



Contested belonging: Britishness in post-brexit education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a three-year research project exploring how British state policies, particularly the Prevent strategy and the promotion of Fundamental British Values (FBVs), impact young British Muslims' identity formation and sense of belonging. Conducted in educational and community settings in Northwest England, the study used a participatory methodology involving 61 youth co-researchers. Data from focus groups, interviews, and interfaith school events reveal that these policies, though intended to promote cohesion, often reinforce exclusionary narratives and surveillance of minority communities. Young participants shared experiences of racism, marginalisation, and hybrid identity negotiation within a post-Brexit climate marked by cultural anxiety. This research argues for a critical rethinking of national identity and civic education, advocating for inclusive approaches such as interfaith dialogue and youth civic engagement as counterbalances to securitised policy frameworks. The paper also addresses the replicability of its participatory research design. It proposes practical policy interventions grounded in empirical evidence and intervention into the ideological mechanisms that shape British civic life.

Context: belonging and surveillance

This research is grounded in a commitment to social justice, inclusion, and civic equity, particularly within the context of education and national identity in contemporary Britain. This brief overview of the project aims to extend its reach and impact, fostering more inclusive educational practices and policy frameworks that recognise and accommodate the complex realities of diverse communities. The project was developed over three years and employed a multi-method, intersectional framework to analyse how young people experience and contest these conditions [21]. Phase one examines the impact of state policies on young people's sense of belonging in Britain. Firstly, it investigates policy discourses by exploring how Brexit, FBVs, and the Prevent strategy contribute to a dichotomous 'we versus them' narrative, reshaping public perceptions of Britishness [22]. The second phase analyses the educational impact and examines the ramifications of integrating FBVs into teacher education and public schooling, particularly how such measures may inadvertently lead to the stigmatisation of minority groups, focusing on the experiences of British Muslims within and outside their communities. The final research phase has yielded several significant findings that enhance understanding of young British Muslims' contemporary societal challenges.

In intensified border politics and a securitised national discourse, the project critically examines how British state policies, specifically the

Prevent strategy and promoting Fundamental British Values (FBVs), have reconfigured discourses of belonging by casting disproportionate suspicion on Muslim youth [13]. These policies, often couched in liberal democratic ideals, operate within a climate of surveillance and exclusion that undermines the pluralism they purport to defend [14]. Drawing on critical scholarship, including Crenshaw's [2] theory of intersectionality, Said's [20] concept of Orientalism, and more recent contributions by Parekh [15], Gholami [7], Farrell [5], and Reed and Rees [18], the research sheds light on a broader ideological and historical context. It explores how counterterrorism frameworks have mobilised education as a key area for identity governance, often constructing young Muslims as subjects of fear, surveillance, and assimilation. It seeks to illuminate how such strategies reinforce 'Othering', entrench racial hierarchies, and cultural stigmatisation, and contribute to the erosion of multicultural citizenship. Contemporary Britain is undergoing a profound reconfiguration of national identity, intensified in the post-Brexit context where belonging is increasingly monitored through exclusionary narratives. Discourses surrounding immigration, integration, and loyalty have been influenced by the framing of Islam and Muslim communities as contrary to British values [14]. As Virdee and McGeever [24] note, debates around Britishness often position Muslims as "bearers of alien customs," contributing to a national imaginary that divides citizens into 'insiders' and 'outsiders' [22]. A subsequent aim of the project is to interrogate how state-led education policies play a pivotal role in solidifying these

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divisions and creating racialised and religiously marked boundaries of belonging. By amplifying young people's voices and highlighting the structural impact of politicised cultural policies, the hope is to shift public understanding, reshape policy discourse, and promote a more cohesive and equitable society.

