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Teaching liberal values: The case of promoting 'British values' in schools

Introduction

Since 2014, all schools in England have been required to “promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” (Department for Education (DfE), 2014b). This policy initially appears to be about patriotism and promoting British national pride. Many schools have interpreted the policy in this way, with activities including ‘pie week’, dressing up as the Royal Family, and eating fish and chips in the playground under Union bunting. Indeed recently, under Boris Johnson’s leadership, the drive to promote ‘British values’ has focused more on patriotism than on liberal values. For example, in June 2021, the Government endorsed ‘One Britain One Nation Day’, encouraging school children to sing a patriotic anthem (Woolcock, Grylls and Ellery, 2021). Yet when we look into the background of the British values policy, as we will do in the next section, we see that this focus on patriotism misinterprets the primary objective of the policy, which was to respond to the threat of terrorism. The core thought behind the policy is that this threat is reduced by teaching children respect, tolerance and other liberal democratic values. The policy is also part of a wider citizenship agenda aimed at stabilising the liberal state by encouraging future citizens to comply with and support liberal democratic institutions. It is in light of these aims that I analyse the policy in this paper; I do not engage with the question of whether it is acceptable to promote patriotism in schools.

In what follows, I analyse the British values policy from the perspective of the two main positions in contemporary liberal theory, comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism. I highlight in what ways comprehensive and political liberal defences of the policy are unsatisfactory, before briefly sketching a possible alternative position – ‘thin comprehensive liberalism’ – and discussing its potential for justifying a substantive education in liberal values.

In light of this theoretical perspective, I suggest some ways that the existing British values policy might be amended in practice so as to bring it more in line with the liberal ideal.¹

The 'British values' policy

England's Department for Education requires that

“Schools should promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.”

(DfE, 2014b, p.5)

These values are to be promoted as part of the overall school ethos, as well as across the curriculum. Schools typically promote the values in classroom displays, whole-school assemblies, and form time (time at the start of the day during registration), as well as through specific curriculum subjects such as Religious Education and History.

Ofsted, the government body that inspects schools in England, assesses schools to check that they are promoting the values. Several schools have had their Ofsted status downgraded as a result of failing in this requirement. (This has significance for the school's future: parents may decide not to send their children to the school, and it may be forced to change to 'academy status' to allow for easier intervention by officials.)

The British values policy has been marketed by the Government as part of a citizenship agenda that aims for young people to “become valuable and fully rounded members of society”, who “leave school fully prepared for life in modern Britain (DfE, 2014a). It is, according to the Ofsted Chief Inspector, part of “a real civic education” (Spielman, 2017). But when we look at the social and political context that led to the policy, we see that its primary motivation was to respond to, and protect against, the perceived threat of Islamic extremism. In the years leading up to the policy, there was acute concern over increases in terrorist violence, school children leaving to fight for ISIS in Syria, having been radicalised in-country, and with the so-called 'Trojan Horse Affair', an alleged plot to takeover and 'Islamicise' Birmingham schools. Indeed, the policy cannot be understood in isolation from Prevent, a branch of the Government's counter-terrorism and deradicalization strategy. It is in a Prevent policy document that the British values are first listed in the form adopted by the 2014 policy, as part of the definition of extremism. 'Extremism' is defined as “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values” (HM Government, 2011, p.107).

¹ I give a fuller analysis of both the British values policy and thin comprehensive liberalism in my forthcoming book (Easton, forthcoming).

Schools have been viewed as key to the implementation of Prevent. Teachers are to look out for evidence of extremist views and identify to the school's designated Prevent Lead those children 'at risk of extremism'. Schools are also seen to have a role in developing children's resilience to extremism:

“Schools ... can also build pupils' resilience to radicalisation by promoting fundamental British values and enabling them to challenge extremist views.”

(DfE, 2015)

This idea that promoting liberal values helps protect against extremism was endorsed by David Cameron, the Prime Minister under whose leadership the policy was introduced. In a 2011 speech, Cameron identified “ideology” as the cause of terrorism and blamed a “hands off”, “passive tolerance” for failing to counter this ideology. He proposed as a remedy “a much more active, muscular liberalism”, arguing that “a genuinely liberal country ... believes in certain values and actively promotes them” (Cameron, 2011). Thus the thought process behind the British values policy seems to be something like the following: Extremist ideology – defined as opposition to liberal values – is the cause of terrorism. Extremist ideology can be countered by promoting British values, and so schools ought to promote these values as part of the fight against terrorism.

