

More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools

Elizabeth Oldfield, Liane Hartnett and Emma Bailey

Theos 

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More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools

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executive summary

Around one in three maintained (i.e. state funded) schools in England have a religious character. This reflects the substantial historic contribution of the churches in providing public education. *More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools* summarises research around maintained schools with a religious character, with a view to informing debate around their place in a plural society and their effect on students.

The report argues that this heated debate is often a proxy for wider disputes around the role of faith in contemporary society in general and education in particular – what is the purpose of education in a plural society, is it possible to create ‘neutral’ public spaces, and what place can and should strongly held religious beliefs have in schools? Different answers to these questions generate fiercely defended positions on what are popularly known as faith schools.

More than an Educated Guess offers a cool-headed reassessment of the evidence base in relation to voluntary aided and voluntary controlled faith schools, but does not touch on free schools, academies or foundation schools because there is not yet enough evidence on which to draw. The report considers research grouped around four key and closely related questions. First, are faith schools socially divisive – do they compound the effect of existing community divides, such as those of race or ethnicity? Second, are faith schools exclusive and elitist – does the ability of some faith schools to act as their own admissions authority result in a degree of social or economic sorting? Third, is there a ‘faith school effect’ – is there anything about the ethos or practice of faith schools which offers an educational advantage over non-faith or community schools? Fourth, do faith schools offer a distinctive education experience – what is the impact of the kind of education that faith schools offer?

The evidence reviewed suggests that there is little reason to think that faith schools are socially divisive. Rather, they are as successful as community schools at reflecting the multicultural make-up of English communities and promoting cohesion.

The balance of the available evidence suggests that when schools act as their own admission authorities – as many do – a degree of socio-economic ‘sorting’ can result

(e.g., with faith schools admitting a lower than proportionate number of pupils eligible for free school meals compared with their locality). However, faith-based selection criteria are likely to be only one cause amongst others of this phenomenon.

There is a clear 'faith school effect' across a range of measures, including academic performance, but the cause of this is disputed. Evidence suggests that the profile of the school intake is an important cause, and that once this is accounted for the 'faith school effect' is much weaker.

There is comparatively little research on the nature and use of a distinctively Christian or other faith-based approach to education (or ethos), and therefore no conclusions can be drawn about the possible impact of this.

The report concludes by noting that there is a significant diversity of schools grouped under the term faith schools, which contributes to the patchy nature of the evidence base. Further research would be welcome, though research is unlikely ever to offer comprehensive or final answers to questions around their overall legitimacy.

The report recommends that those engaged in the debate acknowledge the partiality and contested nature of many of the conclusions and seek to make conversations more constructive. Supporters of faith schools should move away from a justification based on academic outcomes and instead develop a stronger understanding and articulation of the value of an education in a school with a religious character, possibly in relation to ethos, a more holistic approach and development of character. For Christian schools in particular, there are strong reasons to reassess policies around pupil selection, to avoid what looks like a degree of indirect socio-economic sorting, especially given their historic ethic of concern for the poorest in society.

introduction

More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools is a summary and analysis of the evidence on state-maintained faith schools in England. Drawing on, as far as possible, all available and relevant research, it asks two interrelated questions: What do state-maintained faith schools offer students? and, How do state-maintained faith schools impact society?

Theos acknowledges at the outset that 'in law, there is no such thing as a faith school'.¹ There are, however, schools with a religious character. The term 'faith schools' is both problematic and contested and is rejected, for example, by the major churches. Our decision to use 'faith schools' as shorthand for a range of schools 'with a religious character' merely seeks to reflect the language of the public debate. For the purposes of this report, 'faith school' simply refers to a state-maintained school within England which teaches the wider, general curriculum, but which is affiliated to a particular religious denomination or organisation.

Faith schools constitute about a third of all state-maintained or non-fee paying schools in England.² Over 99% of these schools are Christian, but some are Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, or Hindu.³ State-maintained schools may be community schools, voluntary aided schools, voluntary controlled schools, foundation schools, academies or free schools. The next chapter offers a more detailed discussion of the types of state-maintained schools and the differences between them. In summary, these differences relate to governance, property ownership, curricula, admissions and employment.

