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# Political assumptions underlying pedagogies of national education: The case of student teachers teaching ‘British values’ in England

Edda Sant\* and Chris Hanley

*Faculty of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK*

Teacher education in England now requires that student teachers follow practices that do not undermine “fundamental British values” where these practices are assessed against a set of ethics and behaviour standards. This paper examines the political assumptions underlying pedagogical interpretations about the education of national identities through documenting how a group of student teachers uphold the institutional demand of promoting fundamental British Values in relation to their discursive constructions of Britishness. Empirical data exemplifies potential political understandings guiding educational practices. Analysis suggests that pedagogies of national education are mediated by (i) educators’ understandings of the nation as an essential entity or a social construct and (ii) their understanding of national identities as being open or closed to competing interpretations. The paper concludes by examining implications of different political and pedagogical positions for practice and research.

**Keywords:** British values; National identities; Teacher Education; Citizenship Education; Democratic Education

## Introduction

The education of national identities has regained prominence in contemporary educational policy and practices in a number of countries, where the national form of citizenship education has been privileged (Chong *et al.*, 2016). In 2009, 35 of the 38 countries investigated in the International Civics and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) reported the development of national identity as a key aim of citizenship education (Schulz *et al.*, 2010). This is the case in England where, since 2014, teachers across all subjects have been required to promote ‘fundamental British values’—defined as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs (Department for Education, 2013).

For a long time, educational researchers have been analysing the possible consequences of this emphasis on the national dimension of citizenship education. Processes of inclusion and exclusion derived from nationally orientated education have been critically examined in a number of contexts (e.g. Chua & Sim, 2014; Sant, 2017). In the specific case of the UK, Prime Minister Gordon Brown started a new

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\*Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Brooks Building, 53 Bonsall Street, Manchester M15 6GX, UK. E-mail: e.sant@mmu.ac.uk; Twitter: @E\_Sant.

debate on ‘Britishness’ in 2006 and since then several studies have examined the educational implications of promoting Britishness (e.g. Osler, 2008; Hand & Pearce, 2009; Jerome & Clemitshaw, 2012). For some, ‘civic patriotism’ as encountered in ‘British values’ is a legitimate civic aim of education for citizenship in England (Peterson, 2013). Others, whilst emphasising the racialising implications of the guidelines—embedded within the UK government’s ‘Prevent’ anti-terrorism strategy (e.g. Elton-Chalcraft *et al.*, 2016; Farrell, 2016; Revell & Bryan, 2016)—have acknowledged the problematic situation faced by student teachers who, regardless of their views, are expected to uphold the guidelines in their teaching practices to achieve recognition as teachers (Maylor, 2016).

This article examines how student teachers in England respond to the demands of educating a national citizenry, through the lens of social theories of the nation and national identities. More specifically, the research is concerned with analysing the *political understandings* that influence their *pedagogical interpretations*. Our analysis is conducted with reference to data derived from an empirical project. We compare the different ways in which members of a group of English PGCE student teachers uphold the institutional demands of promoting fundamental British values, in reference to both their views on Britishness and their pedagogical intentions. We uncover potential political assumptions in the pedagogical intentions of avoiding, rejecting, promoting or problematising national identities.

The article begins by discussing key theory and research on national identities. This is followed by an outline of possible pedagogical approaches teachers can take when educating about national identities. After a brief overview of the methods used, these pedagogical approaches are used to structure our results. A discussion of the possible links between political understandings and pedagogical practices follows. We conclude by identifying the possible ways in which the links between the pedagogical and the political can shed additional light on the theoretical and practical discussion of British values and, more generally, discussion of the education of national identities.

## **Nations and national identities**

This article is concerned with citizenship education from a cross-curricular perspective. Citizenship is defined here in relation to both a legal status and an identity (Sant *et al.*, 2016), and this article focuses specifically on the latter. There are competing understandings of the nature and functions of ‘identities’<sup>1</sup> (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). We take as our starting point the definition of identities as processes of identification of human subjects with particular ways of organising the social space (external political orders) such as the nation (Laclau & Zac, 1994). This definition, nevertheless, requires certain close examination of the different understandings of this external political order and processes of identification with it. In this section, we focus on analysing these different approaches that will later be used as theoretical tools to analyse our data.

### *The nation as external political order*

The nation, as external political order, has been widely discussed in social science theory and research. According to Mock (2011), the earliest paradigm to study

nationhood was nationalism itself. Those drawing on nationalism or other primordialist assumptions believed that the 'key to the nature, power, and incidence of nations and nationalism lies in the rootedness of the nation in kinship, ethnicity, and the genetic bases of human existence' (Smith, 2000, p. 4). For primordialists, the 'nation', as an organic community, is driven by the same nepotistic drives as other smaller communities such as clans or families (Smith, 2000). The nation is an essential category of the social fabric.

