# Fundamental British Values in Early Years Education: Insights From Policy and Practice

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## Abstract

This article examines how fundamental British values (FBVs), as part of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, are interpreted and enacted in early years practice through qualitative case study conducted in a nursery setting in south west London, United Kingdom. Using semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations and document analysis, I distinguish *values-in-policy* from *values-in-practice* and highlight bounded participation to describe how children's agency is shaped by adult set frames. Data were analysed through qualitative content analysis to identify patterns and themes in how  practitioners interpret and enact FBVs. With the findings of this research, I show that the early years practitioners pragmatically decentre the *British* signifier, as well as align enactment with inclusive relational norms, and often proceduralise democracy, the rule of law and individual liberty (three of the four fundamental British values) via routines of choice, turn-taking and rule following. The study foregrounds interpretive labour required under thin phase specific guidance, and argues for inspection and teacher education that prioritise educative exemplification over visibility metrics. Conceptually, the article offers an early years vocabulary for analysing security-framed value agendas; practically, the study identifies levers for strengthening guidance and professional learning while also avoiding the assimilationist drift of narrow national identity claims, while also underlining the importance of practitioner reflexivity, pedagogical creativity, and situated professional judgment in navigating value-laden expectations.

**Keywords**: Fundamental British Values; Early Childhood Education; Educational Policies, Citizenship Education, Teacher Practice

## Introduction

Since 2011, fundamental British values (FBVs) have migrated from national security discourse into the everyday expectations placed on schools. Originating in the Prevent strategy, FBVs were cast as a counter-extremism instrument and subsequently embedded across education policy levers (HM Government, 2011; Department for Education [DfE], 2014). As a matter of professional regulation, Teachers' Standards (2021, p. 14) require teachers "not to undermine" FBVs, a stipulation that has reconfigured teacher identity and professional judgement within the policy climate. Operationally, the Department for Education (DfE) advised schools to cultivate the four FBVs (namely democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance) primarily via spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) provision (DfE, 2014). The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) also incorporated FBVs into inspection frameworks, making their visible enactment a condition of school evaluation (Ofsted, 2015). In effect, the policy relocates national security concerns into classroom routines and leadership practices, with consequences for accountability and pedagogy across phases, including the early years.

This extension of security rationales into education has drawn sustained critique. Scholars identify conceptual ambiguity in the *Britishness* claim, a narrowing of political education, and the risk of reproducing insider-outsider hierarchies that racialise Muslim students and communities (e.g., Starkey, 2018; Farrell, 2016). Teachers themselves report discomfort with the policy's nationalist overtones and the expectation to operate as instruments of surveillance, especially where guidance is thin and training limited (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2017; Henshall et al., 2024). At the same time, the empirical base detailing how FBVs are translated into daily practice, particularly in early years settings, remains comparatively thin. Much of the literature either interrogates policy logics or focuses on older age phases, leaving a gap around play-based, care-oriented contexts where civic dispositions are initially formed and where policy enactment relies heavily on practitioner interpretation. Addressing this gap matters for three reasons. First, early years educators operate under high-stakes inspection and regulatory demands without commensurate, phase-sensitive guidance. Second, the early years are where abstract values are most likely to be materialised as relational routines (e.g., turn-taking, rule-making, voice), raising distinctive questions about FBVs-in-use. Third, debates about whether FBVs are uniquely *British* or broadly democratic, debates often conducted at a high level, need grounding in situated classroom enactments.

## Background of Fundamental British Values

Fundamental British values (FBVs) are typically defined as four principles (democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs) first consolidated within national security discourse in the early 2010s (Buckley, 2020; Haferjee & Hassan, 2016; HM Government, 2011). They were formally positioned by the Conservative-led government as part of the Prevent strategy in 2011 (Panjwani, 2016; Sonmez, 2016) and subsequently narrated by political leaders as a means to unite diverse communities around a shared civic home (Cameron, 2014). Within this framing, extremism, defined as "vocal or active opposition to FBVs" (HM Government, 2011, p. 34), was explicitly linked to rejection of those values, thereby entangling the language of citizenship with counter-extremism (Panjwani, 2016; Struthers, 2017). The policy genealogy thus establishes a close parallel between national identity work and the management of security risk.

## Fundamental British Values in Education

In November 2014, the Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, announced FBVs as an explicit policy agenda for schools (Vincent, 2019b; Richardson & Bolloten, 2015). Shortly thereafter the Department for Education issued statutory guidance to schools, embedding FBVs within spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) provision (DfE, 2014). This move was widely read as a top-down response to events popularly known as the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham, which were constructed in media and political narratives as evidence of Islamist influence in schools (Allen & Ainley, 2014; Arthur, 2015; Clarke, 2014; Holmwood & O'Toole 2017; Mogra, 2016; Panjwani, 2016; Reed & Rees, 2024).

Operationally, the 2014 guidance sought to make pupils "prepared for life in modern Britain" and placed responsibility for active promotion, and for identifying and reporting concerns, on schools and staff (Buckley, 2020; DfE, 2014; Janmaat, 2018; Vincent, 2019a). Ofsted incorporated FBVs into its inspection frameworks, assessing enactment as part of judgements of SMSC, leadership and safeguarding (Ofsted, 2015; Revell, 2015; Richardson & Bolloten, 2015). Concomitantly, teachers were made responsible not only for avoiding actions that might "undermine" FBVs but also for demonstrable promotion of these values in practice (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2017). These arrangements have been connected to wider regimes of accountability, with potential sanctions, including funding consequences, where institutions are judged non-compliant (DfE, 2014; Ofsted, 2015; Vincent, 2019a). More broadly, the shift from

internal affairs to education positioned teachers as frontline actors in UK counter-terror policy (Revell & Bryan, 2018), while Teachers' Standards (2011) and related professional guidance were invoked to extend expectations into professional identity and conduct (Bryan, 2012; Teachers' Standards, 2011). Taken together, FBVs became an organising device for the moral and civic purposes of schooling with a securitised inflection.