This report is primarily focussed on voluntary schools. Voluntary schools may be voluntary aided or controlled.⁴ Although the next chapter will provide greater detail, it will suffice to note that each of these schools receives, or can receive, a different amount of state funding and that the extent of the formal influence of the associated religious group varies. In fact, the vast majority (about 95%) of faith schools are either voluntary aided or controlled.⁵ In 2012, about 4 per cent were academies or free schools, although this is growing rapidly, and less than one per cent are foundation schools.⁶ Although academies and free schools have a growing impact on the landscape of state-maintained faith schooling in England, the research on these schools is so far limited,

so we do not address them here. Similarly, independent or fee-paying schools are not within the scope of this report. As the faith school debate has largely centred on equality of access to education, it is the existence of non-fee-paying faith schools that is most contentious, and therefore they are the focus of this report.

an arena for proxy debates

The existence of faith schools is controversial, in part, because the debate around faith schools serves as a proxy for other contentious issues. Often the faith school debate is in fact about the role of religion in the public square. This manifests itself in the seemingly intractable tensions between the religious advocates of faith schools, for example, the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, and their secular opponents, such as, the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. However, people's positions on the various components of the debate cannot be neatly categorised – for instance, they do not necessarily align with religious affiliation. For example, the Accord Coalition and the newly launched Fair Admissions Campaign advance a particular model of “inclusive education”,⁷ “without regard to religion or belief”.⁸ Yet their membership base includes the British Muslims for Secular Democracy, the Christian think-tank Ekklesia, the General Assembly of Free Christian and Unitarian Churches, and the Hindu Academy. Similarly, David Conway at the religiously unaffiliated think-tank Civitas advances the merits of faith schools.⁹

Often the faith school debate is in fact about the role of religion in the public square.

Discussions about faith schools occur in a particular historical context. In England, the histories of faith and education are deeply intertwined. Indeed, the provision of schooling by the Church predates the modern state education system.¹⁰ As the next chapter will outline, these schools often had a mission of serving the poor and disenfranchised. The introduction of non-religious state-maintained schools and the evolving relationship between Church and state has problematized the role of religious institutions. Today, however, the debate is never purely about the relationship between religion and state. It is about how we choose to live in an increasingly diverse society, how much scope we allow for parental choice, how we acknowledge diversity and pluralism while promoting cohesion and respecting liberty. We must also determine how we envision common spaces like schools. Are they ‘neutral’ spaces that require us to disregard our religious, philosophical and cultural identities? Or can they be spaces where we come together in difference and equality?

These conversations are grounded in a more fundamental philosophical problem about the objective of education. Is worldview-neutral knowledge dissemination possible? Is it possible to teach or learn without the content being profoundly shaped by who we are or what we value? For advocates of faith schools, faith plays a pivotal role in shaping the conception of ‘the good’.¹¹ The guiding documents of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, for instance, highlight that the contribution of faith schools lies in their commitment to value-based education and the need to replace the atomistic understanding of the individual with a sense of belonging and service to the community.

Drawing on a declaration from the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Education Service elaborates:

(T)he Church provides Catholic schools to be more than just places where pupils are equipped with learning and skills for the workplace and responsible citizenship. Rather, they are to be the communities where the spiritual, cultural and personal worlds within which we live are harmonised to form the roots from which grow our values, motivation, aspirations and the moral imperatives that inform our choices and actions as persons.¹²

Similarly for the Church of England, education has as its core the dual purpose of ‘witness’ and ‘service’. It finds expression in:

a sense of obligation to share an enduring narrative, a set of values and ways of behaving that stem from and express the Christian foundation of the school, thereby sharing the faith with all members of the school community [and an] engagement with and service to society: the provision of education as a common good, open to all and of benefit to all.¹³

For secular and humanist critics of faith schools, however, the good is conceptualized in terms of rationality, autonomy and objectivity.¹⁴ The National Secular Society’s vision is premised on a complete separation of religion and state and the creation of spaces where religious freedoms may be exercised but never privileged.¹⁵ In practice, they call for the elimination of the expression of religious beliefs or preferences by any state institution, including state-funded schools.¹⁶ For the British Humanist Association, education rests on the celebration of humanism: a trust in “the scientific method, evidence, and reason to discover truths about the universe” and the placing of “human welfare and happiness at the centre of...ethical decision making”.¹⁷ To this end, they campaign to end the expansion of faith schools and promote reform within existing faith schools.