In contrast, modernists understand the nation as an 'invention' (Gellner, 2008, p. 55), an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 12) or an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1996, p. 14). In this view, there is nothing essentialist in the nation; the idea of nationhood is rather an ideological construct resulting from the processes of modernisation in Western Europe (Smith, 2000). In between primordialists and modernists, ethno-symbolists understand the nation as a human population sharing a common territory, history and, more importantly, culture (Smith, 2000). What makes nationalism powerful, ethno-symbolists argue, is not its ability to invent traditions, but to rediscover and reinterpret pre-existing myths, memories and symbols (Smith, 2000). The nation is neither real nor invented, but socially and constantly (re-)constructed.

The nation is not only controversial in terms of its possible modalities of existence, but also in terms of its 'content'. Social scientists have extensively analysed whether nations are understood as civic, cultural or ethnic in nature. In brief, the civic approach mainly (but not exclusively) draws upon the modernist paradigm and understands the nation as defined by a common body of law (Muro, 2005). The civic nation is understood here as 'a political structure, the state, which can be summarized as the set of institutions, rights, and rules that preside over the political life of the community' (Bruter, 2004, p. 190). In contrast, analytical tools deriving from the primordialist and the ethno-symbolist paradigms are often integrated in the political literature through the notion of ethnic/cultural nationhood. Ethnic/cultural approaches highlight the ethnic, ethical, linguistic, religious or cultural factors of the national community (Bruter, 2004; Muro, 2005). Whereas those who discuss ethnic nations tend to emphasise bloodlines and common ancestry (Tilley *et al.*, 2004), those using the term 'cultural nation' focus on cultural, social and ethical similarities (Bruter, 2004). It is worth noting that researchers emphasise that nations never present themselves as being entirely civic, ethnic or cultural (Keating, 2001). These categories, rather than being descriptions of any given nation, need to be understood as abstract analytical tools (Keating, 2001) and will be used as such.

### *Processes of identification with the nation*

Not only is there academic controversy about nationhood as external order, but also over modes of identification with this external order. Theory and research on national identities unanimously accepts that the nation is always defined as limited (see e.g. Anderson, 1996; Mock, 2011). By displacing any possible internal contradictions into the 'Other', the nation creates its 'popular unity' (Laclau, 1990, p. 32). Processes of identification with the nation thus always imply the exclusion of a non-national 'Other'. The underlying point of disagreement is whether the antagonistic character

of these processes of identification arise from the nature of the external order—the nation—or from the nature of the processes of identification themselves. Many studies examining the discursive construction of British values understand that the antagonism associated with national identities is a product of the nature of the external order—the nation. Such researchers advocate more inclusive communities (Elton-Chalcraft *et al.*, 2016), but it is also possible that the antagonistic character of national identities is a consequence of the nature of the processes of identification themselves. Identities are understood here to be relational—in equivalence and in opposition—because they are created by power and through the processes of inclusion and exclusion this power generates (Laclau, 1990). In other words, there is an assumption that all processes of identification will inevitably generate processes of exclusion. Antagonism is considered here to be inherent in the social fabric, and the question moves from the terrain of consensual inclusion to the terrain of antagonistic democracy.

In this latter understanding, what matters is not only exclusions emerging from each particular understanding of the nation but, more importantly, whether there are opportunities for citizens to participate in the definition of this nation. In more theoretical terms, the questions here are whether citizen-subjects can negotiate the way the social space is organised (i.e. the political order) and whether there are opportunities for competing understandings of this order (e.g. the nation) to struggle for hegemony (Laclau, 2007). In the case we examine here, this approach generates an additional set of questions. Is Britishness, as encountered in the policy documentation, open to competing understandings? And more particularly, in our case, are those who are expected to interpret the institutional guidelines—the student teachers—open to different understandings? Previous research suggests that Britishness as defined in British values is open to multiple interpretations (Arthur, 2015; Elton-Chalcraft *et al.*, 2016; Farrell, 2016). Here, we examine whether student teachers interpret Britishness with such openness.

### **Pedagogical approaches**

This article investigates whether political understandings of nationhood and national identities mediate English student teachers' pedagogical decisions. The particular question arises since all teachers, regardless of their specialism, need to 'promote fundamental British values' through different 'actions' such as 'include in suitable parts of the curriculum (. . .) advantages and disadvantages of democracy' and 'ensure that all pupils within the school have a voice that is listened to' (Department for Education, 2014a, p. 6). The promotion of British values here is defined from a cross-curricular perspective, incorporating both the 'cognitive' (i.e. knowledge, skills) and 'affective' (i.e. values, practices) domains of citizenship education (Peterson, 2011). All student teachers are therefore expected to contribute at least to the affective domain through their pedagogical practices, creating an open classroom climate and a democratic school ethos (Schultz *et al.*, 2010).

Theory and research in citizenship education has identified different pedagogical approaches for the education of national identities (e.g. Westheimer, 2006; Merry, 2009; Hand & Pearce, 2011; Chua & Sim, 2014). These approaches are not exclusive

to questions of national identity—they can also be applied more widely to citizenship, religious and social studies education (Jackson, 2004; Davies *et al.*, 2005; Hess, 2009)—and are likely to contribute to both the cognitive and the affective domain (Schulz *et al.*, 2010). Here, following Hand and Pearce's (2009) examination of patriotism, we identify four potential approaches: avoidance, promotion, rejection and problematisation.