## Fundamental British Values in Early Childhood Contexts

The extension of FBVs into education explicitly encompassed early childhood education and care (ECEC). Following the 2014 policy changes, early years settings and professionals (EYPs) were required to reflect the new agenda and to evidence active promotion of FBVs (Farrell, 2016; Robson, 2019; Sonmez, 2016). The Prevent Duty statutory guidance confirmed that early years providers fall within scope and identified inspection and funding levers to secure compliance (Home Office, 2023; Ofsted, 2015). HM Government guidance reiterated the expectation that practitioners should both promote FBVs and challenge extremist ideas (Home Office, 2023). Yet despite the salience of these obligations, there remains limited phase-specific guidance for early years practice beyond short illustrative lists (Janmaat, 2018). This regulatory gap creates scope for well-intentioned but uneven enactment, prompting professional bodies and authors to produce practical resources to support implementation (Carroll et al., 2018; Lander, 2016; Maddock, 2017; Sargent, 2016). For example, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) embedded FBVs within its continuing professional development framework and mapped them to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), offering examples of how values might be enacted through everyday pedagogy (PACEY, 2015).

The literature illustrates, however, that everyday representations of the four values can be narrow and risk conflating citizenship with behavioural compliance. On democracy, for instance, guidance often foregrounds class councils, elections and turn-taking, or encourages children's participation in decision-making (PACEY, 2015; Sargent, 2016). While such routines are not trivial, critical pedagogy points to richer horizons in which democracy involves cultivating critical awareness, dialogic engagement and recognition of children's languages, identities and values (Freire, 1976; Slee, 2001). Oversimplified framings may render the promotion duty either mechanical or hollow (Sonmez, 2016), especially if pupils' non-participation in a specific activity is misread as a breach of a fundamental value (DfE, 2014).

A similar narrowing can be seen around the rule of law, where classroom rules and visits from police officers are presented as the main enactments (PACEY, 2015; Sargent, 2016). By contrast, constitutional accounts emphasise equality before the law and the protection of freedom under law as core to the concept (Parliament. House of Lords, 2018). Early years enactments might therefore be widened to include children's experiences of fairness, shared rule-making, and ethical community life, rather than a focus solely on sanctions and authority. For individual liberty, practical materials emphasise choice-making, confidence and voice (Maddock 2017; PACEY, 2015). Extending these insights, Sargent (2016) links liberty to high-quality adult-child interaction with sustained shared thinking, in which ideas are co-constructed and children's agency is respected (Sylva et al., 2004). This interpretation resonates more closely with a relational pedagogy of autonomy.

Finally, mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs (MRT) is frequently operationalised via multicultural books, displays and celebrations (Gouldsboro, 2018; PACEY, 2015). While these can resource inclusive practice, the semantics of "tolerance" raise questions: etymologically associated with "enduring" what one dislikes (Online Etymology Dictionary; Oxford Dictionary of English, 2025), tolerance risks implying a hierarchy of belonging. Commentators therefore urge movement beyond mere toleration to a thicker ethic of social equality and mutual recognition (Lewis, 2013).

Overall, across this literature, FBVs emerge as a politically charged and policy-driven project whose enactment in early years settings remains under-specified and uneven (Janmaat, 2018; Robson, 2019; Sonmez, 2016). This underscores the need for empirical, phase-sensitive research on how EYPs understand and translate the policy into everyday practice. This article responds this gap by offering a multi-source, early-years case study of FBV enactment through answering the below research question. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document reviews, I examine practitioners' understandings and the everyday pedagogical moves through which FBVs are assembled in nursery settings. In doing so, the study contributes conceptually by distinguishing between *values-in-policy* and *values-in-practice* and empirically by showing how policy scripts are re-contextualised within the affordances and constraints of early childhood education. The analysis clarifies how the *British* signifier is negotiated by practitioners, where guidance and training gaps produce oversimplification, and what this means for inspection, teacher education, and the ethics of values education in the early years.

**RQ.1.** How are fundamental British values manifested in early years settings how do early years professionals implement and practise these values within their classroom settings?

Overall, this study addresses a critical gap in the FBV literature by providing empirical, phase-specific evidence of how early years practitioners interpret and enact values policy in daily practice. While existing research has extensively critiqued the conceptual foundations and security origins of FBVs (Starkey, 2018; Farrell, 2016) and documented teacher concerns in primary and secondary contexts (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2017; Henshall et al., 2024), empirical accounts of FBV enactment in early childhood settings remain notably scarce. This scarcity is problematic because early years practitioners face the same high-stakes inspection demands yet operate with minimal phase-appropriate guidance and within pedagogical contexts fundamentally distinct from formal schooling (contexts characterised by play-based learning, care relationships, and emergent rather than explicit citizenship education). The originality of this study lies in its multi-method examination of values-in-practice: by distinguishing between policy scripts and situated enactment, and by introducing the concept of bounded participation, the study moves beyond critique to illuminate how abstract values become classroom realities. The findings identify concrete leverage points for improving guidance, inspection practice, and teacher education, while conceptually contributing an early-years-sensitive analytic vocabulary relevant to international contexts grappling with tensions between national identity projects and inclusive, child-centred pedagogy.

