Difficult conversations around British values

Fundamental British Values are not simply ‘tea, the Queen and fish and chips’. So how can further education promote awareness of this key aspect of the Prevent agenda and an essential part of the Common Inspection Framework (2015)?

By Mary Kitchener and Lisa Lawlor

Fundamental British Values (FBVs) are officially defined as “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs” (ETF, 2016: 1).

It is not uncommon in education to have a national narrative (Jerome and Clemitshaw, 2012). In fact Reid et al (2009) found that national narratives were prevalent in many countries.

Yet as two practitioners delivering initial teacher education, we had recognised a disconnection between the expectations of the government and the reality of teaching in further education. Far from being “…at the heart of the provider's work” (HM Government, 2015: 40), we found FBVs formed a minefield of confusion and tension for practitioners.

The ETF’s Research Development Fellowship (RDF) Programme enabled us to conduct a small-scale action research project to establish current practice.

We found that practitioners were engaging with FBVs, but not making explicit reference to them. Some participants reported concerns when engaging students in conversations about FBVs, conversations they did not feel professionally competent to handle. One likened promoting FBVs to opening a can of worms.

On one hand, it was reassuring that practitioners recognise the often challenging nature of the values to be promoted. On the other, however, it was clear that much current classroom practice is insufficient to ensure legislative compliance.

We promoted the term ‘foregrounding’ of FBVs, to heighten the awareness between classroom activities and FBVs, and to empower them to make the link explicit in class.

PARLIAMENTARY CPD

Improving our own underpinning knowledge of FBVs, as teacher educators, led to us developing an online resource repository for activities to help support practitioners’ knowledge.

One valuable resource is the House of Parliament Education Service. It runs a three-day ‘Teacher Institute’ course and a free CPD event for practitioners twice a year (for more information see parliament.uk/education). Furthermore, we arranged a day trip to the Houses of Parliament for trainee teachers from Swindon College to see democracy in action. From this intervention, practitioners have arranged similar trips for their students to attend.

One of the activities trialled with trainee teachers was a ‘Community of Inquiry’. Based on the work of Matthew Lipman (Lipman, 2003), it engages students in authentic conversations and encourages critical thinking skills.

We selected a comedy clip as a stimulus (see link below) and, from this, students came up with questions to share and voted on one question they would all discuss.

They chose the question: “Do Britons have issues relating to superiority; therefore should teachers be focusing on what is wrong with Britain rather than promoting British Values?”

The discussion led to a valuable critique of British values and critically highlighted language use that needed to be explored, for example, the use of the term ‘Muslim terrorists’ instead of ‘terrorists’.

This research emphasises the coupling of the Prevent agenda, particularly concerning radicalisation, to the roles and responsibilities of the teacher within the legislation. This has created tensions for teachers and, often, a feeling of dread rather than empowerment when it comes to having challenging conversations around FBVs.

Yet if we, as teachers, do not have those conversations with our students, who will?

The impact of the project will be seen in the forthcoming Ofsted inspection due in 2016/17.

REFERENCES

- View Tez Ilyas on British values (strong language): goo.gl/1qPzOW