Student teachers can *avoid* the topic of national identities by simply 'skirting around [it] in lessons and steering discussion into safer territory when it is raised by students' (Hand & Pearce, 2009, p. 453). However, this strategy might not be desirable: at some point in their lives, young people will experience issues related to national identities. It would seem advisable to foster in school at least a minimal understanding of these issues (Hand & Pearce, 2009). A second option could be the *active promotion* of national identities. Certain common bounds are necessary for the survival of any community (Olssen, 2004; Merry, 2009) and schools are, therefore, expected to perform their socialising role and contribute to integrate students 'into the social histories and narratives of their communities' (Peterson, 2011, p. 31). Against this approach, some researchers have asserted that '[t]he discourse of civic nationalism which purports to accommodate plurality (and herein lies the contradiction) serves to exclude the very members of its society that are constructed as the terrorist "Other"' (Lander, 2016, p. 276). Student teachers could also *reject* educating national identities (Hand & Pearce, 2009). They could take a 'critical stance' while 'generally refusing to promote simple or simplistic messages on behalf of politicians' (Jerome & Clemitshaw, 2012, p. 39). Here, however, student teachers might simply be asserting 'personal views rather than societal shared values' (Peterson, 2011, p. 29) and this will trigger other ethical considerations (Biesta, 2016). A fourth approach is *problematizing* national identities. Student teachers can take 'a stance of neutrality, inviting discussion' and 'presenting it as an open question or controversial issue' (Hand & Pearce, 2009, p. 454) (Hess, 2009; Merry, 2009). Here, students are simultaneously negotiating their own identities whilst fulfilling the role of a facilitator presenting multiple possibilities (Biesta, 2016). For Hand and Pearce (2009), problematising national identities is the only viable option and, therefore, it is the one they advocate. But whether or not this 'stance of neutrality' is possible is also open to question (Peterson, 2011).

We take these four approaches to structure our analysis. We investigate whether these different pedagogical practices correspond, in the case of student teachers, to different political understandings about the nation—as external order—and associated processes of identification. It is our purpose to uncover possible political assumptions underlying these pedagogical approaches.

## **Methods**

This empirical project took place within a one-year course of teacher education for postgraduates at an English university. The course formed the basis of an interpretivist longitudinal study. In line with interpretivist research, we assumed our reality to be socially constructed, with the researcher and the subject being at the centre of the research process (Denzin, 2001). However, in contrast with more inductive

approaches, we considered that qualitative analysis would benefit from data being contrasted with previous theory (Ezzy, 2002). Thus, the contrasts between theory, participants' views (empirical data) and our own views (as researchers, educators and political subjects) were constant and productive.

The research team included two individuals (the authors of this article) with different professional and personal positions. Sant is a white non-British female without professional or personal links to the participants. Hanley is a white British male and the teacher educator of the participants. The study focused on a small group of 11 students, 2 male and 9 female, all having studied English Literature or English Language as undergraduates. Students' self-identifications and their participation in the research activities are described in Table 1.

Data was gathered at six points, from October 2015 to June 2016. The UK European Union (EU) membership referendum (the so-called 'Brexit' referendum, in which approximately 52% of electors voted to leave the EU) took place in June 2016 and debates around Britishness were particularly forceful during this time. At the start of the course and again at the finish, the 11 student teachers were asked for passages of writing explaining their ideas about Britishness and their pedagogical responses to the Teachers' Standards' requirement to uphold British values. Interviews (a total of eight, with an average time of 45 minutes) were also held by Sant, Hanley or both together with individual participants and with groups at the beginning and end of the course. The interviews were semi-structured, with participants encouraged to explore their reactions to British values and associated issues.

Non-participant observations also took place throughout the course. Researchers conducted observations in two university-based sessions. At the first, early in the course, some pedagogical implications of British values were discussed as part of students' developing familiarity with forthcoming professional expectations. The second session was run about half-way through the year, on a larger scale to include different cohorts of students. It highlighted the 'Prevent' agenda (the UK government's strategy against terrorism) as a key dimension of student teachers' work alongside British values.

During two extended teaching placements, observations took place in school locations. Student teachers taught English lessons covering different curricular content (e.g. literature, drama, the uses and contexts of language). The lessons did not explicitly address the cognitive domain of British values but were, in line with the Teachers' Standards, supposed implicitly to reflect and promote British values through their objectives, lesson 'content', choices of activity, pedagogies, etc. It is worth noting here that students were working within a recently revised National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2014b), with increased emphasis on 'classic' English writers such as William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. Field notes, pertaining to the participants' work with school pupils, were taken by researchers and associated tutors.