## Method

### Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative case-study design within an interpretivist, social-constructivist orientation. This approach was chosen because the research aims to understand how practitioners make sense of and enact FBVs in their contexts, rather than measure compliance or outcomes. Constructivist perspectives hold that meanings are co-constructed through social interaction and situated practice; an interpretivist lens is therefore appropriate for examining how early years professionals (EYPs) understand and enact the policy of fundamental British values (FBVs) in everyday contexts.

A single, bounded case, a nursery setting in London, England, was selected to enable close examination of the sociocultural and pedagogical processes through which FBVs are interpreted and practised. The intention was not to test compliance but to illuminate FBVs-in-use and the practical reasoning through which policy is translated into routine activity. Four participants (pseudo named as Florence, Alicia, Sally and Rita) were recruited through convenience sampling

at the research site, and all participants received information sheets, provided written consent, and are referred to by pseudonyms. This sample size is consistent with qualitative case study methodology, where the aim is analytical depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2014). Four participants enabled intensive, repeated engagement with each individual's perspective while maintaining manageability for in-depth analysis. This aligns with recommendations for interpretive case studies in education, where samples of 3-6 participants are typical when combined with extensive observation and document review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

## Data Collection

### Interviews, Classroom Observations and Document Review

Three complementary methods were used for data collection: semi-structured interviews (primary source), non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews were arranged at times and locations preferred by participants, typically a quiet space within the nursery. A flexible guide explored understandings of each FBV, purposes and challenges, examples of practice, and experiences of inspection and training. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised.

Along with the interviews, two full-day non-participant observations (approximately 12 hours in-total) were also conducted. Observation focused on the everyday enactment of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs, for example, rule-making, turn-taking, conflict resolution, opportunities for voice and choice, and adult-child dialogue. Fieldnotes captured descriptive details and immediate analytic comments.

Document analysis in this study encompassed three categories of material: institutional artefacts (the staff-created FBV chart, curriculum planning documents, Ofsted inspection materials), pedagogical records (PLODS observation sheets, floor books, planning cycles), and children's learning documentation (portfolios, photographic records of activities, classroom environmental displays). Following Bowen (2009), documents were treated not as supplementary illustration but as primary data sources revealing how values were materially represented, made visible for accountability purposes, and integrated into children's documented learning journeys. Documents were analysed alongside interview and observation data to triangulate understanding of enactment and to examine the relationship between espoused values (in planning and display) and values-in-use (in interaction and pedagogy). Access to such documents was granted by the headteacher, and all identifiable information was removed at source.

Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation which included combining interviews, observations, and documents to cross-verify findings, and through prolonged engagement at the research site. In addition to this, dependability was also supported by maintaining detailed audit trails of data collection procedures, analytical decisions, and emerging interpretations documented in research memos.

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis following an iterative, multi-stage process. In the first stage, an initial coding framework was developed deductively from the research question and FBV policy literature, identifying provisional categories aligned with the four values (democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance) and policy enactment themes. This framework was applied to interview transcripts, fieldnotes and document extracts. In the second stage, the framework was refined abductively through multiple cycles of moving back and forth the data itself, capturing practitioner meanings and enactment

patterns not anticipated by the initial framework (e.g., the ways practitioners decentred the British signifier or preceduralised values through everyday routines). Each participant's dataset was first considered individually to preserve contextual meaning, followed by thematic synthesis across cases using constant comparison to identify convergences, cariations and tensions in how FBVs were understood and enacted. Coding was conducted manually; memos documented decisions and supported an auditable trail from data to interpretation. To enhance trustworthiness, a sample of coded data was reviewed by the research supervisor, and coding consistency was discussed and refined through peer debriefing.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study followed the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines, and institutional ethical approval was granted by the University College London, Institute of Education. Participants received information sheets and consent forms and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Given children's presence, the researchers were introduced by staff and maintained their unobtrusive observer role. All data were stored securely, password-protected, and anonymised in transcription and reporting. Use of audio recordings and photographs was explicitly consented to and aligned with privacy and data-protection protocols.

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**Findings and Discussion**

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Drawing on interviews, observations and documents, the analysis is organised into five themes: (i) professionals' understandings of FBVs; and the enactment of (ii) democracy, (iii) the rule of law (TRL), (iv) individual liberty (IL), and (v) mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs (MRT). Throughout, I distinguish values-in-policy from values-in-practice, using this contrast to illuminate how policy scripts are translated into the relational, play-based routines of early childhood education.

**Theme 1: Early years professionals' understandings of FBVs**

*Definition and the British signifier*

When asked to define FBVs, participants most commonly described them as "the values that every democratic society could have". All four problematised the British label, emphasising universality. Florence, one of the practitioners, framed FBVs as "about treating people [in a way] that how you wanted to be treated… being very inclusive of everyone's beliefs and religions", before concluding, "I wouldn't necessarily say they are British values; they are World Values. It is not about a country, is it? It is more about human beings." Alicia echoed this: "I didn't see them as particularly 'British'. I would have said that they are more about a democratic free society's values."