The concept of belonging, defined as “a fundamental human need for connection, recognition, and acceptance” [21], provides a powerful lens through which to examine these dynamics. Research shows that British Muslim youth view belonging not as a static legal status but as a continuously negotiated process shaped by structural constraints, surveillance practices, and policy-driven narratives of cultural incompatibility. Prevent was introduced in 2003 by the Labour government to anticipate and prevent international terrorism after 9/11 [17]. It is part of CONTEST, focusing on international terrorism. However, after the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, “the focus of Prevent shifted from international to domestic terrorism, targeting Muslim communities, especially young Muslims” ([16] in Reed et al. [18]). The Prevent strategy, alongside FBVs, fosters an environment where expressions of Muslim identity are pathologised and viewed as potential threats. Qurashi [17] notes that these mechanisms signal a shift from justice-based multiculturalism to preventive surveillance, leading to new forms of state-sanctioned marginalisation. Post-Brexit, FBVs in education and the intensified Prevent strategy influenced by migration have increasingly framed discussions of Britishness through exclusion and ‘Othering’. (Reed et al. [18]). The question ‘Who belongs in Britain?’ has dominated political debates about the perceived incompatibility of some cultures, especially Islam, with democratic values. “The UK government’s denunciation of multiculturalism shows it as a perfect host for radicalisation. It gives reason for heavy surveillance of every space Muslims inhabit: the home, the schools, colleges, universities, community centres and the mosques” ([21], p.11). Thus, the project reveals the multifaceted impact on young citizens, exposes policymakers’ tendency to overlook complex identities, particularly within Muslim communities, and how these identities are instrumentalised to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

The initial research phase (Table 1) aimed to address a significant gap in the literature on the impact of state policies on young people’s sense of belonging in Britain. This involved investigating policy discourses, focusing on how Brexit, FBVs, and the Prevent strategy may contribute to a dichotomous ‘we versus them’ narrative raised by several scholars ([15,6,7]). The process included a detailed policy analysis shaped by critical works (e.g., [2,20], and others) and understanding how intersectionality informs these debates. This initial phase of analysis was predicated on the premise that intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw and emphasised by several scholars, is essential for acknowledging how identities such as faith, ethnicity, gender, and migration status interact with systems of power and exclusion [22,23]. Contrary to homogenising representations, British Muslims embody diverse linguistic, cultural, and national backgrounds. Public discourse and policy often treat them as a monolithic group. While some Muslims in the UK may encounter challenges related to integration, cultural identity, and religious expression, others may feel entirely integrated and part of British society. This is reinforced within many Muslim communities and beyond the notion that cultural difference necessitates limits, as “it is [Muslims] who must declare their allegiance to British values” ([11], p.26). By adopting an intersectional lens, the findings provided insights into the structural dimensions of exclusion and the real-life implications of politicised cultural policies. It began to chart what scholars like Gholami [7] and Topidi [23] discussed: a *shift* from a celebration of multiculturalism to a surveillance-oriented approach under the guise of counterterrorism. This was shown in the second and final phase of the project (see Table 1 for the project design). The outline shows the key phases of data collection, community engagement, and dissemination activities. It illustrates the research process’s iterative and participatory nature, and emphasis on youth co-researcher training, interfaith school events, and the addition of a documentary production.

Table 1
Summary.

	Phase	Activity & description	Key Outcomes
December 2018	Introductory Meeting	Presentation of the project’s aims and shared vision; discussion of ethical considerations and obtaining informed consent from participants.	Establishment of project direction and ethical clearance.
January–May 2018	Data Collection	Execution of researcher-led focus groups using research questions alongside peer-led focus groups with teachers and students to gather diverse perspectives.	Reflections and Rich, qualitative data showing varied experiences and viewpoints.
June–July 2018	School Link Events	Organisation of interfaith events: one event hosted by a school with teachers and another led by youth forum members, including a mosque visit.	Enhanced intercultural dialogue and community engagement.
October 2018	Data Analysis & Discussion	Transcription and analysis of focus groups and interviews; production of two documentary films (academic and non-academic) to capture the outcomes of the school link events.	Comprehensive analysis and multi-format dissemination of findings.

The table also demonstrates how data collection and community dialogue were integrated to capture young people’s experiences of Britishness, identity, and belonging. This aspect of the project design could be replicated in academic and non-academic contexts in many ways (see Table 3).

The second phase of the research concentrated on lived experiences through qualitative interviews and focus groups involving young people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds using several research

Table 2
Research questions.