Data was analysed using a normative content analysis derived from our theoretical framework. First, we examined the pedagogical approaches proposed by students in the passages of writing and the individual and group interviews. Following Hand and Pearce's research (2009), students were classified into four different groups. Second, we used the same framework to analyse the observation field notes, examining whether student teachers would avoid or encourage other debatable topics and if, in

Table 1. Participants' self-identifications and their participation in data collection strategies

Self-identification	October		November		January		March		May		June	
	Writing	Individual interviews	School observations	University observations	University observations	Group interview	School observations	Writing	Individual interviews	Group interview	Writing	Individual interviews
Becky	✓		✓	✓	✓						✓	
Sarah	✓		✓	✓	✓						✓	
and												
British												
Holly	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Carla	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	
and												
British												
Lorna	✓		✓	✓	✓							
Donna	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		
James	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		
Gara	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		
Amanda	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		
Monica	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		
Alastair	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		
Somali												



doing so, they would promote, reject or problematise particular views. Next, we investigated participants' political understandings in relation to our theoretical framework. The analysis was guided by two questions: (i) how do student teachers understand nationhood? and (ii) how do students understand processes of identification with the nation? We then contrasted students' pedagogical proposals on promoting British values with their political understandings and their teaching practices as observed in the placements.

Limitations to the empirical project need to be acknowledged. The size and the contextualised nature of the project does not allow us to claim the statistical representativeness of the students' political and pedagogical views. Our position as researchers and educators might also generate additional questions about our own political and pedagogical commitments. Further, our aim is to explore potential relations between political assumptions and pedagogical decisions, and we do not contemplate other potential understandings (about the nature of teaching and learning, their roles as educators, etc.) that might mediate these practices. However, we want to emphasise that our aim in this article is not to look for generalisations about how teachers' beliefs map onto classroom practices, but rather to examine how social theory might help us to reveal potential underlying political assumptions guiding our own or our students' educational practices.

## Results

Here we present our results organised in relation to the pedagogical approaches our participants proposed: avoidance, promotion, rejection and problematisation. In each case, we describe students' teaching practices as observed in teaching placements, their pedagogical proposals on 'promoting fundamental British values' and discuss the potential political understandings of the students supporting each pedagogical approach.

### *Avoidance*

Several students were confused or troubled by the notion of British values, but Becky was the only participant who made clear that she would avoid discussions on British values and Britishness in her class. At the beginning of the course, she explained that she would promote British values by '*highlighting traditional English texts*'. During her observed lesson in school, Becky did not deviate from her pre-planned subject content. Her pedagogical approach was rather teacher-centred, not providing much scope for students to debate or challenge her presentation of the topic and looking for particular 'right' answers to all posed questions. We read this as an avoidance of dialogue, through which teachers can create and maintain a democratic ethos in class. At the end of the PGCE, she explained that promoting British values was not of interest to her. Although the term 'avoidance' was not explicitly mentioned, our analysis suggests that Becky would avoid the issue if possible.

Becky's pedagogical approach might initially appear surprising, considering her political understandings. Becky described Britishness as '*being born here*', '*speaking English and having the same morals*' and as a '*community working together. Tea.*

*Monarchy*'. Her views on the common bounds bringing British people together included an amalgam of ethnic ('being born' and 'speaking English'), cultural ('tea', 'having the same morals') and civic aspects ('monarchy'). We interpret Becky's beliefs on the nature of the nation as fitting with primordialist approaches. Becky seems to relate Britishness to tradition, kinship and, to a certain extent, ethnicity.

Becky implicitly acknowledged two different discourses on Britishness. She defined herself as a 'traditional British citizen' in what can be interpreted as a discourse opposed to 'non-traditional' British citizens. In Becky's case, there is an acknowledgement of different discourses but also, implicitly, a hierarchy of these. Traditional Britishness seems to be implicitly related to the ethnic and cultural aspects of the common bounds she identifies—she defines herself as a 'traditional British citizen' because '*I was born here*'—whereas non-traditional Britishness can be associated with the civic aspects. Traditional Britishness, in this respect, seems to be somehow more exclusive.

This exclusivity, in our analysis, could shed light on the reasons why Becky appears not to be interested in promoting British values. If traditional British identity is explained through birth, then the role of schools becomes blurred and to an extent, unnecessary. Those born 'here' already constitute part of this identity—regardless of the way they are educated—whereas those who are not are excluded by birth. If this is the criteria, there is nothing schools can do to challenge this dichotomy. The role of schools here is not a socialising one but is, at most, to highlight who is and who is not a traditional British citizen.