Given the competing visions of the role of faith in the public square, of diversity, liberty, cohesion and even the purpose of education, it is unsurprising that these debates remain heated. Coming to terms with our identity as a diverse and plural society fundamentally requires us to navigate our way through the seemingly competing human rights of individuals, children and families, of our rights and freedoms to religion, belief and expression.

However, making faith schools the site for all these wider debates loads a narrow issue with ideological weight that it cannot bear. While it is impossible to evade these wider themes or approach this issue from a position of neutrality, our objective is to clear the ground and provide a resource for those seeking to better understand the issues.

our approach

Drawing together evidence from a wide range of sources, including books, academic papers, newspaper reports and polls, we seek to represent the spread of evidence on these issues. This is not a meta-analysis in the classic academic sense, as it casts its net beyond academic research where appropriate, but it should function as a similarly useful resource for those interested in the field. We did not conduct any primary research. Instead, using an evidence-based approach, we aim to highlight points of consensus, divergence and gaps in existing research. Our report is aimed at a non-technical audience and we have attempted to combine rigour with clarity and accessibility.

Engaging with the available evidence and the core arguments of advocates and opponents of faith schools, our central focus is the impact of state-maintained faith schools on society and students. Our focus is narrow and our aim is to look at the main areas of the debate dispassionately, without seeking to privilege or problematize either faith or community schools. The report is structured around a series of questions that seek to reflect the tenor of the debate and grapple with the core critique and defence of faith schools:

- Are faith schools socially divisive?
- Are faith schools exclusive and elitist?
- Is there a faith school effect?
- Do faith schools offer a distinctive education experience?

These chapters are preceded by another section entitled ‘facts and figures’ laying out the meaning of the key terms and the most useful statistics.

It is worth noting at this juncture that there are some limitations to this report. First, the faith school landscape varies significantly across the United Kingdom and consequently this report has chosen to focus primarily on faith schools in England and not Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. Second, the report may appear to prioritise research on Church of England and Roman Catholic schools to the detriment of schools of other denominations and religions. However, this is merely reflective of the fact that around 98% of faith schools are either Catholic or Anglican and the vast majority of available research centres on them.¹⁸ Third, there are some components of the debate which fall outside the scope of this report. For example, we do not discuss allegations of homophobia in faith schools, for two reasons. First, the most recent Stonewall School Report found pupils in faith schools are now no more likely than pupils in non-faith schools to report homophobic bullying.¹⁹

98% of faith schools are either Catholic or Anglican.

Second, a discussion about homophobic bullying necessarily entails engaging with the debate about the content of religious education and school curricula, which are beyond the purview of this report. These issues in turn are bound to the deeply contentious issue of proselytism, which merits greater consideration than this report allows, and will be focus of a forthcoming Theos report. Finally, this report does not explore the relationship between faith schools and human rights and equality legislation. Although there is significant research on the law and possible areas for legal reform, a rigorous discussion of this issue would require further primary research and access to data on admissions and employment, which is outside the ambit of the project.

In 2003, a researcher at the University of London Institute of Education wrote:

Much of the political and public debate about faith-based schooling is conducted at the level of generalised assertion and counter-assertion, with little reference to educational scholarship or research. There is a tendency in these debates to draw upon historical images of faith schooling (idealised and critical); to use ideological advocacy (both for and against) and to deploy strong claims about the effects of faith-based schooling upon personal and intellectual autonomy and the wider consequences of such schooling for social harmony, race relations and the common good of society.²⁰

Ten years later, the problem is as deeply entrenched. We hope that our report begins a process that turns a debate grounded primarily in ideology into one that pays due attention to the facts.