Research Question	Theme(s)	Emergent Categories/ Concepts
How has the UK political context, policies, and the EU referendum reshaped young people’s sense of belonging?	Race, Racism, and Islamophobia	Experiences of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Muslim hate crimes
How do young people articulate their identity and notions of Britishness?	Subjectivity of Britishness & Multi-faith Identities	Hybrid identities: Religious and cultural self-definitions
What does ‘belonging to Britain’ mean for young citizens, including Muslims?	Belonging and Community	Heritage, multiculturalism, stigmatisation, and surveillance practices
What are the current trends among young Muslims regarding ‘multi-layered citizenship’?	Multi-layered/ Hybrid Citizenship	Experiences of terror, hate crimes, immigration challenges, and intersectional discrimination
How can education enhance young people’s sense of belonging through interfaith dialogue?	Education in Troubling Times	FBVs, intercultural exchange, shared human values, and legislative impacts.

questions and resources (Table 2). These narratives showed the influence of policies and media representations on their sense of self, security, and societal belonging. As Kirby et al. [10] contend, incorporating individuals with lived experiences into research enhances the validity and impact of the findings. The data derived from participants' narratives highlighted an urgent need for more inclusive, reflexive, and justice-oriented approaches to education and citizenship. This relates national policy shifts to the lived realities of young individuals, particularly British Muslims. The narratives advocate for reimagining belonging to challenge surveillance logics and affirm the complex, plural identities that constitute contemporary Britain. The research data substantiated scholars' investigations in which the Prevent strategy has cultivated distrust within educational environments, thereby altering teachers' roles from learning facilitators to informal surveillance agents [1,19]. Young Muslims have reported heightened anxiety, stigmatisation, and alienation in schools, particularly when cultural or religious expressions are viewed with suspicion. The Prevent duty, alongside the promotion of Fundamental British Values (FBVs) and the pervasive racial messages stemming from the Brexit referendum in 2016, has created "a distorted narrative of fear concerning migrants and refugees" [22], who are perceived as a risk for 'home-grown' terrorism ([17], p. 2). The research analysis also showed the challenges young British Muslims face daily in contemporary Britain, such as harassment on transport links, hate speech, and verbal/physical incidents of abuse. Participants felt that these harmful and often traumatic encounters resulted from the implications of Brexit, FBVs, and the Prevent strategy in education and within diverse communities. Thus, the findings corroborate the unintended consequences of state interventions and propose potential pathways towards more inclusive policies and practices.

In the second phase, several research questions (Table 2) were introduced to guide the participants and engage them in discussions and debate. Thematic areas and conceptual categories emerged from the data analysis. These themes, including race, Islamophobia, multi-layered citizenship, and interfaith education, are analytical anchors linking participant experiences to broader structural forces. This table illustrates the research's grounding in critical frameworks and its commitment to addressing the intersecting dimensions of identity, education, and policy in post-Brexit Britain.

The third and final research phase focused on the educational implications of integrating FBVs into teacher training and curricula. While framed as a tool for social cohesion, FBVs often function as normative standards against which minority communities are measured and frequently found 'lacking'. [11] states, "it is [Muslims] who must declare their allegiance to British values," reinforcing the notion that cultural difference is conditional, tolerated only within narrow bounds. Participants' interviews and small group discussions revealed how policies meant to protect society may paradoxically undermine the cohesion, civic equality and anti-racism they aim to achieve by reinforcing cycles of racism and marginalisation. Empirical findings from the research (Table 2) show that young people believe "racism is a painful daily reality, evident through social media bullying, verbal abuse, and violence" ([21], p.83). From the data, young British Muslims often experienced a 'double consciousness', navigating a desire to belong alongside the reality of being viewed with suspicion ([21]). The data showed that the Prevent strategy and FBVs have contributed to a climate in which Muslim youths feel 'hyper-visible' yet 'unheard' [21]. Thus, these frameworks have intensified polarisation instead of fostering integration, portraying Islam as incompatible with Western modernity [16]. This view was echoed initially in Said's [20] enduring critique of Orientalist thought, where he wrote:

"These contemporary Orientalist attitudes flood the press and the popular mind... Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled... to the majority of the world's resources... Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being" ([20], p.108).

The emerging themes captured the youths' experiences of terror, hate crimes, immigration challenges, and intersectional discrimination and demonstrate social division and stigmatisation of Muslim minority groups, particularly post-Brexit and more so, post- terrorist attacks. The qualitative data from open-ended responses across diverse educational settings highlighted the ramifications of introducing FBVs and the Prevent strategy in various contexts, as well as the increased sense of discrimination and alienation among the youth in Britain today. For instance, one participant shared her fear of walking alone at night and being followed by a police car. Initially, she assumed the police were present to protect her as a woman, but then she felt concern about being stopped and searched as a Muslim minority wearing a headscarf ([21], p.81). This demonstrates how policies and specific governmental measures have not only heightened feelings of marginalisation among young British Muslims but have also fostered a polarised discourse that further reinforces incidents of hostility, racism, hate crime, violence, marginalisation, exclusion, and stigmatisation.