### *Promotion*

Although most of our participants implicitly explained at some point during the course how they would promote British values in response to the Teachers' Standards, five of them seem to be particularly committed to this task. In the passages of writing, students explained that they would use humour and stereotypes to discuss Britishness (Sarah), use a poem to introduce the topic of nationality (Lorna), look at the different communities constituting the UK (Holly) and would ask students to read a text and identify what British values were promoted (Carla). Data from observations appears to be consistent with students' proposals. In a lesson on school placement observed by a researcher, Amanda focused on passages from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). The selection of this text illustrates a recent governmental change of emphasis in the National Curriculum document that steers school-based learning in English towards 'high quality, challenging, classic' literature (Department for Education, 2014b, p. 5). The researcher noted Amanda's confidence in reading the text and setting tasks aimed at particular pedagogic goals, but also that she did not allow pupils sufficient time to think and respond for themselves. We read this as indicative of a primarily cognitive approach to the subject (through the exchange of information) and a somewhat less 'affective' approach, in which the presuppositions of the text might be explored. *A Christmas Carol* can be understood as being 'particularly British' in its depiction of Victorian morality; pupils might have needed more support to make connections between the ethical world of the text and their own judgements as readers. Amanda appeared more comfortable promoting a particular

point of view than problematising it. She can be seen as promoting the values of the text (redemption and renewal through suffering) while promoting a cooperative dynamic, but not sufficiently promoting the students' voice or perspective in the lesson.

Besides engaging with different pedagogical strategies, what Amanda and these other student teachers had in common was an understanding that British values—as defined in the Teachers' Standards—had to be promoted. In this respect, they accepted that it was part of their role as teachers to promote processes of identification with the principles outlined in the Teachers' Standards: 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'.

An examination of these participants' written or spoken accounts suggests that, for these student teachers, the British nation was also defined in relation to a set of cultural and civic common bounds in which students could be socialised. Whereas the ethnic aspect only appeared once when Sarah defined Britishness as a conjunction of '*Being born in Britain, silly traditions that we have*', the cultural aspects were particularly significant. For instance, all students talked about having 'tea', 'being friendly' and 'being polite'. The civic aspects of Britishness were also emphasised in these student teachers' accounts. For instance, Lorna explained that Britishness was about '*Living in any country under British rule and citizenship. England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland etcetera*' and Carla explained that Britishness was about '*Democracy, the right to freedom of speech, opinions and values. The right to your own beliefs. Equality no matter what race, religion, gender or age*'.

National identity, in these participants' views, was essentially constructed as a closed social construct. Besides explicit mention of the different nations under British rule ('England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland etcetera') and the links with tolerance, equality and freedom, there is nothing open in the way these participants approached Britishness. In their accounts, the cultural and civic aspects seem to merge into a single discourse on common bounds integrating cultural stereotypes (e.g. being polite) and the civic values explicitly or implicitly associated with the policy (e.g. freedom of speech). There is no acknowledgement of the existence of competing understandings of the nation in the way Becky, for example, acknowledged 'traditional' and 'non-traditional', nor in any other way.

These uncontroversial and cultural/civic-based understandings are then mirrored by the pedagogical practices these participants propose. Since they define the nation in relation to cultural and civic bounds rather than ethnic ones—as in Becky's case—schools become essential in the promotion of these bounds and teachers become socialising agents of this culture. But this culture is understood as being closed to competing interpretations. For instance, Carla wrote that she would '*Read a British text and look at what British values are promoted*'. Her proposal lies in the assumption of consensual criteria that define a British text and British values. Carla, Amanda and the other participants assumed a closed reading of 'the promotion of British values' and did not acknowledge either the processes of inclusion and exclusion deriving from these readings or the contradiction of these closed interpretations of a nation in which 'democracy' is supposed to be a key feature.

### Rejection

Two of our participants explicitly rejected the promotion of British values. James explained, *'I would never voluntarily teach or "promote" British citizenship. I don't think British citizenship needs promoting – it isn't a commodity'*. Similarly, Donna stated *'I think that this is a restricted and controlled set of requirements that suggest that moral and ethical values are "British" and owned by Britain'*.

Data from observations suggests that both Donna and James were willing to problematise subject-specific content. For instance, in a lesson on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, James initiated a debate in which students were encouraged to voice their opinion and support their points with evidence. James illustrated a particular view of how knowledge is created between teachers and learners (i.e. supported by objective measures such as evidence, rather than the preferences of the teacher or mere transmission of the teacher's point of view). Following an extended period on school placement, in the focus group, Donna explained in an interview:

I think it's important to study like books and novels from different cultures because I learnt more at university through studying like postcolonial writing or American modern drama – it made me understand my culture more by looking at other cultures.

We take this as suggestive of a commitment to knowledge that implicitly resists the ascendancy of English 'classics', whilst recognising that a cultural position is not absolute; learning is an interchange rather than an assimilation of a single perspective. But we also note that even when these participants were explicitly required by one of us—who they could see as their teacher educator and, therefore, as someone in charge of assessing their commitment to the Teachers' Standards—they openly expressed their opposition to the British values guidelines.