The policy has been controversial. For example, many have questioned why the values are referred to as 'British', with some teachers arguing that the language used is unhelpfully exclusionary (e.g. Busher et al., 2017). Since the British values guidance document does not prescribe particular content nor dictate where in school life the values should be taught, schools have sought to fulfil the requirement in a variety of ways. However, research by Carol Vincent suggests that the most common response by schools has been to 're-package' a school's existing activities so as to accommodate the new policy (Vincent, 2019, p.23). Schools taking this approach audit existing activities and then emphasise these in relevant policy documents, to demonstrate to potential inspectors that the school promotes British values.

Further controversy has arisen as a result of the way that Ofsted have sometimes interpreted 'British values', and there have been multiple clashes with faith schools. For example, Ofsted inspectors apparently downgraded a private Orthodox Jewish school for failing to teach 'British values' because it did not teach about homosexuality and gender reassignment (Rudgard, 2017). In spite of the ongoing controversy, the latest Ofsted Inspection Framework remains unchanged in terms of how it will inspect British values. Schools are assessed on pupils' “acceptance of and engagement with the fundamental British values” (Ofsted, 2019).

In light of the above summary, we can see that the British values policy has two core, inter-related objectives. First, to “strengthen the barriers to extremism” so as to reduce the threat of terrorist violence, and second, to promote respect and tolerance amongst citizens (DfE, 2014a). Whilst the values are described as ‘British’, what the policy in fact gives is an (incomplete) list of liberal values. These values are contested within the multicultural society in which the policy applies. Is this policy of promoting liberal values, with the aims just described, legitimate?

Problems with existing liberal justifications

Following John Rawls (1987) and Charles Larmore (1990), a distinction is often made between comprehensive and political forms of liberalism. Comprehensive liberals permit more substantive values to be invoked as justifications for political principles and/or policies. That is, they allow *perfectionist* justifications – justifications that some people might reasonably reject. In contrast, political liberalism aims to be freestanding of controversial conceptions of the good. Legitimate political interventions have ‘public’ justifications, sometimes understood as ‘neutral’ justifications or justifications that cannot reasonably be rejected. In what follows, I analyse the British values policy from both comprehensive and political liberal perspectives. Whilst the policy is justifiable from both perspectives, both justifications face difficulties that map onto real-world, practical issues with the policy.

Comprehensive liberal approaches

From a comprehensive liberal perspective, the state ought to promote true values to children, to help secure their wellbeing (by the children themselves, as well as others, holding true beliefs about what is of value). Whilst there is disagreement amongst comprehensive liberals over what is of value, most comprehensive liberals do agree that the so-called ‘British values’ are indeed important values. The comprehensive liberal will be comfortable with these values being promoted in schools, provided this is done in a way that is consistent with the development of autonomy (i.e. not by indoctrinatory methods), autonomy being a value held in common amongst different comprehensive liberals. One example of a thinker who might embrace this position is Tim Fowler. Fowler (2020, p.93) argues that “the design of social institutions should promote, as far as possible, ... socially liberal views”, because acceptance of these views contributes to human flourishing.

The DfE document outlining the British values says that schools should “further tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions by enabling students to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures” (DfE, 2014b, p.5). This emphasis on tolerance and, in particular, on appreciating diversity, echoes some comprehensive liberal views on education. For example, Bruce Ackerman (1980, p.159) sees education as a “great sphere”,

where students land at one point but are then encouraged to “explore the globe”, learning about a diversity of cultural and religious views.

Moreover, the Conservative party’s ‘muscular liberalism’ has sometimes been interpreted as a move back from political liberalism to comprehensive liberalism (e.g. Clycq and Levrau, 2017, p.154; Joppke, 2014, p.293). Actively promoting certain liberal values, rather than attempting to remain neutral between different values, was the emphasis of Cameron’s approach, exemplified in the British values policy. The British values policy might therefore be seen as arising from a comprehensive liberal approach.

Concerns with comprehensive liberalism have been well-discussed, and come from various directions. Some argue that the position rings of hypocrisy: The comprehensive liberal claims to be committed to allowing a variety of conceptions of the good, yet at the same time they endorse policy that pulls children towards a homogenous set of values. Others question how a policy-maker can be confident that they have landed upon the correct set of values. How can the state be sure that these are indeed true values, and that believing in these values will contribute to the well-being of citizens?