Methodology

In contemporary Britain, young individuals are considered future leaders deserving of a safe and inclusive society. Initially, a literature review was undertaken to identify emerging themes concerning Britishness, identity, and belonging, as well as to examine the discussions surrounding Fundamental British Values (FBVs) in education, multiculturalism, and teacher identity through the perspective of recent scholars like Gholami, [7], Farrell, [5], Lander et al., [14] and many others. In response to the continual media and political appeals advocating for community cohesion and tolerance, this research engaged 61 young participants aged 14–19 from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the Northwest region of England [21]. Stringent ethical measures were implemented, which included the utilisation of pseudonyms and the exclusion of identifiable details, to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The project involved extensive training sessions for peer co-researchers from four schools and two community groups, equipping them with the requisite skills to design and conduct focus group discussions about the research questions (Table 2). This methodology allowed participants to express their experiences after the EU Referendum. Their narratives revealed personal encounters with racism, anti-Muslim discrimination, and surveillance, highlighting the shortcomings of current anti-racist educational initiatives ([21], p.53). Although too young to vote in the referendum, these young citizens strongly desired their voices to be heard and to contribute to creating a more equitable society. This emphasised the research project's replicable elements, including youth co-researcher training, school-community events, and the need for ethical practices within schools supported by NGOs, organisations, and local councils (Table 3).

Data collection was voluntary across multiple phases, including interviews, focus groups, school link events, and roundtable discussions at key locations, such as churches and mosques in the Northwest of England. Schools were carefully chosen as 'social sites' to represent the region's diverse cultures and communities ([21], p.53). For instance, Schools 1 and 2, situated in urban settings, cater to multicultural communities with a high percentage of BME students. Schools 3 and 4, located in areas with distinct socio-economic backgrounds, primarily hosted white British students (Ibid, p.55). Additionally, urban youth groups served as external partners, providing safe spaces for young participants to express their views on Britishness, identity, and

Table 3
Tensions in exclusionary policies and proposed inclusive measures.

Surveillance via Prevent	Mistrust in schools and community tension	Interfaith-led citizenship education
Exclusion from voting	Political disenfranchisement	Lowering the voting age to 16

belonging. Their active participation, which included creating a documentary film showcasing recurring themes ([21], p.167) of racism, immigration, and hate crimes, enriched the dialogue and significantly influenced the overall findings of this project.

Replicability and practice-based relevance

The research design involved youth co-researchers, multi-method qualitative tools, and interfaith community-school engagement, providing a replicable framework for studying identity and belonging in contexts characterised by securitisation, migration debates, or post-colonial tensions. This model explores national identity, belonging, and exclusion within securitised educational environments. Participatory design, which includes youth co-researchers and a multi-method data collection approach, can be feasibly adapted across various educational settings. The intersectional framework offers a transferable lens for analysing how race, religion, and policy influence young people's experiences in everyday Britain. This is often an aspect that is overlooked in academic research [21]. Key practices that can be adapted include utilising wider trained youth co-researchers and stakeholders (61 participants across schools and communities), presenting a replicable model for inclusive, youth-centred research. This design enhances engagement and data validity, and it can be applied in diverse geographical, cultural, and educational contexts, particularly in post-conflict or post-referendum societies confronting national identity issues. Moreover, interfaith-led citizenship events, documentary films, and structured dialogues serve as low-cost, high-impact engagement strategies that schools, NGOs, and councils can replicate and organise through dialogue ([21], p. 170).

Additionally, the project contributes to the existing scholarship ([14, 5]; Reed et al., 2024) and provides significant practical relevance by highlighting the unintended consequences of policies such as Prevent and Fundamental British Values (FBVs). More importantly, it offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and school leaders, including reforming teacher training, promoting interfaith dialogue, and incorporating youth perspectives into policy development ([21], p.170). It plays a pivotal role post-Brexit in understanding inclusive civic education and promoting equity-oriented practices within educational institutions and communities. The literature review indicated that the growing critiques of FBVs and Prevent strategies have emerged as counterproductive to community cohesion. Therefore, it was pivotal for this project to offer practical suggestions, such as reassessing the FBV framework, introducing intercultural and interfaith education, and lowering the voting age to enhance civic inclusion (Table 3) as proposed solutions. The notion of educational landscapes as dialogic spaces through interfaith encounters and youth-led projects is essential. It positions schools as venues for rebuilding trust and fostering civic inclusion. In doing so, educational institutions and policymakers can show consideration of the youths' experiences in Britain of racism and exclusion in shaping more responsive and inclusive post-Brexit civic policies.