Interestingly, the ways in which Donna and James understood Britishness was framed by ethnic and cultural aspects. For James, Britishness was defined in relation to ethnic principles that he did not share. He explained, *'Although I acknowledge that I am British I don't feel particularly patriotic and I don't rank my own heritage above other people's'*. Britishness, for him, was essentially constructed as an ethnic nation that considered itself to be at the top of the heritage hierarchy. In Donna's case, what she disliked were the colonial connotations of the term 'Britishness'. She explained, *'I don't agree with the term "Britishness", when I think of the words "British values", I think of quite . . . a passive . . . colonisation and repression'*. Both participants seem to understand the British national identity as being fixed and rigid. In certain ways, more than anybody else, these two participants defined Britishness in relation to its potential primordialist nature (heritage and colonial past) and, perhaps because of this, they rejected this understanding and the entire notion of Britishness itself.

Behind this rejection lies a critique of the nature of nations and national identities. In line with modernist theorists, both student teachers understood the nation to be a rigid social construct, necessarily generating processes of exclusion and inclusion. Donna made this explicit when she explained in an interview, *'the notion of nationality, as anything more than "where you were born" or "where you live", has the potential to be dangerous because it is a man-made idea that reinforces borders and barriers between people that is unnecessary'*. For James and Donna, it is the national character of national

identities—rather than the potential antagonistic character of identities themselves—that makes nations dangerous. Consequently, they both seem to be more willing to promote alternative forms of citizenship (i.e. local, global), rather than British values, in their teaching practices.

### *Problematizing*

Three of our participants understood the promotion of British values as a space to problematise the notion of Britishness itself. In their written passages, they proposed promoting British values by asking students about their own understandings of Britishness and discussing different ideas related to this. In Monica's terms, she would introduce 'British values', check 'students' awareness' and, more importantly, 'debate'. Our observation data suggests that these student teachers would not only problematise British values, but also pedagogical processes and subject content reflecting these values. Our experiences as teacher educators tell us that in lessons, student teachers often rely on pre-planned patterns of thinking and struggle to adapt when a student comes up with something unexpected, particularly when they feel their authority is being undermined. However, in one of the classroom observations, Alistair had the confidence to create a space for unexpectedness and challenge, enhancing the learning taking place. For example, he asked students to discuss a quote in their exploration of the character of Moriarty from the *Sherlock Holmes* stories. Whilst he did challenge students' statements when these were not sufficiently coherent or well supported, the students felt confident enough to challenge Alistair's ideas and to ask further questions. We regard this as indicative of an inclusive, participative view of knowledge creation and a good development in Alistair's subject-pedagogic expertise, with both cognitive and affective domains present and becoming integrated.

Similarly to the group of students who would promote British values, these three participants described Britishness as a mix of cultural and civic common bounds. For instance, Ciara explained that Britishness involves '*being overly polite, being accepting of other cultures and identities. Britishness is encouraging a diverse community, being open to different cultures*'. In contrast with previous participants, nevertheless, these three student teachers did not integrate these aspects into a single discourse, but they did acknowledge the existence of alternative discourses on Britishness which they did not define hierarchically. Britishness here was understood as an open identity, an empty signifier that allowed the simultaneous existence of multiple discourses. For instance, Alistair explained: '*I don't think there'd be a shared definition for Britishness, I think it's all a personal choice of what Britishness is to you*'.

In these participants' understandings, Britishness is essentially constructed through an ethno-symbolic approach in which some elements of myths of the past are rediscovered in the present. For instance, Monica explained: '*I think Britishness, in its most basic sense, is being British. It has connotations of drinking tea and eating cake, despite the fact that these foodstuffs originate from India*'. What Monica suggests is how a myth from the past (tea and cake) is reinterpreted as part of present discourses on Britishness. In the line of ethno-symbolism, these students do not understand this reinterpretation to be limiting, but rather to be one of the (stable) narratives interacting with more (disruptive) up-to-date understandings. As stated by Alistair, Britishness is '*constantly*

*changing and adding in more (...) acceptance connotations, but constricting it to and interweaving it with the traditional Britishness definition'.*

Problematising, in these students' cases, did not represent taking a neutral stance. 'Kids', Monica explained:

are going to leave school and they're going to become part of society, it's trying to implement just a tolerable society where they can get on and they know the difference between right and wrong, they know how to interact with people from different lives and different situations and different backgrounds and they're not just stuck in like a bubble that is a small area, do you know what I mean?

The nation here is defined as a larger community in which antagonism is a key feature (different lives, different situations, different backgrounds). The nation represents an outside of the 'bubble' area which is, in contrast, understood to be less diverse. In Monica's account, the coexistence in this national community requires certain common bounds that can be educated through school practices.

What makes these student teachers distinctive, nevertheless, is an understanding that these common bounds are flexible—in relation to students' and teachers' interpretations—and can be problematised. For Alistair, there is a fine balance between understanding teaching and learning as a process of negotiation (as he does) and understanding teaching as merely a process of socialising learners. As he explained in an interview, he would not feed his opinion to shape children's ideas but he '*can pose questions; I might be able to say, "Who thinks this is moral?" "Who thinks this is legal?" Well actually it's legal, and if they come up with anything themselves that's entirely up to them (...)* So, there is a fine balance between the two'.

