

Teaching Standards: A question of values

The recent move to include a link with British values in the national teaching standards is likely to open up a lively and indeed controversial debate. There feels an element of *deja vu* in this. During the 1990s I recall Nick Tate, as head of the then Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), similarly pressing for an embedding of education in a sense of British values. Back in 1995 he opened a public furore about the place of British values in education before moving on to be head teacher of Winchester School. He linked the themes of culture and social cohesion to the idea that the curriculum should foster a sense of British identity, and said it was a mistake to respond to cultural diversity with “some kind of watered down multi-culturalism”.

Reflecting again on this controversy ten years later, Tate (now Director-General of the International School of Geneva) said his call in 1995 to install “a sense of national identity and a common culture as a central thread in the curriculum for all pupils whatever their cultural or ethical background” would pass unnoticed in 2005. However this strident exponent of promoting British culture in schools, particularly in subjects such as history, added: “Eventually I ceased to be shocked when someone got up and told me at a conference that the national curriculum was ‘racist’ because of its emphasis on English history and literature” and added “it is not surprising, given such attitudes, that we now find substantial numbers of Britons with no sense of British identity” (Tate, 2005).

So it is clear that this issue of the place of British values in the education system is not a new one, but it still comes as something of a shock and concern to see the Tate agenda resurfacing again in 2012 in the recommendations of the review group commissioned by the Government to review standards for teaching. What is a concern is that this appears to have slipped in under the radar so that many in the profession appear unaware of the proposal or of its implications. Our lead article by Hazel Bryan (‘Setting the British standard?’) valuably sets out the details of the review group’s recommendations and unpacks the issues involved.

On the face of it what is being proposed may seem anodyne and laudable enough. The Government has accepted the review’s recommendation to ‘set a clear expectation that teachers must not undermine fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’. The list of exemplars of British values given here may feel unchallengeable; after all how could we question that teachers should not undermine individual liberty or tolerance of those with different faiths? However, on deeper reflection many will have considerable reservations about this development and will see it as raising a number of concerns.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental concerns is that the focus on British values is being made in the context of national teaching standards. The expectation to uphold British values follows a statement that the standards ‘will set a clear and unambiguous benchmark for teachers.’ It is difficult to see how something as sensitive (and indeed unclear) as values, can be benchmarked in this way. Instead many teachers will see the practice of such values as being something that is implicitly part of being a professional and consider that this has always been the case.

Closely associated with the notion of values being made explicit within the new teaching standards is the proposal to make this a feature of the performance management process. It is difficult to see not only how this might be desirable but also how it could be practically done.

Of course the most telling critique of the proposal relates to the naïve assumption about what “fundamental British values” might mean. Although some exemplars are given, there are presumably others which are not specified; how are teachers and schools to deduce what these are – not least to ensure they are upholding them as part of their performance management? The examples that are given also set all sorts of hares chasing. Is it the case that democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, however laudable, are peculiarly British? Rather, are these not universal values that have been a crucial and integrated part of the liberal concept of education that has prevailed in this country, and others, for well over a century, and have helped shaped the professional behaviour of teachers? If so, one wonders why they are now being enshrined within the standards framework with their British badging. One has to add, in the current context, that a universal value that the British has always laid claim to is fairness. Where is the fairness in Mr Gove’s refusal to reconsider English GCSE results after the goal posts were moved? It shows how values like fairness can be so easily spun in the interest of the powerful.

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