Results and implications

Belonging in Britain is a multifaceted and evolving concept, intricately woven into the country's historical, social, and cultural tapestry. The data reveal that while the intent behind measures such as FBVs and the Prevent strategy may be to safeguard national security and cohesion, their implementation often exacerbates social divisions and marginalisation ([21], p.83). As Britain grapples with the challenges of post-Brexit multiculturalism, the insights from this project offer valuable guidance for reimagining policies that protect and celebrate the nation's rich and diverse identities. The research also asserts that efforts to promote social cohesion, inclusivity, and mutual understanding are crucial in fostering a sense of belonging among all communities; however, how they are delivered is not often considered adequate. The case

studies detailed in the project highlight a reconfiguration of national identity among young people. An analysis of media narratives, policy documents, and participants' narratives indicates that recurring themes suggest 'Britishness' is increasingly constructed in opposition to perceived foreign elements [21]. To clarify, this binary framing, evident in public debates, institutional practices, and policies, deepens societal divides and undermines the pluralism of British identity ([21]). The impact, noted by scholars ([5]; Reed et al., 2024; [14]), is evident on community cohesion and the safety of Muslim citizens and their communities. The participants' narratives reveal a concerning increase in prejudice, fear, hate crimes, and social anxiety linked to the politicisation of identity.

Moreover, the research findings highlight significant challenges in fostering a sense of belonging among young people, particularly those from ethnic and religious minority communities in Britain. Despite the emphasis on mutual recognition and 'hybrid identities' ([21], p.108), structural inequalities, racism, and surveillance remain persistent barriers to full inclusion. Participants frequently described their experiences of xenoracism, Islamophobia, and anti-Muslim hate crimes, revealing that educational and social initiatives have yet to effectively address the root causes of discrimination (Ibid., p.111). The lack of youth representation in key political decisions, such as the EU Referendum, further exacerbated feelings of exclusion and political disenfranchisement [8,9]. During and post-Brexit, the youths revealed that although schools and community settings promote discussion through various methods, they have not always been prepared to engage critically with the legacies of colonialism or the impact of Brexit on minority identities.

Impact on everyday belonging: racialised suspicion

Surveillance measures justified under the Prevent strategy have eroded trust between communities and state institutions, fostering environments characterised by fear and suspicion. Some examples of student responses include:

"Just because you are Muslim, it does not mean that you are used to it, that you think, yeah, it is all right, it does not matter. I know you are being positive about it, but it is still racism. It still exists, and if you are getting name-called, and when you got attacked last year on the way to school, and somebody pulled your scarf, that was a racist attack. Brushing it under the carpet does not make the problem any better. So, it is still racism and needs to be addressed, but it does not mean we must accept it" ([21], p.89).

The impact of racial identity on individuals' self-perception and consciousness has created a sense of inferiority among many young people who may have internalised negative experiences and stereotypes and sought to conform to white standards of beauty and culture to simply 'fit in' [21]. The educational implications are evident in the findings, which suggest that the role of educators is being redefined from facilitators of multicultural dialogue to de facto agents of state security. This shift has led to a disjuncture between the ideals of citizenship education and the practical realities faced by minority students, especially Muslims, thereby complicating the broader aims of social cohesion. These outcomes have informed a critical re-evaluation of current policy measures, such as FBV and Prevent, and have spurred discussions on the need for more nuanced approaches (i.e., interfaith dialogues and other initiatives) that recognise the complexity of identity formation in a diverse society.

