

THE CONVERSATION

Why you won't see Gove-style proposals on curbing school extremism in Scotland

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Gove's proposals won't apply in Scotland. Wasi Daniju, CC BY-SA

Michael Gove's recent proposal that English schools must "actively promote British values" caused a predictable storm of merriment on Twitter. He made his statement earlier this month ahead of the launch of a consultation this week proposing new regulations requiring state schools to comply with the same principles as free schools and academies, and allowing Ofsted to intervene where schools failed to meet these standards.

The government's definition of British values as "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs" is pretty uncontroversial. So is the reminder that schools, like the rest of us, must comply with the 2010 Equality Act.

None of this is particularly new. The proposed regulations will require schools to "actively promote" these "fundamental values" and not just respect them, but the authorities' power to

intervene is specifically restricted to a limited range of scenarios.

Also new, I suppose, is the controversy which Gove stoked up by linking the original announcement to the furore over allegations that Muslim extremists were influencing some Birmingham schools. But I'm not convinced this will make a big difference to the relationship between schools and the authorities in practice. And despite the furore the controversy is probably being overstated – it's not far from what was recommended by the Labour-era Crick report, for example.

Nonetheless it does raise some interesting and challenging issues for teachers and governors in England's schools, perhaps particularly around the issue of **gender discrimination**. It also poses the question of what all this might mean for schools in other parts of the UK.

What happens north of the border

This issue is particularly pertinent in Scotland, where national identities and values inevitably play a significant role in the independence debate. Scottish education has always been distinctive, and has continued to evolve in its own ways since devolution. One important manifestation of this was the decision in 2002 to undertake a major reform of the entire school curriculum, with the appointment of a review group which reported two years later.

The 2004 proposals identified four key purposes of education as those that enable young people to become, "successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors." These principal goals, rather than specific skills and knowledge, were to form the core around which schools and colleges should organise learning.

This outline was subsequently developed by Education Scotland, the agency responsible for quality and curriculum, to encompass sets of attributes and capabilities for each of the four principal goals.

In the case of "responsible citizens", the attributes are "respect for others" and "commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life". The five capabilities include, "develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it"; and "understand different beliefs and customs."

The Scottish government has also promoted greater attention to Scottish issues across education. It has accepted a number of recommendations from its **working group on Scottish studies**, which argues that learning about Scotland should be embedded right across the curriculum from early years to senior phase. It is also promoting teaching of Gaelic and Scots in state schools.

Ideas about education and national values are inevitably surfacing in the independence debate. The Scottish government's **white paper on independence** describes education as, "also about who we are as a nation", a claim it makes in relation to the new curriculum. In relation to higher education, it defends free tuition as an expression of "the values that underpin our education system." More generally, the white paper speaks of the rule of law, democracy and liberty as national values, as well as the "shared values of fairness and opportunity, and promoting prosperity and social cohesion."

Different emphasis

So far, so similar. In practice, Scottish values and British values turn out to mean more or less comparable things for those politicians who try to promote them. We might spot a greater emphasis on egalitarianism in the Scottish texts, and an anxiety about ethnic and religious segregation in the English ones, but the positive values are largely the same; only the adjectives — British or Scottish — differ.

What is striking about the Scottish policy texts, though, is their lack of attention to ethnic and religious diversity. This partly reflects the nature of Scottish nationalism today, which usually describes itself as civic rather than ethnic, but also mirrors the relatively small scale of ethnic minority communities in Scottish society. Remember that **despite some talk** about an Islamic faith school in Glasgow a few years ago, there is **still only one** in Scotland. Even **the reported appearance** of a Scottish Muslim in a jihadist recruitment video this week has so far provoked little comment from Scotland's political leaders.

So perhaps we should not be surprised that the debate over citizenship and education has taken a slightly different course north of the border. The different tone of the debate in Scotland is such that it is unlikely that the Scottish government will come under pressure to introduce anything equivalent here, regardless of what effect you believe the changes will have in England. But more striking than the differences is the extent to which policy developers in both countries have adopted similar perspectives on the values that should underpin the school curriculum.

Survey data suggest that **most Britons see these values** as more important to national identity than being born in Britain or having British ancestry. It seems reasonable to conclude that very few people will object to the idea of schools promoting democracy, liberty and the rule of law, as well as tolerance and respect for different religions and views. But politicians should note that the survey findings also show that most Britons believe that our political institutions fail to live up to their expectations. That problem is not one that can be solved by tinkering with the school curriculum.



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