Two further patterns were evident. First, democracy surfaced early and prominently in talk and was frequently conflated with voting and taking turns. As Sally put it, "democracy… nation voting; it is important to look what does that mean for the young children in the nursery". Florence similarly associated her understanding with electoral participation: "It is democracy and [it represents] how I have been voting out as a British." Secondly, while participants accepted the broad moral ambitions of FBVs, they problematised the narrow national framing implied by the adjective "British," aligning with scholarship that questions the national particularism of these values and the risks of othering inherent in the policy label (Habib, 2018; Panjwani, 2016). Taken together, these accounts suggest a pragmatic decentring of the British signifier in favour of a cosmopolitan moral vocabulary. In practice, this translation reduces potential stigma and permits staff to foreground inclusive classroom norms. At the same time, the narrowing of democracy to procedural devices (votes, turns) foreshadows the implementation patterns observed later, resonating with critiques that FBVs can be implemented as thin behavioural

scripts detached from richer civic education.

### *Requirement, visibility and interpretive work*

Participants acknowledged the statutory requirement to promote FBVs and described it as both "imposed on us" (Sally) and helpful in "making visible what you do". Alicia thought the requirement "has helped nurseries in picking the ethos which makes them think how it is translated into the everyday actions." Sally reflected that the values "already were an important part of what we do… [the requirement] made it more visible." Rita was sympathetic to the aims but would have "liked where FBVs was not being a requirement and teachers normally introduce those values into their practices."

All four participants also emphasised the absence of phase-sensitive guidance and the consequential need for local interpretive labour. Following the introduction of the Prevent Duty and FBVs, staff "dedicated a few hours looking and brainstorming on FBVs in small groups and discussed each value individually" to agree practices. The outcome was a shared chart of potential classroom strategies, displayed to support consistency across staff (see Table 1). Table 1 reproduces the content of this staff-created wall display, documented during fieldwork and formatted for presentation here. This is important, because as Rita articulated, there is a risk inherent in interpretive autonomy: "Different teachers can interpret it [FBVs] towards their own upbringings… teachers… who did not grow up in a multicultural setting may likely misinterpret these values."

**Table 1**

Examples of potential practices of FBVs from the nursery

| How we promote British Values at the Nursery | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Democracy** | **The Rule of Law** | **Individual Liberty** | **Mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs** |
| -Listening to children<br>-Using strategies such as sand timers to support turn taking<br>-Supporting children to resolve conflicts<br>-Providing choices in activities and resources<br>-Offer opportunities for imaginary role play within small groups and supporting children who need help with self-regulation<br>-Encouraging lines of inquiry and questioning e.g. use a floor books and group work | -Supporting children to set their own rules (e.g. how to take turns fairly)<br>-Having rules and boundaries, "This is the time we…"<br>-Conflict resolution-supporting children to empathise and understand the consequences of their actions | -Developing self-esteem and confidence by giving children a voice (group time)<br>-Taking risks (e.g. Forest School)<br>-Celebrating children's work (sharing their stories at story time)<br>-Individual planning<br>-Introduce the language of feelings while children are at nursery-"You look frustrated …etc.<br>-Using post it notes to reflect and evaluate the morning | -Celebrate religious festivals and traditions<br>-Explore different cultures-families and beyond (e.g. Chinese New Year or Africa)<br>-Playing and dancing to a range of music<br>-Inviting families to come<br>-Challenge preconceptions and stereotypes e.g. boys don't like pink<br>-Talking about the similarities and differences- "J likes red and N likes blue"<br>-Working as part of a group<br>-Ensuring equal access to the curriculum<br>-Multicultural books, displays (e.g. green room) and resources |

In short, the requirement functions as a visibility and accountability mechanism (DfE, 2014; Ofsted, 2015), while the lack of detailed guidance shifts interpretive responsibility onto practitioners, echoing wider accounts of policy enactment under conditions of high accountability and limited specification (Revell & Bryan, 2018).

**Theme 2: Practices reflecting democracy**

Democracy was the most readily cited value in interviews. Florence associated democratic practice with "making sure that everything is fair, and everyone takes turns", while Rita stressed

"listening to the children when they speak". Sally connected democracy to children's "own choices, their own decisions", locating the practice of democratic voice particularly in free-play and in planning cycles responsive to children's interests: "we spend a lot of time watching what children are playing with. Then we use that information… to inform our planning for the next day." Conflict resolution featured prominently as a democratic routine: Alicia explained that instead of removing a contested toy "you take time, help these children develop models and ways [of] resolving conflicts between the two of them."

Observations showed that democratic enactments were ubiquitous but often thinly framed. Professionals frequently offered children a choice, encouraged turn-taking, and solicited opinions. Yet choices were sometimes tightly bounded by adult-designed options:

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**Observation 1**

During an activity, an EYP asks which material and colour children wish to use.

**Observation 2/ cooking activity**

EYP: "Do you want cream for your cake?"

Child: "Yes."

EYP: "Do you want pink or blue?"

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Here, in these observations, choices were real yet circumscribed; pre-selected alternatives structured the decision. Whether this constitutes a democratic practice depends on whether children understand the process as participation in shared decision-making or as a selection among adult-curated options. In addition to such accounts, turn-taking and group reflection were also embedded routines within the setting. A whole-class music activity required children to collaborate with the teacher in controlling tempo by signalling with hand gestures; children were invited to lead for brief periods. A daily reflection time asked children "to draw, write and discuss" their morning; participation was voluntary, with non-participants free to opt out. The nursery's open-door policy for parents, allowing them to enter classrooms freely (especially during settling-in), also foregrounded the wider community's voice in the learning environment.