## Discussion

In our study, only Becky suggests that she would avoid the topic of British values if possible. In contrast with our results, Hand and Pearce's research (2011) found that most teachers would be likely to avoid teaching patriotism if possible. We understand this divergence to be explained by two different factors. First, Hand and Pearce's study took place at a time in which no policy explicitly required teaching about patriotism. We, in contrast, required student teachers to discuss 'promoting British values' when they are assessed against a set of Teachers' Standards that include this aspect as part of the ethical code. Second, the difference in both studies can be explained by the nature of the question and the interpretation of the question made by participants. It is to some extent possible to avoid discussing patriotism even if conversations on this topic appear in class (Hand & Pearce, 2009), but when promoting British values, the possibility of avoidance lies, precisely, in the interpretation of 'British values' the student teacher holds. If the student teacher understands British values in relation to what is specified in the guidelines (or more generically in relation to other civic aspects), then citizenship education in its cross-curricula perspective is unavoidable. Teachers can avoid discussing the strengths and weaknesses of democratic systems, but it is difficult to imagine how they could avoid promoting or not promoting tolerance, democracy, etc. in class. Avoidance, as in Becky's case, would necessarily imply the continuance or neglect of these values. In other words, teachers, regardless of

their specialism, might be able to avoid engaging with the cognitive but not with the affective domain of citizenship education (Peterson, 2013). It is only if student teachers discursively construct British values through ethnic aspects that avoidance becomes possible. In our analysis, Becky acknowledges two discourses on Britishness, one of them associated with culture and another associated with ethnicity. In this respect, we wonder whether Becky understands national identity in essentialist terms, as something that one is not educated in but born into, and whether this might explain her avoidance strategy.

Five of our participants manifested their commitment to actively promoting British values. In line with previous research (Elton-Chalcraft *et al.*, 2016), these student teachers reported an uncontroversial understanding of Britishness shaped by an amalgam of cultural and civic aspects that did not allow space for competing interpretations. Elton-Chalcraft *et al.* (2016) express their concerns about how the open nature of the guidelines allow 'stereotypical', 'naïve' and 'unsophisticated' interpretations of Britishness, and suggest that teacher educators and other academics should play a more significant role in helping student teachers and teachers to critically engage with more 'sophisticated' understandings of Britishness. The question is whether this proposal only works on the assumption that there are 'right' and 'sophisticated' (real) and 'non-right' and 'non-sophisticated' (unreal) understandings of Britishness. If, in contrast, we understand Britishness as an empty signifier, then what matters is whether there are spaces for citizens to negotiate its meaning. The five participants who would promote British values appear to be willing to teach what British values are (i.e. cognitive domain) in the same way they would teach any other subject content: by promoting a particular point of view and reflecting upon it. But they appeared not to be aware of the possibility that by narrowing the definition of British values, these democratic negotiating spaces (i.e. affective domain) will be reduced. In this respect, we argue that it is not the *open* nature of Britishness in the guidelines but the *closed* interpretations student teachers might be making of these guidelines that could become problematic.

Two of our participants demonstrated, as others have done before (Jerome & Clemitshaw, 2012), a critical account of the notion of Britishness. Although these student teachers were willing to problematise other topics, giving pupils space to discuss their views, they explicitly rejected discussing British values. In other words, they appeared to be willing to create an open classroom climate, implicitly engaging with the affective domain defined in the British values guidelines [i.e. 'ensure that all pupils within the school have a voice that is listened to' (Department for Education, 2014a, p. 6)] only in so far as this was not mediated by the notion of Britishness itself (i.e. cognitive domain). Our analysis suggests that this rejection might be mediated by three different political understandings. First, these participants draw upon modernist approaches which depict the nation as an ideological construct (Anderson, 1996; Gellner, 2008; Hobsbawm, 2012). Specifically, they define the nation as a 'man-made idea'. Second, they assume this socially constructed nation is closed to competing interpretations. More than any other participants, they associate the nation with discourses on genetic heritage and the colonial past and, perhaps because of this, they separate themselves from any possible understanding of Britishness. If, for these students, the meaning of Britishness is inherently compromised, then the only solution is to avoid Britishness in itself. Third, they understand, as some

modernists do (see e.g. Hobsbawm, 2012), that antagonism lies in the nature of nations as external orders rather than in the nature of processes of identification. As Donna suggests, it is the nation that '*reinforces borders and barriers between people that are unnecessary*'. In their understandings, national common bounds—to use Olssen's term (2004)—will inevitably create exclusions, but this is not the case with other identities. In this respect, it is not surprising that these two students seem to be willing to educate for alternative identities. They advocate identities that they understand to be less likely to generate processes of exclusion (cf. Osler & Starkey, 2003; Sant *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, what they reject is not so much the promotion of British values in their pedagogical practices, but the political existence of the nation itself.