Arguably the most serious concern with comprehensive liberalism is *moral* rather than epistemological. This concern is that when policy is made on the basis of non-neutral justifications, this fails to show adequate respect to those citizens who reasonably reject these justifications. Why think that perfectionist policy disrespects citizens? Arguably being coerced by policy that is justified by reasons one rejects is oppressive; power is only exercised legitimately when it is non-oppressive. Additionally, we might think that perfectionist policy denigrates those who do not subscribe to the conception of the good that justifies the policy and makes these individuals feel inferior. It “puts those people at a disadvantage, suggesting that they are less worthy than other citizens, and in effect, not treating them as fully equal ends in themselves” (Nussbaum, 2011, p.22). So, perfectionist policy might also pull against liberal commitments to equality.

These theoretical worries are exemplified in the real-world case of the British values policy. Conservative Muslims, a minority group who already felt stigmatised and marginalised, were the main target of the policy. It is therefore understandable that Muslims have, in general, perceived the British values policy negatively. Indeed, some thinkers have argued that the “‘particularist’ construal” of ‘British values’ exacerbates an ‘us’ and ‘them’ dynamic (Holmwood

and O'Toole, 2018, pp.29-30). This negative perception is further exacerbated by the links with Prevent.²

The British values policy is specifically designed to root out beliefs that are, for many Muslims, core to their identity. For example, for some conservative Muslims, their beliefs about the separate gender roles of men and women and the immorality of homosexual sex stem from a deeply held belief in the infallibility of the Qur'an. One might see the British values policy as a way of publicly affirming that Muslim beliefs are not to be taken seriously and ought to be disregarded in favour of the beliefs and values of the more powerful. This equality-based concern is exacerbated by the educational context of this policy: Schools ought to be affirming, welcoming places for *all* children, regardless of their background. Evidence suggests that ensuring this might help contribute to equal educational opportunity; minority groups are more likely to achieve academically when they have a positive identification with their own ethnic group (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018, p.135; Telles and Ortiz, 2008). For these reasons, we might worry that a comprehensive liberal approach, where the state identifies what it considers to be true values and then pushes these onto those with less power, is highly objectionable.

Political liberal approaches

Political liberalism seeks to avoid these criticisms and secure respect for persons by only allowing policies that are publically justified. Some political liberals understand the public justification requirement as meaning that policies must have *neutral* justifications – justifications that cannot reasonably be rejected. One might initially think that political liberals would reject the British values policy as illegitimate. Given that disagreement exists over the values promoted by the policy, it is hard to find a public justification for the policy. Some have characterised political liberalism as being fundamentally about “toleration of diversity” (Fernández, 2010, p.282), and indeed one of Rawls's motivations in writing *Political Liberalism* was to show how a just society that accommodates religious diversity is possible (Rawls, 2005, p.xxxviii). Rawls says that political liberalism requires “far less” than comprehensive liberalism in terms of children's education (2005, p.199), suggesting a far less substantive values education. In the words of Christian Fernández, “a school system aligned with political liberalism ... is a system that carefully avoids getting in the way of diversity and of parents' rights to care for their children's upbringing” (Fernández, 2010, p.284).

² In their national survey of school and college staff, Busher et al. (2017) found concern about Prevent leading to increased stigmatisation of Muslim students. Half of their 225 survey respondents said that the Prevent duty has made Muslim students more likely or considerably more likely to feel stigmatised, with this figure rising to 76% when only the views of black and minority ethnic respondents were taken into consideration (Busher et al., 2017, p.54).

Yet political liberalism's supposed toleration of diversity does not mean that *no* values can be promoted in schools, and the British values policy may fulfil the political liberal requirement of being neutrally justifiable. The objectives underlying the policy – protecting citizens from violence and promoting respect and tolerance amongst citizens – cannot be reasonably rejected. Reasonable citizens wish to be protected against violence and to live amongst people who respect and tolerate each other. Being protected from violence enables you to live whatever kind of life you value, and so is a neutral justification.