Documentation corroborated a systematic approach to responsive planning. Possible Lines of Development (PLODS) records evidenced sustained observation of children's interests and subsequent adaptation of activities (Quinlan, 2011). Exemplars from children's portfolios illustrated interest-led planning as well: one child's fascination with "tools" generated a sequence of provision; another child's interest in "fire engines" led to related activities (see Figure 1).
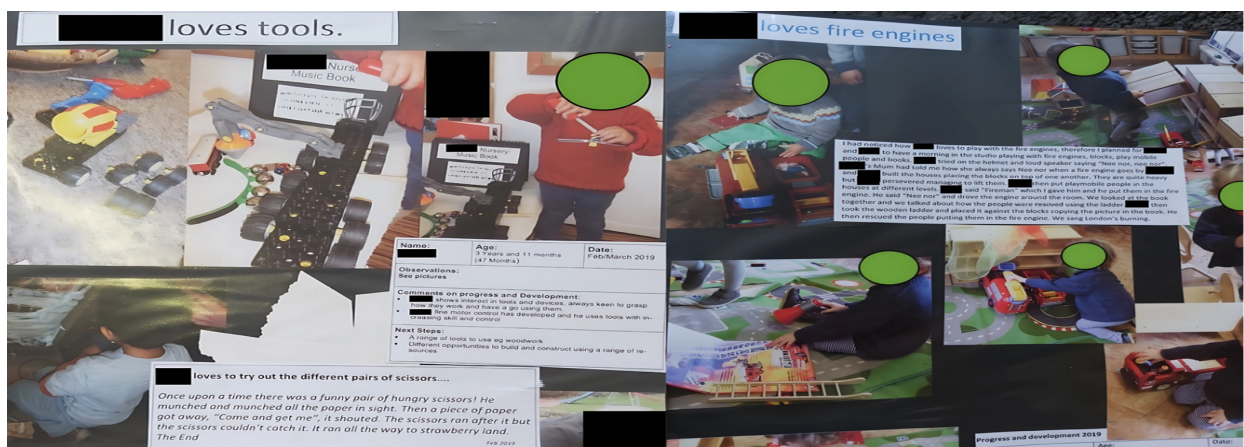


**Figure 1**

Child's portfolios showing interest in 'tools' and 'fire engines.'

Overall, the practices observed align with professional guidance that equates democracy with participation, turn-taking and choice (DfE, 2014; PACEY, 2015; Sargent, 2016). At the same time, they exemplify what might be termed bounded participation: children are invited to choose within adult-determined frames. PLODS extends this frame by using children's interests to shape provision, bringing the planning cycle closer to a dialogic model. Yet, even here the key curricular decisions, what counts as an eligible interest, which materials are feasible, remain adult-mediated.

This is not a criticism of early years pedagogy per se: safety, resource constraints and developmental appropriateness necessarily contour children's decision-making. However, the pattern helps explain how democratic rhetoric can become synonymous with procedural routines (voting, turns, picture-card choices) rather than deliberation, shared rule-making or critical voice. The analysis thus supports concerns in the literature that democracy in FBVs is prone to oversimplification and risks vacuity if not connected to reflective dialogue and the negotiation of difference (Vincent, 2019a).

## Theme 3: Practices reflecting the rule of law (TRL)

From the collected data, only one participant foregrounded TRL when describing practice. Sally explained that, rather than labelling behaviour as simply right or wrong, staff invoke setting-specific norms: "instead of saying 'that was wrong' or 'that was right', we quite often say that 'at [nursery] we do this'. Because we recognise there are different rules at home… here at [nursery] we can use [knives]; however, we have to do it safely." She also referenced the forest school's "very clear rules such as holding hands around the route".

Beyond the interviews, below observations indicated that TRL was enacted most often as the articulation and reinforcement of classroom and activity rules, sometimes in the context of games:

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**Observation 3/ circle-time game**

Children pass a penguin toy around the circle, chased by a shark; the aim is for the penguin to escape. One child keeps the penguin until the shark arrives, then makes the shark eat it. One of the practitioners pauses the song and says, "you shouldn't do that… the rule in this song is to pass the penguin before the shark came. This is how we do." The child appears disappointed but complies.

**Observation 4/ garden free-play**

Seeing a child fill a toy ship with sand, the practitioner intervenes: the ship is "fragile" and "can be broken with the weight of the sand"; alternative options are offered (sand to the water or bucket). The child selects the bucket.

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Beyond the above observations, I founded that the classroom rules were also materialised through prompts and reminders (see Figure 2 for an example).



**Figure 2**

A reminder for children for blowing noses (guiding children to 'ask for help').

In addition to listed rules, a repertoire of hidden rules (such as being kind; not hurting others) was voiced by staff in conflict situations: "Molly, we do not hurt each other; you should be kind to your friend."

Overall, in practice, TRL largely became a shorthand for learning to follow and negotiate rules in situ. This translation into classroom management is developmentally sensible: young children encounter rules as relational conventions rather than abstract juridical principles. Yet an exclusive focus on compliance risks flattening the concept to sanctions and authority, missing broader dimensions (e.g., equality before the law, protection of freedom under law) identified in civic accounts. The data do include emerging forms of deliberative rule-making (e.g., negotiating safe use of knives, offering alternatives), suggesting opportunities to expand TRL enactment beyond lists of prohibitions towards shared rule creation and fairness talk. Such expansion would better reconcile FBV policy with early years pedagogy and avoid the conflation of "rule of law" with mere obedience.