Advocating for a shift from exclusionary practices to genuinely inclusive strategies is vital for shaping future policy reform and fostering a broader societal dialogue about the true essence of belonging in contemporary Britain [4]. Mutual recognition is crucial in affirming identity, Britishness, and belonging for many participants and British Muslim educators involved in this research project. The emergence of 'hybrid identities', as reclaimed multi-layered identities, has shed light

on British Muslim communities’ persistent challenges [21]. It provided fresh insights from a new generation eager to become future change-makers in Britain. Table 3 summarises the core findings derived from participant narratives and policy analysis. It highlights the broader educational and societal implications of the Prevent strategy and the Fundamental British Values (FBVs) policy. The table contrasts exclusionary practices (e.g., surveillance, political disenfranchisement) with suggested inclusive interventions such as interfaith-led education and youth civic engagement. These categories represent the dual tension between marginalisation and the potential for inclusive reform identified throughout the research.

As summarised in Table 3, which provides a clear synthesis of these policy tensions and proposed interventions, this evidence offers practical guidance for educators and policymakers. The analysis shows that policies like Prevent and the FBVs framework have created an environment of surveillance and marginalisation for many young British Muslims. Table 3 synthesises these tensions by contrasting the exclusionary mechanisms identified in the study, such as mistrust, disenfranchisement, and surveillance, with actionable, inclusive pathways like interfaith-led citizenship education and lowering the voting age. In doing so, the table highlights the project’s core finding that practical, community-based strategies can directly counter the marginalising effects of securitisation and policy-based othering.

The data also reveals a strong vision for a ‘multi-faith Britain,’ with participants confidently expressing their identities and sense of belonging amidst ongoing social and cultural change. One finding from the roundtable discussions was that participants conveyed powerful narratives of negotiating and reclaiming their identities within the complexities of contemporary British society.

“I think people has this idealistic idea that as soon as you leave the EU then all the immigrants will leave, but in truth that is never going to happen because you have got to think of how many immigrants have come to this country and are doing great things, you cannot just pick out the minority and say that you do not want them here, because it is not going to be like that, people just assume that if everyone leaves, and it is going to be like ‘a perfect Britain’” ([21], p.71)

Many participants’ testimonies emphasised a ‘hyper-visibility’ that marks Muslim identities as ‘suspects’ under policies like Prevent, while simultaneously rendering their experiences of racism and exclusion invisible or minimised. Another participant described the emotional burden of adapting a version of ‘Britishness’ to avoid peer scrutiny and hostility, noting the pressure to “fit in” by modifying their accent, clothing, or religious expression in predominantly white educational settings. Similar accounts reveal a complex process of identity negotiation, where young people resist dominant narratives that frame them as ‘outsiders’ by asserting multifaceted, hybrid identities that embrace both British and cultural/religious affiliations ([21], p.83). This can be addressed through interfaith-led citizenship education, which opens the scope for dialogue, respect, and mutual understanding (Table 4). Despite encountering structural inequalities and surveillance, what was significant was that many participants demonstrated a strong sense of agency, advocating for a more inclusive and pluralistic vision of Britishness rooted in shared values of respect, mutual recognition, and justice.

Their profound experiences, recounted just before the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, were both moving and inspiring, offering a hopeful glimpse into the future of Britain’s next generation. During this period, they highlighted a series of inequalities affecting numerous ethnic minority communities across the country and celebrated instances of collective triumph and unity during significant cultural events such as Ramadan, Eid, and Diwali. These experiences can help build a sense of community, togetherness, and belonging. Despite being disproportionately impacted by Brexit and the pandemic, these young people have consistently sought comfort and support from one another, their families, and their communities. For example, a participant noted:

Table 4
Framework for interfaith dialogue, youth participation, and policy accountability.

Interfaith Dialogue in Education responds to findings that students experience a lack of meaningful representation and connection across cultural lines.	Interfaith initiatives via schools Can be embedded into citizenship or religious education curricula.	To create opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to engage in dialogue. Designed by faith and community leaders
Youth civic inclusion initiative	Lowering the Voting age to 16	Critical during national decisions, such as Brexit, to empower the youth and encourage political inclusion.
Community-centred policy design	Youth advisory councils, focus groups and youth participation initiatives.	To encourage diverse and broad societal representation
Monitoring and Accountability	Independent monitoring bodies are needed to track the impact of policies and FBVs’ data and their effects on school climate and community trust.	To encourage transparency, trust, and ensure accountability.