Indeed, some political liberals have defended views on civic education that roughly line up with the British values policy (e.g. Clayton, 2006; Macedo, 1995; Quong, 2011). For example, Jonathan Quong (2011) has argued that the state ought to intervene where children are being educated into beliefs that pull against the liberal order. Such actions are part of the state's legitimate "containment" of "unreasonable doctrines", the spread of which "undermines the normative stability of the liberal democratic system" (p.302). Even where no action is expected to follow from these illiberal beliefs, and even though people are entitled to hold these beliefs, Quong's view is that the state can legitimately act to prevent their spread (p.303). One is reminded here of David Cameron's concern with rooting out even non-violent forms of extremism, a major motivation behind the British values policy.

Given the availability of neutral justifications for the British values policy, considered in the abstract, this policy may be justifiable from a political liberal perspective. But to properly evaluate the policy, we also need to consider how the policy has in fact been implemented in practice.

In practice, the 'British values' have been filled out in a controversial way. Take the value of 'tolerance'. Whilst political theorists have tended to understand tolerance as requiring mere non-interference, the DfE document talks of tolerance as involving children learning to 'appreciate' other cultures (DfE, 2014b, p.5). Resources utilised by schools to teach the British values often understand tolerance as requiring not having negative beliefs about others in the first place. For example, one book in a "British Values Series" aimed at 11 to 14 year olds understands tolerance as "not being prejudiced", for example, not holding negative beliefs about immigrants or people of different races (Yeates, 2017). These are quite specific, controversial understandings of tolerance, that go beyond what is required for a socially cohesive, safe society where people are able to live out their own lives, free from interference. In order to have a positive (or neutral) attitude towards other religions, one needs to hold some quite specific, controversial beliefs, such as the belief that it is hard to find answers to ultimate questions (questions such as where to find the source of true revelation and how to interpret the ethical demands made in revelation). If, in contrast, you think that any attentive person will

recognise the Qur'an as the final revelation of God, then it makes sense to disapprove of those who fail to follow the commands issued there. For these reasons, teaching tolerance, in the sense sometimes implied by the British values policy and its implementation in schools, is not neutrally justified.

Additionally, Ofsted have sometimes indicated that teaching British values requires teaching certain, controversial content, including homosexuality and gender reassignment (Rudgard, 2017). This content is much harder to justify from a political liberal perspective. Even if we discount from consideration sectarian objections (such as those based in revelation), some people still object to teaching children about homosexuality. For example, parents protesting in Birmingham, England in the summer of 2019 objected to primary-age children being introduced to same-sex relationships on the basis that this was “too young” and involved the “sexualisation of children” (Duffin, 2019).

Perhaps these are not reasonable objections. In the case just discussed, children were, at least on paper, merely being introduced to the existence of gay relationships.³ This is consistent with the less controversial understanding of tolerance – tolerance as non-interference. Similarly, a recent case of Ofsted downgrading a school claiming that it “undermined British values” is consistent with the less controversial understanding of tolerance. The school had allowed its library to stock a book calling for homosexuals to be punished (BBC, 2021); it was not simply that (for example) the books expressed the viewpoint that homosexuality is sinful. This kind of state intervention, aimed at preventing children from being taught that homosexuality ought to be punished, is therefore consistent with political liberalism, for it promotes the less controversial, ‘neutral’ value of tolerance as non-interference.⁴

However, there are at least two reasons to remain concerned about political liberalism’s ability to justify a satisfactory version of the British values policy.

First, one might think that liberalism requires that thicker, more controversial values are taught than simply tolerance as non-interference. For example, one might want people to not

³ In fact, the ‘No Outsiders’ programme (the source of the controversy) was probably going beyond simply introducing children to the existence of such relationships, aiming to *celebrate* the diversity of relationships that exist. Andrew Moffat, the programme’s author, has now published a new version of the programme, which changes the terminology from “celebrating” to “accepting” LGBT individuals (Lightfoot, 2020).

⁴ Some political liberals might interpret the case differently. To accurately ‘diagnose’ the case, really we need to know more about the context, to allow us to assess whether the presence of the book in the library amounts to children being ‘taught’ that homosexuality ought to be punished. If, for example, other books are more easily available that present alternative views, or the book is being used in teaching to illustrate a view that is inconsistent with respecting every individual’s political equality, then perhaps the downgrading of the school is not acceptable from the perspective of political liberalism. Thanks to Julian Culp for pressing me on my interpretation of this example.

disapprove of mixed race marriages, rather than merely to allow them. One might want children to be taught that women are not confined by their ‘nature’ to domestic roles, rather than merely that women should be allowed to occupy such roles in a liberal-democratic state. And one might, as the compulsory Relationships Education curriculum in England now requires, want children to be taught that LGBT relationships are “loving, healthy” relationships (DfE, 2020), rather than merely that those engaging in such relationships ought not to be punished. Those who agree with these examples will be inclined towards the view that liberalism requires that children are taught not merely to accept *political* equality (the belief that everyone is entitled to equal respect and the same moral, political and legal rights), but also to accept *substantive* equality (beliefs about equality that are controversial even amongst reasonable citizens who accept political equality, such as the examples just given). Yet political liberalism’s neutrality requirement makes it hard to justify teaching that is aimed at children acquiring beliefs in substantive equality.

