachers_Standards.pdf
- Elton-Chalcraft, S., Lander, V., Revell, L., Warner, D., & Whitworth, L. (2017). To promote, or not to promote fundamental British values? Teachers' standards, diversity and teacher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(1), 29-48.
- Farrell, F. (2016). 'Why all of a sudden do we need to teach fundamental British values?' A critical investigation of religious education student teacher positioning within a policy discourse of discipline and control. *Journal of Education for teaching*, 42(3), 280-297.
- Farrell, F., & Lander, V. (2019). "We're not British values teachers are we?": Muslim teachers' subjectivity and the governmentality of unease. *Educational Review*, 71(4), 466-482.

- Healy, M. (2019). Belonging, social cohesion and fundamental British values. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 67(4), 423-438.
- Home Office (2011). *Prevent Strategy*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-strategy-2011>
- Kapoor, N. (2013). The advancement of racial neoliberalism in Britain. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(6), 1028-1046.
- Lander, V. (2016). Introduction to fundamental British values. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42(3), 247-279.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. London and New York: Routledge.
- McDonnell, J. (2014). Reimagining the Role of Art in the Relationship between Democracy and Education. *Educational philosophy and theory*, 46(1), 46-58.
- McGhee, D., & Zhang, S. (2017). Nurturing resilient future citizens through value consistency vs. the retreat from multiculturalism and securitisation in the promotion of British values in schools in the UK. *Citizenship studies*, 21(8), 937-950.
- Panjwani, F. (2016). Towards an overlapping consensus: Muslim teachers' views on fundamental British values. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42(3), 329-340.
- Rancière, J. (2006). *Hatred of Democracy*. London and New York: Verso.
- Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Continuum.
- Rancière, J. (1992). *On the shores of politics*. London and New York: Verso.
- Revell, L., & Bryan, H. (2016). Calibrating fundamental British values: how head teachers are approaching appraisal in the light of the Teachers' Standards 2012, Prevent and the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, 2015. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42(3), 341-353.
- Sant, E., & Hanley, C. (2018). Political assumptions underlying pedagogies of national education: The case of student teachers teaching 'British values' in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(2), 319-337.
- Vincent, C. (2019). Cohesion, citizenship and coherence: Schools' responses to the British values policy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(1), 17-32.
- Vincent, C. (2018). Civic virtue and values teaching in a 'post-secular' world. *Theory and Research in Education*, 16(2), 226-243.
- Winter, C., & Mills, C. (2020). The psy-security-curriculum ensemble: British values curriculum policy in English schools. *Journal of Education Policy*, 35(1), 46-67.