“I am proud to be British. I think, especially as a sense of British value has been introduced, it has always excited, but we have not noticed it before. Ever since it has been introduced, I feel as though we have been taking it for granted because people in other countries do not have British values and British values are like a sort of what helps bring our communities together” ([21], p.60)

This participant’s narrative provides a rich and complex starting point for critically examining how young people form and express ideas about British identity, especially regarding the concept of FBVs promoted by the state. The participant takes pride in being British and sees FBVs as a unifying force, implying that promoting them has raised awareness and sparked a new appreciation for shared civic values. However, this seemingly positive stance deserves closer examination. Firstly, the participant’s comment that “British values... help bring our communities together” echoes the underlying message of the FBVs policy as outlined in government discussions, which is that core values (like democracy, the rule of law, mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths) are crucial for social unity. However, invoking these values as distinctly ‘British’ implicitly reinforces an ‘exclusionary national imaginary’. Another participant questioned why they should not be called ‘human values’. What makes them ‘British’? Scholars such as Lander [12] and Elton-Chalcroft et al. [3] have argued that the framing of FBVs positions Britishness in opposition to other cultural or religious identities (particularly associated with Muslim communities). Thus, while the participant views FBVs as integrative, this viewpoint may indicate a limited or idealised understanding influenced by prevailing policy narratives.

Moreover, the comment that ‘people in other countries do not have British values’ highlights ‘cultural exceptionalism’ that risks overlooking the universality of many principles enshrined in FBVs. Values such as democracy and respect for others are not inherently British, but are shared across numerous societies, as one participant pointed out. The assertion may reflect an uncritical internalisation of a state-sponsored narrative that conflates national identity with moral or civic superiority [4]. This is problematic, as it inadvertently marginalises individuals or groups within Britain who are seen as ‘failing to embody these values’ [21], despite their diverse and meaningful contributions to civic life. By framing certain civic principles as uniquely ‘British’ rather than universal, the FBV’s discourse reinforces the ‘insider versus outsider’ binary, marking some communities, especially Muslim youth, as perpetually othered and subject to conditional belonging. To

clarify, labelling core values like democracy, mutual respect, and tolerance as 'British' increases the risk of reinforcing cultural exceptionalism, suggesting that Britain is the sole embodiment or guardian of these principles. This framing implicitly casts minority communities within Britain as culturally 'other' and perpetually on the fringes of national belonging. In doing so, minority communities find themselves constantly striving to demonstrate their alignment with these so-called national values. This discursive shift is not harmless; it legitimises policies like Prevent that normalise the surveillance of Muslim youth under the assumption that they are more likely to reject these values. In doing so, it exacerbates stigmatisation, suspicion, and the lived experience of being 'hyper-visible yet unheard,' as many of the participants described. Highlighting this contradiction, the research shows how the language of FBVs, while aimed at fostering cohesion, paradoxically deepens divisions and justifies unequal treatment of certain groups as threats to national integrity rather than recognising them as equal citizens. Therefore, any meaningful policy shift must critically examine this insider/outsider binary and instead emphasise shared human values that identify the complex, plural identities of all young people in Britain.

Notably, the persistent underrepresentation of youths in politics raises questions about whose voices are being heard in discussions of national identity and whose experiences are being overlooked. This might also suggest the participant's perspective within a dominant cultural framework that enables them to see FBVs as empowering rather than restrictive. This was evident in the project's final phase, which presented a dual narrative of challenge and resilience, indicating that hybrid 'multi-layered' identities reveal persistent issues and promise a more inclusive and cohesive future for Britain. Building on these contrasts, Table 4 provides a framework for operationalising interfaith dialogue, youth civic inclusion, and independent policy monitoring. It highlights specific practices, such as integrating interfaith initiatives into citizenship curricula and empowering youth advisory councils, that translate the study's conceptual insights into practical actions. This strengthens the research's contribution to connecting scholarship and practice by offering replicable models for fostering inclusive belonging.

Through various multifaceted approaches (Table 4), there is hope in promoting inclusivity, equal representation, and civic engagement among the youth in Britain. The discourse must commence with an emphasis on the necessity of "Interfaith Dialogue in Education", which addresses findings indicating that students frequently experience a sense of disconnection due to inadequate cultural representation. Integrating interfaith initiatives within citizenship or religious education (RE) curricula developed in collaboration with faith and community leaders can facilitate spaces for constructive dialogue across diverse viewpoints (detailed in Table 4). Youth civic inclusion initiatives, including proposals to lower the voting age to 16 (Table 3), can empower young individuals and augment their participation in significant national decisions, exemplified by events like Brexit. Community-centred policy design, which incorporates youth advisory councils and participatory initiatives, guarantees that policy reflects the diverse voices present in society. Table 4, thus, accentuates the significance of monitoring and accountability through independent bodies, which assess the impacts of policies such as Fundamental British Values (FBVs) on school climate and community trust.