Second, even if we think that it is not within the remit of state education to teach these more substantive values, and even if tolerance is taught to students in the less controversial sense of non-interference, teachers will still have to engage their students in conversations about right and wrong, and thus they still need to think about what, if any, specific values ought to be promoted. No plausible view of tolerance suggests that we should tolerate every view and action; it is right to disapprove of some views and actions, and it will be right to interfere in some cases. Establishing what these cases are requires reflecting on the cases themselves: Do the reasons in favour of tolerance (e.g. peaceful co-existence, respect for other’s autonomy, etc.) outweigh the bad that we attribute to the potential object of toleration?

Failing to emphasise that tolerance has boundaries and that some things ought not to be tolerated may lead to students thinking that all views are equal and should be accepted – a view I refer to as “umbrella tolerance” (Easton et al., 2019).⁵ Whilst it is possible for schools to teach that tolerance is required in all cases where there is moral controversy, there are still going to be borderline cases – cases where it is not clear whether or not something ought to be seen as controversial. Guidance for educators is needed on how to resolve these questions of when to teach directly (with the aim of students coming to hold these beliefs) and when to teach something as controversial.⁶ But answering these questions requires wading in on matters of controversy in a way that political liberalism seeks to avoid.

⁵ My experiences teaching in secondary schools, as well as my own research, suggest that students have a proclivity to think that being tolerant means ‘accepting all views as equal’ (see Easton, n.d.; Easton, 2019; Easton et al., 2019). For the view that there is “rampant relativism and non-judgementalism” amongst university students, see Law (2006, p.77).

⁶ On the distinction between directive and non-directive teaching, see Hand (2018, p.37).

Thin comprehensive liberalism

The above discussion suggests that political liberalism cannot justify the British values policy as it has been implemented in practice. In practice, the values that have been taught have been thicker, more substantive values than political liberalism can allow. This is something that many liberals will view as a positive move. And indeed, some filling out of the values is required if children are to be taught a sensible notion of tolerance as in some way bounded. Comprehensive liberalism is able to justify a substantive, 'filled in' set of values, but comprehensive liberal views often fail to show respect for persons. In the British values case, endorsing controversial interpretations of values such as tolerance, in deliberate opposition to the values of conservative Muslims, antagonises relations with an already stigmatised minority group.

One possibility left open is to embrace a different position from 'mainstream' comprehensive or political liberalism. One such position that I will now sketch is 'thin comprehensive liberalism', which falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of liberal positions. Thin comprehensive liberalism seeks to show respect for persons by aiming to only introduce policy that has minimally controversial justifications. However, unlike political liberalism, which has a strict constraint on legitimate policy that its justifications must be 'neutral', it is not a necessary condition of legitimate policy that it be minimally controversial. Policy that is non-neutral (in the sense that might concern some political liberals) may be introduced in order to protect the liberty, equality and rights of citizens, or to protect the well-being of children. Let me unpack this a little more by comparing this position to political liberalism.

Because of its concern with neutrality, political liberals have generally shied away from saying much about children's well-being. Especially in educational contexts, concern with children is restricted to civic matters; indeed Rawls (2005, p. 199) is explicit that "Society's concern with [children's] education lies in their role as future citizens..." In contrast, thin comprehensive liberalism allows that justifications for policy may draw on a thin (in the sense of minimally controversial) theory of well-being, one that is agreed upon across a wide range of conceptions of the good. For example, a thin theory of well-being might include mental health, being able to enjoy recreational activities, having the option of romantic relationships, and the possibility of sexual satisfaction (Nussbaum, 2000).⁷

⁷ In Easton (2021), I argue that Rawls's notion of primary goods can deliver a thin theory of well-being, and so actually political liberals should not have shied away from education's role in promoting well-being. But if that is so, what distinguishes thin comprehensive liberalism from what we might call 'thick political liberalism'? They are close positions, but one difference is that the thin comprehensive liberal need not insist that reasons are 'publically justifiable', and can draw on a thicker, more controversial understanding of equality than political liberalism allows.