## Theme 4: Practices reflecting individual liberty (IL)

When it comes to IL, two participants offered detailed accounts of how they understand and promote this value. For Rita, the core is dialogic recognition: "Children have a voice, and that needs to be heard… there needs to be a conversation between the teacher and the child." She described specific strategies (such as meeting children at eye-level, negotiating safe ways to take risks (e.g., climbing) rather than defaulting to prohibition) so that "we can figure it out together how the child can climb in a way that is okay for the nursery setting and yet is safe." Sally articulated a similar stance of bounded autonomy: "we do not force children to do anything… sometimes, we encourage/help them to take risks and to make decisions, but we do not force children in their actions."

From the observations, in practice, IL was enacted as voice, risk-taking and recognition of competence. Children's expressions of competence were affirmed:

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**Observation 5/ cooking activity**

A child cracks an egg unaided: "I did that!"

EYP: "that is great!"

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**Observation 6/ outdoor play**

A child climbs a web frame, calls to the teacher to watch, then jumps down. EYP: "that was a good jump, well done!" Child: "I know, I am very good at this."

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EYPs also created structured opportunities for voice and choice in group work:

**Observation 7/ shared reading**

Rita reads The Great Pet Sale book (Inkpen, 2006) outdoors. She prompts: "Which pet would you want to have? Why?" Each child takes a turn and offers a reason; Rita reflects aloud that "almost everybody has a different choice".

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Moreover, classroom documents showed systematic attention to language of feelings, problem-solving and self-evaluation[2]. Floor books were other examples which provided shared space for recording children's thinking on topics (e.g., superpowers), visually indexing the diversity of views.

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[2] An example of such document was a poster highlighting the list of conflict resolution steps. This poster was published by HighScope and can be accessed at: https://highscope.org/shop/steps-in-resolving-conflicts-wall-size-poster/ .

Overall, IL was most coherently articulated and enacted as recognised agency within safe parameters. Staff sought to hear and validate children's perspectives while negotiating constraints arising from safety and collective life. This sits comfortably with early years pedagogies of sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al., 2004) and with professional resources that link IL to voice, confidence and choice (PACEY, 2015). As with democracy, the analysis points to a productive tension: autonomy is scaffolded rather than absolute, and its ethical value lies in co-construction rather than mere absence of constraint. Where IL was approached dialogically (e.g., negotiating risk; naming feelings), it appeared to deepen children's participation beyond simple choice-making, suggesting a route to "thicker" enactments of FBVs.

**Theme 5: Practices reflecting mutual respect and tolerance (MRT)**

All participants described MRT as central to daily practice. Florence defined it as "treating fairly, being respectful of others' choices and being inclusive of everyone's beliefs and religions", "about treating everyone with respect whether they are from Turkey or Africa." Alicia emphasised making differences explicit and normalised: "when one child likes X and another Y", she explains that "not all people do like that [in the way you do]." Rita extended this logic from preferences to identities: tolerance cultivated in small matters ("colours") may later inform acceptance of adult identities and relationships; she drew parallel lines to religion and physical differences. Sally highlighted whole-setting activities (such as cultural days, recognition of religious festivals, and parental involvement) recalling a mother who brought a menorah to tell the story of Hanukkah and celebrations of Diwali, Christmas and Easter.

The setting's diversity (children and staff with links to China, Italy, France, India, Ukraine and elsewhere) formed a lived context for discussing and valuing difference. In this sense, classrooms were well resourced with multicultural texts (see Figure 3 for resources).



**Figure 3**

Picture books depicting diverse beliefs and family structures.

EYPs used these materials in shared reading and to prompt conversations about difference and similarity. Similarly, documents in children's portfolios and floor-books evidenced festival-related and culture-sharing activities, often linked to the backgrounds of pupils or staff (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

Child portfolios for Chinese New Year, Ukrainian headdress and celebrating Eid (clay handprints).

Overall, MRT was enacted through everyday talk, inclusive pedagogies and celebration of cultural and religious events. These practices correspond to professional guidance (PACEY, 2015) and can be powerful when embedded in lived relationships and linked to children's own families. However, with these practices, two caveats arise. First, the semantics of tolerance imply forbearance rather than mutual recognition (as also mentioned earlier during the etymological critique outlined in the literature), risking a subtle hierarchy of belonging. Practitioners in this case often moved beyond basic tolerance towards curiosity, reciprocity and respect, which suggests a local re-framing more consistent with social equality (Sargent, 2016). Second, the calendar-based approach, the reduction of diversity work to calendar events, can tokenise difference if not accompanied by sustained attention to power, voice and everyday encounters. The stronger moments observed (e.g., parent-led storytelling, discussion of diverse families, responsive selection of texts) point to a more dialogic and recognition-based approach.

**Synthesis: values-in-policy and values-in-practice**

Across the five themes, the translation of fundamental British values from policy text into early years practice reveals a complex process of reinterpretation, negotiation and pedagogical judgement. This synthesis identifies four cross-cutting dynamics that characterise how FBVs were enacted in the nursery setting, and through which we can understand the gap between values-in-policy and values-in-practice. These dynamics, as discussed below, illuminate both the constraints and possibilities inherent in translating a security-framed policy agenda into the relational, play-based world of early childhood education.

