



The 5 British Values – Explained For Students

By Chris Drew (PhD) / October 23, 2022

In 2014, the UK Government created five fundamental values that it proclaimed were the unifying values that were fundamental to British society and cohesion.



The values were designed to balance freedom of thought, expression and choice in a liberal society with the need to maintain a safe and secure society.

The [five British values](#) are:

- Democracy
- Rule of law
- Individual liberty

- Mutual respect
- Tolerance



British Values Definition

The five British Values are democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith. These are the 5 fundamental values that have been developed by the [UK Government](#) in an attempt to create social unity and prevent extremism.

How To Teach The 5 Fundamental Values In The Classroom

The [Government guidance](#) on the implementation of the fundamental values framework provides both examples of what students should know, and what to teach.

Examples of what students should know include:

- How to influence society through lawful democratic participation;
- That the freedom to religion, including the freedom of others to hold faiths other than your own, is enshrined in British law;
- That people of diverse faiths should all be respected and not be discriminated against as a result of their religious affiliations;
- That it is everyone's responsibility to identify and challenge discrimination wherever it occurs.

Examples of [teaching strategies](#) include:



- A critical analysis of democracy, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it contrasts to other forms of governance;
- Implementation of small-scale democratic processes within schools that focus on [childhood citizenship](#). This might include allowing students to have a voice on matters of importance to them and how their school is run;
- Hold mock elections, including mock election debates, through which students can voice their differences of opinion in respectful and tolerant ways.

Related: [27 Universal Morals Examples](#)

Why Do The 5 Values Exist? | (The Prevent Strategy, 2011)

The 5 Values were first outlined in the Prevent strategy of 2011.

The prevent Strategy's purpose was to quell extremism. Both white nationalist and Islamic extremism were listed as threats to national unity within the Prevent Strategy document.

Within the document, extremism is defined as:

“vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs.”



Within the Prevent strategy, teaching of the 5 values is not made compulsory.

Rather, educators are asked to:

- Respect the 5 fundamental values;
- Report students who appear to be radicalized, as defined by contravention of those 5 values.

Later, in 2014, it would become compulsory to actively implement the 5 fundamental values outlined in this definition in British schools. The move to compulsory implementation is outlined below.

Why Are British Values Compulsory In Schools? (The Trojan Horse Affair, 2013-14)

The 5 values were a response by the UK Government to fears of Islamisation of British Schools. In particular, they were a response to the moral panic caused by the release of a fake letter titled 'Operation Trojan Horse'. The letter supposedly unveiled a plot for the takeover of Birmingham school curricula by religious extremists.

Here is the complete timeline of events:

November 2013: Operation Trojan Horse Letter

The values were created in response to rising fear of religious extremist thought in English schools, in particular the Trojan Horse Affair in Birmingham.

In November 2013, an anonymous person send Birmingham City Council a photocopy of a letter. It was claimed the letter was found on a boss's desk.



The letter outlined plans to stealthily take over the operations of local Birmingham schools and implement an extreme Islamist curriculum.

The letter outlined five steps to the plan:

1. Find schools where the majority of students are from a Muslim background;
2. Identify a small group of parents within those schools who will agitate from within for an Islamic curriculum;
3. Select staff members sympathetic to hard-line Islamism to cause trouble among staff resistant to any moves;
4. Run an anonymous campaign aimed at getting the head teacher to resign. This would be done through letters to local parents and community members.

The letter also claimed that this operation had already succeeded at several schools in the Birmingham area, which were listed in the letter.

January 2014: News Reaches The Media

In December 2013, the 'Operation Trojan Horse' letter was handed over to the Department for Education and Home Office.

The letter was subsequently declared a fake by investigators.

Nonetheless, the letter was also leaked to the media in January 2014. When the media got their hands on it, the story grew very quickly with headlines like:



- **The Daily Mail:** “Revealed: Islamist plot dubbed ‘Trojan Horse’ to replace teachers in Birmingham schools with radicals”
- **The Birmingham Mail:** “Council leader calls for fightback on ‘schools jihad plot’”

Mid-2014: Snap OFSTED Inspections

OFSTED, the office in charge of monitoring schools’ competencies and compliance to laws, conducted snap inspections of 21 schools in Birmingham. Some of the schools had previously been rated ‘Outstanding’ by OFSTED. However, after the inspections, 5 schools were placed in the lowest rated category: “Special Measures”, indicating that the schools are inadequate.

Among the charges leveled against the schools were:

- Sex education classes were inadequate;
- Schools failed to provide sufficient education on religions other than Islam;
- Some classes were found to have been segregated according to gender;
- Girls and boys were discouraged from socializing with one another; and
- Teachers who voiced opposition to changes were found to have been bullied into compliance.

Furthermore, according to [The Guardian](#), there was general agreement on the facts by all parties involved in the school inspections. These facts included:



- Schools in East Birmingham made strides to employ more Muslim educators and governors in order to align the teachers' values with parents' values;
- Prayer rooms and calls to prayer were introduced in some schools;
- Emphasis on creative arts, drama and music was dropped and preference was placed on basic literacy and numeracy.

Following this affair, education minister Michael Gove released statutory guidance insisting that democratic values be actively taught in schools – see below.

Do Schools Have To Teach British Values?

In response to the Trojan Horse Affair and its aftermath, [statutory guidance](#) was released on 27 November 2014 requiring schools to put in place a clear action plan to implement the 5 values into their schools. While previously schools were required to 'respect' those values, from that day forward schools needed to clearly demonstrate how the values would be implemented in their school community.

Criticisms Of The British Values | 'Moral Panic' Argument

There have been some criticisms of the move to implementing 5 national values in schools, including:

- **The 'Moral Panic' Argument:** The Trojan Horse Affair was widely found to have been discredited. The letter was believed to have been a hoax.



Suspicious leaking of the letter to the media led to widespread moral panic at something that had little basis in fact, and which blew up to the extent that teaching of the 5 values are now compulsory in all schools

- **The ‘Surveillance’ Argument:** While white supremacy is mentioned in the Prevent strategy, it may be a thinly-veiled attempt at hiding the fact that this strategy is directly designed to increase surveillance on Muslim students and pressure them into assimilating.
- **The ‘Libertarian’ Argument:** The idea that there should be a list of government-mandated national values possibly flies in the face of liberalism, freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Forcing people to hold certain values is profoundly undemocratic.

Final Thoughts

The 5 fundamental British values are a controversial set of values. The controversy is linked as much to the reason behind their development (fear of Islamic extremism) as it is of their substance. The values themselves appear to represent the small-l liberalism that modern Britain, and indeed modern Europe, is founded upon. Nonetheless, there are some tensions within the framework. For example, does insisting that people hold certain values contravene their rights to freedom of thought and expression?

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