A group of three participants demonstrated that they would problematise British values as they appeared to problematise other issues. They explained that they would introduce the notions of Britishness and British values as specified in policy documentation (explicit cognitive domain) and generate debate with students (implicit affective domain). In contrast with what has been suggested by Hand and Pearce (2009), nevertheless, these student teachers did not attempt to take a neutral stance, nor did they explicitly engage in consensual shared values (Peterson, 2011). Rather, they manifested their engagement in defending what they understood to be ethically right discourses on Britishness. Indeed, their interpretations of Britishness were not that different from the interpretation of those who would actively promote Britishness—often an amalgam of cultural and civic common bounds. But the differences lie in their acknowledgement of the existence of multiple discourses on Britishness without establishing any hierarchy besides their own preference. In other words, they believed that their discourse was only a possibility among others (Biesta, 2016). In political terms, these students were distinctive in their understanding of the nation in ethno-symbolic terms. That is, as a dialogue between rediscovered traditions and new discourses (Smith, 2000), between 'social histories and narratives of their communities' (Peterson, 2011, p. 31) and new controversies (Hand & Pearce, 2009). Accordingly, they were willing to bring institutionally defined interpretations of Britishness to the class, but these would be used as a starting point for teachers and students to 'look forward', to use Monica's terms.

## **Conclusions**

The education of national identities might be influenced by educators' political understandings. In England, where the British values guidelines define the nation in its 'civic' dimension (Arthur, 2015) and the education of national identities in relation to cognitive (i.e. knowledge, skills) and 'affective' (i.e. values, practices) aspects (Department for Education, 2014a), student teachers' understandings of the nation appear to partially influence the pedagogical intentions of avoiding, rejecting, promoting or problematising national identities. Essentialist understandings of the nation might be mirrored in avoidance-oriented pedagogical strategies. Here, the educator could explicitly avoid talking about the nation but necessarily promote/reject its civic values. If some educators understand the nation as an ethnic community one is born into, then there is no need for schools to take a socialising role. But even in this case, these educators would still certainly engage, implicitly or explicitly, with the



affective domain of the civic values (e.g. democracy, tolerance). Modernist approaches, whilst not necessarily disregarding the affective domain, foster the rejection of the cognitive aspect of national identities. These educators might problematise other subject contents but explicitly reject the promotion of national values. In the interviews, two of our participants expressed their intentions to reject the ‘promotion of fundamental British values’, but in the observed practices, they engaged with the ‘affective’ aspect of the guidelines through the problematisation of other subject contents. Ethno-symbolist understandings, in contrast, might lead educators to promote or problematise national identities. Whereas those who understand the nation as a closed and uncontroversial reality would promote national identities, those who conceive the nation as open to competing understandings would be more likely to problematise them.

We are cautious about making excessive claims about the last two cases. Our analysis suggests that the participants who promoted/problematized British values also promoted/problematized other subject content. More intensive research could be conducted into their teaching styles and the formatting of pedagogic practices of national identities. Other researchers might also want to employ our conceptual tool with other educators (e.g. different level, different subject, particular social groups), with other approaches to citizenship education (e.g. citizenship as a subject) or in other contexts where national identities might be defined in relation to cultural or (other) civic aspects.

We agree that the role of education and teacher education is essential in preparing student teachers from all specialisms to fulfil their role as civic educators (Peterson *et al.*, 2015; Elton-Chalcraft *et al.*, 2016). We argue for a teacher education curriculum that focuses not only on the cognitive but also on the affective domain of citizenship education. The participants in this study described potential contributions of the English subject to the cognitive domain of citizenship education (through pedagogic work in literature, media, etc.) (Moss, 2010), but they did not engage with how pedagogical practices in the line of what some define as an open classroom climate (Schultz *et al.*, 2010) could contribute towards the affective domain. If we assume that student teachers, regardless of their specialism and views on nationhood, are likely to support civic values such as democracy, tolerance, etc., then spaces for pedagogical discussion need to be created so they can explore how certain pedagogies can or cannot contribute to these principles. Student teachers, we argue, need to understand that supporting these values requires a commitment to discussing even those topics (i.e. national identities) that some would initially avoid or reject, and to open (rather than close) the possibilities for each of them. It is not (and should not) be in our hands as academics, teacher educators or potential ‘experts’, we argue, to decide how the British (or any other) nation should imagine itself. In this respect, we believe that present and future teachers—as members of society—should cultivate their own political understandings about what Britishness means, providing they are equally open to listening to other understandings. Yet it is in our hands to imagine (and help student teachers, regardless of their political views, to imagine) what pedagogical practices mirroring democratic principles could look like. The question for us is not whether student teachers promote, avoid, reject or problematise national identities,

but whether in the process of grappling with these challenges they create opportunities for their students to do the same.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> In what follows we will examine Western social theory on the nation, national identities and their educational implications. This is an acknowledgement that we understand, as Connell (2007) does, that Western theory draws upon certain ontological and epistemological assumptions that cannot be universalised. However, since our article examines Western-framed concepts (nation and national identities) in a Western country (the UK), we feel that it is legitimate to limit our analysis to Western philosophy. This is not to say that the theory we use here can necessarily be universalised but rather, it is particular to the case we study.

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