*Decentring Britishness and centring relational norms*

The most striking pattern across all interviews was practitioners' rejection of the "British" signifier as meaningful or appropriate for their work. Every participant reframed FBVs as universal human values or characteristics of any democratic society, with Florence's assertion that "I wouldn't necessarily say they are British values; they are World Values" echoing similar sentiments from Alicia, Sally and Rita. This was not an only semantic quibbling but a deliberate pedagogical strategy with ethical and practical dimensions. Ethically, practitioners recognised that foregrounding national particularity risked creating insider-outsider hierarchies in a setting

where children and families came from China, Italy, France, India, Ukraine, Turkey and elsewhere. To label respect, fairness and voice as distinctively British would implicitly position non-British children and families as lacking these values, reproducing precisely the racialised othering that scholars have identified as a structural feature of the FBV policy (e.g., Farrell, 2016; Panjwani, 2016). By decentring Britishness, staff avoided this stigmatising logic and created space for all families to recognise themselves in the nursery's value commitments. Practically, this reframing allowed practitioners to connect FBVs to existing professional frameworks and relational norms already embedded in early years practice. Rather than introducing an alien or imposed agenda, staff folded the four values into familiar pedagogical repertoires: sustained shared thinking, responsive planning through PLODS, conflict resolution strategies, and celebration of diversity. The effect was to naturalise FBVs as continuous with, rather than disruptive of, established early years pedagogy. This move has precedent in research showing that teachers across phases pragmatically domesticate policy demands to fit their professional contexts (e.g., Revell & Bryan, 2018), but it takes on particular significance in early years settings where pedagogical identity is strongly anchored in care, responsiveness and the recognition of children's competence (Sylva et al., 2004).

However, this decentring also reveals a conceptual instability at the heart of the policy. If FBVs are indistinguishable from the values of any democratic society, as both practitioners and comparative research suggest (Janmaat, 2018), then the rationale for national branding collapses. What remains is either a set of broadly defensible civic and ethical commitments (in which case the "British" label is superfluous) or a narrower project of national identity formation (in which case practitioners' universalising move represents a form of quiet resistance). The data support the former interpretation: in practice, FBVs function as a vocabulary for articulating inclusive relational norms in multicultural settings, with the national frame serving primarily as a policy legitimation device rather than a substantive pedagogical principle.

### Routinisation and bounded participation

The second major dynamic concerns how abstract values were materialised as classroom routines. Democracy was represented through voting and turn-taking; the rule of law was highlighted through posted rules and reminders; individual liberty became choice cards and voice opportunities; mutual respect and tolerance became multicultural books and festival celebrations. This routinisation made FBVs visible, measurable and reproducible, qualities valued under inspection regimes (Ofsted, 2015), but also risked reducing civic learning to behavioural compliance. The concept of bounded participation captures the structure of these enactments. Children were invited to exercise voice, choice and agency, but always within adult-designed frames. As highlighted from the collected data, children were encouraged to negotiate, but staff scripted the available resolutions. These boundaries are not inherently problematic, they reflect safety concerns, resource constraints, and developmentally appropriate scaffolding. Young children cannot deliberate on curricular priorities or set their own health and safety rules. The analytic point is that the civic and ethical character of these routines depends on how boundaries are drawn and whether children experience them as enabling or constraining participation.

The data reveal a spectrum of bounded participation, from tightly constrained to more open-ended. At the thinner end, choice was sometimes reduced to binary selection between adult-curated options, turn-taking became a queue management technique, and rules were presented as fixed rather than negotiable. These enactments align with professional guidance that operationalises democracy through "making choices" and "taking turns" (PACEY, 2015; Sargent, 2016) but lack the dialogic depth that might transform routines into opportunities for ethical reasoning. As Vincent (2019a) cautions, such approaches risk conflating democratic

participation with procedural compliance, evacuating the political content from citizenship education. At the thicker end of the spectrum, however, practitioners created spaces for more substantive participation. PLODS exemplified this: by systematically observing children's interests and reshaping provision in response, staff extended the frame of participation beyond immediate choice-making to include agenda-setting power over what becomes worthy of pedagogical attention. A child's fascination with tools or fire engines was not merely accommodated but became the organising principle for a sequence of activities, documented in portfolios and reflected in planning cycles. Similarly, conflict resolution at its best involved co-constructing solutions rather than applying pre-set rules, and risk negotiation (as in Rita's account of climbing) involved dialogic problem-solving rather than prohibition. In the daily reflection time, children's voluntary participation and the option to opt out respected autonomy while creating a forum for shared meaning-making.

These thicker enactments point to the pedagogical conditions under which bounded participation can approach genuine democratic practice: when adults position themselves as co-inquirers rather than sole decision-makers; when children's reasons and preferences are treated as substantively valid rather than merely tolerated; when rules and routines are open to revision through dialogue; and when participation is linked to meaningful consequences for the learning environment. The variability observed here underscores that routinisation is not inherently reductive; its civic and educational value depends on whether it is accompanied by what Sylva et al. (2004) term sustained shared thinking highlighting the collaborative exploration of ideas, problems and meanings.