Political liberalism works to protect the liberty, equality and rights of citizens. It does so through a restrictive definition of 'reasonable citizens'. Roughly, reasonable citizens are those who respect the rights and interests of others (e.g. Clayton and Stevens, 2018, p.71). However, this still limits what 'progressive' policies the political liberal state can put in place. In terms of implications for education, political liberalism requires only that we teach children political equality, not substantive equality. In contrast, thin comprehensive liberalism allows that policy sometimes be based on more substantive notions of equality. It recognises that beliefs pulling against substantive equality can affect the political equality of some citizens, and can damage children's well-being and future liberty. This might point towards teaching children that all races are equal (in the substantive sense of none being inherently superior to the others) and that women need not be confined to domestic roles.

We should expect that policies concerning children, such as education policies, need to be more perfectionist (i.e. more controversial amongst reasonable conceptions of the good) than policies that concern only adults. There are two main reasons for this. First, the morally salient features which demand that we attempt to minimise controversiality in the case of adults are present to a lesser extent in the case of children. For example, it is not clear that respect for persons requires that we do not introduce perfectionist policy; since children are not yet fully rational agents, we need not worry that it fails to give due weight to their standing as free, equal and rational agents. And since children do not yet have a fully-formed identity that being made to follow a particular policy will rub up against, they are less likely to have their integrity damaged, and less likely to perceive perfectionist policy as sending a message that the group to which they belong is inferior. Second, because of their malleability and vulnerability (Fowler, 2020), we have special obligations to children to make policy that helps protect their wellbeing and future liberty, equality and rights. "Children have weighty interests in both well-being and future agency" and this means that "children have a right to be treated paternalistically" (Brighouse and Swift, 2014, p.70). Since children's current and future well-being, and their future equality and liberty is better ensured where they are taught some more controversial beliefs than the political liberal would allow – such as that women's 'nature' does not restrict them to the domestic sphere – schools should teach these more controversial beliefs.

To summarise, thin comprehensive liberalism has in common with political liberalism a concern with minimising controversiality. It seeks to draw on values that are the subject of wide agreement amongst reasonable conceptions of the good. However, it allows this concern to be overridden. Unlike political liberalism, it does not claim 'neutrality', and it seeks to be honest and open about the values being relied upon when justifying policy.

Revising the 'British values' policy

What are the implications of the above discussion for the British values policy? All the approaches discussed suggest that teaching liberal values, in the abstract, is justifiable. However, unlike political liberalism, thin comprehensive liberalism can justify a more substantive values education, one that many liberals will find desirable. Thin comprehensive liberalism provides a way of thinking about how to decide specific content: Does teaching this content make an important contribution to the well-being of children? Is it necessary to ensure their future liberty, equality and rights?

One implication is that equality ought to be added to the list of abstract 'British values'. But the above discussion might also imply that some more controversial interpretations of 'British values', including some that have been endorsed by schools and / or Ofsted, are justified. For example, thin comprehensive liberalism might justify teaching the controversial view that LGBT relationships are loving, healthy relationships, on the basis that this helps ensure children's wellbeing by (for example) making it possible for them to access loving relationships and have adequate mental health.⁸ Teaching aimed at countering the belief that LGBT relationships are sinful might also be necessary to fully secure the political equality of LGBT individuals.

Note that thin comprehensive liberalism does not simply justify teaching whatever set of beliefs the liberal might hold. For example, whereas the perfectionist liberal Fowler (2020, p.81) indicates that the just society would teach young people a general permissiveness about sexual choices, including that polyamorous relationships are entirely permissible, a thin comprehensive liberal who themselves believes in sexual permissiveness and in the moral permissibility of polyamorous relationships need not agree with Fowler. There may be differences between the LGBT case and the polyamory case that are salient for the thin comprehensive liberal. For example, it is not clear that disapproval of polyamorous relationships leads to the harm of loneliness in the way that disapproval of LGBT relationships does, since polyamorous individuals can still access the life-good of relationships.