Interfaith dialogue is a potent tool for promoting inclusive belonging in contemporary Britain, operationalised through curriculum reform, community partnerships, teacher training, and youth leadership. It scrutinises the exclusionary narratives that underpin policies such as Prevent and FBVs, which often depict Muslim identities as incompatible with British values. Religious Education and Citizenship lessons have the potential to facilitate structured interfaith dialogue. This encompasses collaborative projects where students from different backgrounds explore shared values like justice, compassion, and peace. Collaborations with local faith centres, mosques, churches, synagogues, and NGOs can facilitate cultural exchange visits, roundtable discussions, and joint interfaith initiatives. Organising interfaith panels or youth-led forums is

also paramount (Tables 3 and 4). Students can share their experiences and engage with diverse perspectives in this context. This can be complemented by training educators on facilitating interfaith dialogue, addressing unconscious bias, and managing sensitive discussions. Such training equips teachers to create safe spaces for open communication while nurturing an inclusive classroom culture. By emphasising shared human values, respect, and personal experiences, interfaith dialogue confronts the dichotomy of insiders versus outsiders and encourages mutual understanding. This approach is particularly significant in contexts where Muslim youth encounter racialised surveillance, as it provides a space for affirming diverse identities rather than perceiving them as problems.

Conclusion

Education must be central in fostering a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of British identity. The research project proposes several targeted interventions to address systemic marginalisation and identity-based exclusion. Some of the recommended strategies highlight why interfaith dialogue constitutes a particularly suitable and effective response to experiences of racism and surveillance and how these strategies might be implemented within educational settings. This is most evident through an increased emphasis on interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange initiatives, and anti-racist educational encounters (Table 3). Interfaith dialogue addresses racism and surveillance by disregarding differences and promoting critical engagement. It creates a dialogic space wherein students are invited to listen, reflect, and humanise one another, transforming educational institutions from suspicious environments into solidarity communities. This research, evident throughout the three phases, demonstrates that two-way conversations between young individuals from diverse faiths and backgrounds can significantly mitigate stereotypes and Islamophobia. By engaging with peers from diverse communities through respectful dialogue, students can deepen their understanding of one another, fostering an environment where trust, empathy, and community cohesion can thrive, and challenging the fear-based narratives that often underpin surveillance policies.

These efforts could reinforce young people's sense of belonging and redefine the concept of Britishness for the forthcoming generation of youths in Britain. Revisiting the notion of Fundamental British Values (FBVs) and other policies ensures that these initiatives embody shared 'human values' rather than being categorised as tools for 'labelling' or surveillance [16]. Expanding civic engagement among youth, such as granting 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote (Table 4), could empower young individuals to actively shape the future of Britain ([8], p.10). While this study provides valuable insights into the intersections of identity, belonging, and policy in post-Brexit Britain, it also has certain limitations. The findings are based on data collected from a specific region and timeframe, which may limit their broader applicability. Future research could build on this by exploring different geographical areas, examining the long-term impacts of changing policy frameworks, and investigating the experiences of other marginalised youth groups in comparative contexts. Such research would enhance the evidence base for more inclusive policy reforms and educational approaches.

Finally, policy responses must address systemic inequalities to ensure that young people, particularly those from marginalised Muslim communities, are not only heard but also actively included in decision-making processes that influence their lives and communities. Collectively, the recommended strategies advocate for a more cohesive, equitable, and participatory society, grounded in dialogue, transparency, and shared responsibility. By prioritising these steps, Britain can move towards a more cohesive, diverse, and inclusive society.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Shereen Shaw: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft,

Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethics statement

The author has read and followed the ethical requirements for publication in *Societal Impacts* and confirms that the current work does not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or any data collected from social media platforms. For this research, prior to collecting the data, several approvals were obtained from various organisations, including the university's research ethics committee, the participating schools, stakeholders, and faith groups. Specifically, the ethical procedures were adhered to in terms of providing participants with an informed consent form, ensuring voluntary participation, and protecting participants' confidentiality.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could be seen to influence the work presented in this paper.

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