### *Interpretive labour under thin guidance*

The third dynamic concerns the work required to make FBVs operational in the absence of detailed, phase-specific policy direction. All participants emphasised that they received no tailored guidance for early years and instead had to generate local understandings through collective brainstorming, discussion and the production of shared materials such as the wall chart reproduced in Table 1. This interpretive labour was both necessary and risky. It was necessary because the policy texts (DfE, 2014; Home Office, 2023) offer only abstract definitions and generic examples, leaving open how values should be enacted with three- and four-year-olds whose cognitive, social and linguistic capacities differ markedly from older pupils. The examples circulating in professional resources (PACEY, 2015; Sargent, 2016) provide some scaffolding but remain relatively superficial, often listing activities (voting, police visits, choice-making, multicultural books) without embedding them in a coherent pedagogical rationale or connecting them to broader theories of civic or moral development. In this regard, practitioners became policy interpreters by default, a role for which they received little preparation in initial teacher education or continuing professional development. The interpretive labour undertaken at this nursery was collective and dialogical. Staff met in small groups, discussed each value individually, and negotiated shared understandings that were then codified in the wall chart and reinforced through professional conversations and planning processes. This approach mirrors findings from wider research on policy enactment, which shows that schools function as "policy-making contexts" where teachers actively translate, select and adapt policy scripts to fit local conditions and professional identities (Ball et al., 2012). In this case, the local adaptation centred on aligning FBVs with existing early years principles: child-centredness, responsive planning, inclusive practice, and holistic development. The result was an enactment that felt continuous with professional norms rather than alien or imposed.

However, this interpretive labour also carried risks, as Rita's comment about teachers' varied upbringings suggests. Without critical resources (e.g., theoretical frameworks for understanding FBVs), practitioners may default to commonsense or unexamined understandings.

The narrowing of democracy to voting and turns, noted across interviews, exemplifies this risk. While not incorrect, this framing backgrounds richer democratic practices such as deliberation, dissent, shared rule-making and the negotiation of difference (Freire, 1976). Similarly, the emphasis on posted rules as the primary enactment of the rule of law, while developmentally sensible, risks conflating legality with obedience and missing opportunities to explore fairness, equality and justice as organising concepts. Inspection and accountability mechanisms compound these dynamics. Ofsted's incorporation of FBVs into inspection frameworks (Ofsted, 2015) creates pressure for visible enactment, which may incentivise the production of compliance artefacts (such as wall displays, photo documentation, policy statements) over substantive practice. Participants acknowledged this tension: the requirement "made visible what we do" (Sally) but also functioned as an externally imposed demand. The wall chart in Table 1 serves dual purposes: it is both a genuine tool for professional consistency and a displayable object that signals compliance to inspectors. The risk is that visibility becomes detached from substance, with settings investing energy in documentation while the pedagogical depth of enactment remains unexamined (Vincent, 2019a).

## Contribution and implications

This research provides an early-years-specific account of FBV enactment that clarifies the micro-pedagogies through which policy is lived. Conceptually, it distinguishes values-in-policy from values-in-practice and introduces bounded participation as a way to theorise how democratic and liberty-related practices are structured in early years contexts. Empirically, it documents how the British signifier is quietly sidestepped in favour of an inclusive ethical register; how PLODS and floor-books function as vehicles for children's voice; how TRL collapses into classroom rules unless connected to fairness talk; and how MRT gains depth when linked to lived relationships rather than calendar-based tokenism. These insights speak directly to debates about the national framing of FBVs (Habib, 2018; Janmaat, 2018; Panjwani, 2016) and to practical guidance that risks oversimplification (PACEY, 2015).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has shown how a security-framed policy assemblage is domesticated in the relational routines of early childhood classrooms. By distinguishing *values-in-policy* from *values-in-practice* and theorising the everyday dynamics of bounded participation, it provides an early-years-specific vocabulary for analysing how national value projects are translated, trimmed, and sometimes thickened in pedagogical life. The analysis clarifies how practitioners decentre the "British" signifier in favour of a broadly humanistic register and how, under thin guidance, their interpretive labour can tilt enactment towards either procedural compliance or dialogic civic learning.

Conceptually, I challenge the view that civic values should be narrowly national, showing that what works in early-years practice fits better with broad, human-rights-based approaches than with tight claims about national identity. To explain how this might play out in classrooms, bounded participation model can be highlighted where children have a say within adult-set limits, so everyday routines (such as choosing, taking turns, following rules) can remain simple behaviour drills or become steps towards genuine discussion and shared rule-making, depending on the space adults allow. Specifying these contingencies addresses concerns that FBVs lack substance by identifying the micro-moves (such as sustained shared thinking, fairness talk, and recognition of competence) through which values gain depth in use.

Practically and politically, the findings recommend a recalibration of guidance and inspection towards educative exemplification rather than visibility metrics. Initial teacher education and professional development should equip practitioners to work with disagreement, ethical risk, and children's reason-giving, not only with displays and calendars. Policy texts

could model age-appropriate shared rule-creation and make explicit that "tolerance" is a minimal threshold to be surpassed by practices of mutual recognition and equality. Such adjustments would mitigate assimilationist drift while aligning enactment with the educational goods long associated with citizenship education.

The research has limited generalisability; however, future research may follow enactments across diverse settings, incorporate children's own meaning-making as primary data, and trace how leadership cultures and inspection practices shape local interpretations over time. Comparative work could also test the conditions under which bounded participation loosens into genuinely dialogic practice.

In summary, the article's contribution lies in reframing the FBV debate at the point of contact between policy scripts and pedagogical reason. It offers a portable conceptual distinction (with *values-in-policy / values-in-practice* framework), a theorisation of bounded participation that makes sense of both the thinness and promise of current enactments, and actionable implications for policy, inspection and teacher education. In the early years, where civic dispositions are first sedimented as habits of attention, voice and fairness, such specification is indeed crucial.

## Declarations

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