Thin comprehensive liberalism justifies directive teaching of some controversial beliefs (that is, teaching aimed at students coming to hold these beliefs). However, establishing a particular aim does not imply a particular teaching method. I suggest that when it comes to teaching both abstract liberal values and their more specific, more controversial interpretations, a 'light-touch', discussion-based teaching method is usually appropriate. There are various

⁸ In Easton (2021) I expand on how the belief that LGBT relations are sinful can lead to LGBT individuals refraining from romantic relationships. See also Fowler (2020, p.82).

pedagogical, moral, political and philosophical reasons to favour this.⁹ Here I will mention just three.

First, schools ought to be inclusive places for all children, including those from conservative religious backgrounds. For this reason, teachers ought not to publicly declare that conservative religious beliefs are wrong. Rather, reasons can be presented in support of, for example, the view that LGBT relationships can be loving, healthy forms of relationship, without proclaiming the falsity of statements in the Bible. Having a discussion about the issue, even if it is a steered rather than open discussion (Easton, 2018b), means that minority conservative groups are less likely to feel excluded and are able to participate in education on an equal standing.

This leads to a second, pragmatic reason in favour of discussion: This approach is less likely to prompt resistance and result in children being withdrawn from state education. It gives students opportunities to express conservative viewpoints and have these acknowledged, even if counter-arguments to these views are also discussed.

Third, there are strong pedagogical and political reasons to have a discussion-based approach that simultaneously promotes critical thinking. As well as teaching important civic skills more generally, critical thinking skills may provide some immunity to extremism (one of the main motivators of the British values policy). Citizens skilled in critical thinking may be more capable of examining the ‘facts’ presented to them via social media and questioning the powerful, persuasive message of ISIS (Hobbs, 2017). The DfE’s report *Teaching approaches that help to build resilience to extremism among young people* emphasised the importance of critical thinking. The most effective teaching approaches were non-prescriptive, giving room for young people to develop their own views (DfE, 2011, p.78), created supportive settings for discussion of difficult topics (p.106), and aimed to develop the “harder skills” of critical thinking such as the ability to interrogate evidence (p.68). All this points towards an approach that allows students to debate and discuss values, rather than have them dictated to them.

In addition to guiding discussion of arguments for and against certain values, teachers ought to model an attitude of epistemic humility to their students. That is, they should demonstrate that they are humble about their abilities as a knower and that they are willing to consider the possibility that they are wrong about the belief that they are leading students towards. If teachers and students are able to adopt this attitude, even discussions conducted with a particular aim in mind are never fully ‘closed’.

⁹ For more on the value of critical discussion to children’s civic education, see Easton (2018b). I also give an extended case for the value of discussing the ‘British values’ in my forthcoming book (Easton, forthcoming).

What is being suggested here does, admittedly, have an air of paradox. Schools take a stand, adopting policy that is not claimed to be neutral. But at the same time, teachers are to avoid dogmatically insisting that a particular view is right, are to allow discussion, and ought to model epistemic humility. I do not think that this position is incoherent. Whilst the classroom discussions surrounding liberal values are steered discussions, with one aim being for students to adopt these values, these are also genuine discussions where students are encouraged to question the values. This is a similar approach to that taken by at least some Church of England schools: one aim of these schools is for students to come to hold Anglican beliefs, but this is not forced upon the children, who are made aware of other options. Children from other religions attend these schools; these children are not made to feel excluded, and no attempt is made to convert them. Large numbers of people who attend these schools do not go on to adopt Anglicanism, just as in our case of teaching liberal values, there is the (likely) possibility of at least some people deciding to reject these values.

My emphasis on discussion leads to two further implications for how the British values policy might be amended.

First, values education should be part of a distinct and compulsory curriculum subject, taught by trained experts, rather than part of a whole-school approach (as in the current policy). In her research investigating how teaching professionals view the British values policy, Carol Vincent noted a problematic dearth of time for discussion:

“one point of common agreement across the interviewees was the low status and limited lesson time available for discussion and debate with pupils. Thus, critical reflection, engagement and discussion of the values were not generally foregrounded.”

(Vincent, 2018, p.233)

Having a distinct curriculum subject dedicated to discussion of values (and perhaps civic and moral issues) would go some way to addressing this problem.¹⁰

We also need those teaching the values to have relevant expertise: expertise at managing discussion of controversial issues and expert knowledge of the likely issues that will arise. Research indicates that teachers generally lack confidence in handling controversial issues (e.g. Hess and McAvoy, 2015; Oulton et al., 2004), suggesting a need for more training and support for those teaching the values. Teachers also need to possess the right knowledge to be able to steer discussion on relevant topics. In particular, a good level of religious literacy is required. One cannot discuss the hijab without knowing what the Qur'an says about modesty

¹⁰ It might be possible to combine this with a whole-school approach, provided that the values are promoted in school assemblies etc. alongside an understanding that students are allowed to question these values.

or discuss Orthodox Jewish views on homosexuality without understanding their views on Scripture and sin more generally. Even discussions about ostensibly purely political issues will often require engaging in theology, for political disagreements can often stem from theological disputes (Easton, 2018a).

Second, teaching liberal values ought to be separated from counter-extremism policy, for at least three reasons. First, the presentation of teaching British values as a way of countering extremism (DfE, 2015) distracts from the many benefits of citizenship and values education, independently of concerns with violent extremism. Second, the suspicion that many people, especially Muslims, have of Prevent, partially transfers over to suspicion of teaching British values (Busher et al., 2017, p.27). And third, the link with counter-extremism policy makes it hard for classrooms to be places of genuine, exploratory discussion, where students are encouraged to question the values that are being taught to them. In the current context, students may be afraid to voice certain viewpoints for fear of voicing a view that is designated as 'extremist' (Faure-Walker, 2017). Whilst it is beyond the remit of this paper to comment on counter-extremism policy, it is relevant that the current definition of extremism makes mere opposition to liberal values 'extremist'. This means that a student questioning the 'British values' could potentially be reported to the school's Prevent lead by their teacher. This situation makes the honest and genuine discussion that I have been advocating, where students can 'air' their views, very hard. Since the British values policy and Prevent are inextricably linked, one way of resolving the problem might be to scrap the British values policy in its current form, and 're-invent' teaching liberal values as part of a distinct subject such as 'Values Education'.

Conclusion

The policy to promote 'British values' in schools has been controversial, in part because it requires promoting values that are the subject of dispute in multicultural societies. However, considered in the abstract, as a policy to promote liberal values such as tolerance and liberty, this policy is justifiable from both comprehensive and political liberal perspectives. The so-called 'British values' are endorsed by many comprehensive liberals, and promoting these values is consistent with the development of autonomy in children. The values are also justifiable across a wide range of reasonable conceptions of the good and therefore promoting these abstract values is acceptable to a political liberal. In this paper, I bring some much-discussed criticisms of comprehensive and political liberalism to bear on the British values policy, showing how these criticisms map onto real-world, practical worries. Comprehensive liberal approaches fail to show respect for conservative Muslims, the original targets of the policy. Political liberal approaches are unable to justify a substantive values education that

secures the wellbeing and equality of children. Indeed, as soon as we put ‘meat on the bones’ of abstract values such as ‘tolerance’ – especially in the way that Ofsted and many schools have in fact done – these values are no longer neutrally justifiable. In particular, understanding tolerance as requiring a positive attitude to other religions or to LGBT individuals requires beliefs that might be rejected by reasonable citizens.

Adopting an intermediary position such as thin comprehensive liberalism has potential as a way of lessening the force of these criticisms. Whilst this position aims for policy that has minimally controversial justifications, it prioritises policy aimed at protecting the well-being of children and the liberty, equality and rights of citizens. This means that education policy can have perfectionist, controversial justifications. In the case of the British values policy, it indicates how we might fill out the abstract values mentioned in the policy. It may offer some backing for some of the ways that Ofsted and schools have in fact filled out the policy (for example, teaching positive attitudes towards LGBT relationships). Putting it far too simply: children should be taught to believe these things in part because it is good for them.

A number of implications follow for how the British values policy might be revised. First, concrete guidance for schools on appropriate objects of directive teaching needs to be given if teachers are to be confident teaching liberal values. In particular, how are values such as ‘tolerance’ to be understood? Additionally, equality ought to be added to the list of values, understood to include some quite specific ‘socially liberal’ beliefs such as those relating to gender. Discussion should feature prominently as a teaching method. This implies that the current, whole-school approach is inappropriate, since it does not allow for sensitive and genuine discussion. Instead, liberal values ought to be taught as part of a separate subject, by teachers with expertise both in the relevant issues and in managing controversial discussions. One possibility is to have a distinct subject, ‘Values Education’. This would also allow for teaching of liberal values to be detached from counter-extremism policy.

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