introduction – references

- 1 Rachel Barker and John Anderson, 'Segregation or cohesion: Church of England Schools in Bradford', in Roy Gardner et al. *Faith Schools: Consensus or Conflict*, (Routledge, 2005), p. 122.
- 2 <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/maintained/b00198369/voluntary-and-faith-schools>.
- 3 See table: Data on Faith Schools <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/data-on-faith-schools.xlsx> (Correct at January 2012, and obtained by FOI from the Department of Education) <http://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/faith-schools/>.
- 4 For a more detailed discussion of voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools see page 20 and 21.
- 5 Data on Faith Schools table.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/about-us/>.
- 8 <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/about/>.
- 9 David Conway, 'Faith Schools: Enrichment or Division?', Paper delivered to the London Society for the Study of Religion on 7 June 2011, http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/Conway_FaithSchools.pdf.
- 10 <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/b0066996/faith-schools>.
- 11 Trevor Cooling, *Doing God in Education* (Theos, 2010).
- 12 *Gravissium Educationatis*, as cited in *Christ at the Centre* (Catholic Truth Society, 2013), p. 7.
- 13 Church School of the Future Review (Church of England Archbishops Council Education Division, 2012), p. 8.
- 14 Cooling, *Doing God in Education* (Theos, 2010), Chapter 1.
- 15 <http://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html>.
- 16 <http://www.secularism.org.uk/secularcharter.html>.
- 17 <http://humanism.org.uk/humanism/>.
- 18 <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/maintained/b00198369/voluntary-and-faith-schools>.
- 19 April Guasp, *The experiences of gay young people in Britain's schools in 2012* (Stonewall, 2012), p. 6. It should be noted that the report also stated that "faith schools are still less likely than schools in general to take steps to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying".
- 20 Gerald Grace, 'Educational Studies and Faith-Based Schooling: Moving from Prejudice to Evidence-Based Argument', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 51(2): pp. 149–167, June 2003, p. 149.

facts and figures

Church involvement in education provision predates the existence of the modern state education system. The Church of England provided 17,000 public schools between 1811 and 1860 through the National Society, with the intention of providing education to the poor at a time when the government was unwilling, and perhaps unable to do so.¹

The creation and expansion of non-religious state-maintained schools in 1870 was not intended to provide a radical alternative to traditional church schools. Rather, these schools were simply seen as building upon and expanding the work of traditional church schools.² Since the late nineteenth century, Church of England, Catholic, Jewish, Methodist, and Quaker schools have existed within the state-maintained sector. The founding of these schools reflected a need to address problems faced by the respective faith communities, including, “poverty, educational inequalities and the desire to use education as a route for socio-economic mobility”.³ They also sought to address “successive waves of immigration and efforts to promote integration”.⁴ Hence, the number of Roman Catholic schools grew to respond to the influx of working-class Irish immigrants between 1847 and 1906.⁵ It is also revealing that the Catholic Education Service was formerly known as the Catholic Poor School Committee.⁶

The term ‘faith school’ refers to the ethos and governance of the school.

In 1902, the Education Act merged church and state-based school systems to establish free, compulsory Christian education. A further Education Act in 1944 introduced the dual system of education recognisable in England today: the co-existence of schools with and without a religious character in the state-maintained sector.⁷

In many ways, the lines between state-maintained and non-religious schools continue to be blurred. For instance, all state-maintained schools are legislatively required to have a daily act of collective worship. In schools without a religious character, this collective worship is not neutral, but must (by law) be “wholly, or mainly of a broadly Christian nature”.⁸ Within state-maintained faith schools, this collective worship may be carried out in accordance with the tenets and practices of its designated faith. Yet the term ‘faith school’ does not refer to the religious beliefs of its pupils. A state-maintained school may, by chance or geography, contain pupils all of one religion, but this would

not be enough to qualify the school in question as a faith school. The term thus refers to the ethos and governance of the school. The pupils need not necessarily follow the religion of the school (state-maintained faith schools are required by law to admit pupils from all faiths and none if they cannot fill their quotas), but its lessons (despite following the National Curriculum in all but Religious Education and Citizenship) and its environment are shaped by the tenets and beliefs of a particular religious tradition. The precise nature of a state-maintained faith school is largely dependent upon its financial status and relationship to the state. If a school is *voluntary controlled* (VC), the primary responsibility for the school's admissions and staff lies with the local authority. If the school is *voluntary aided* (VA), the school has greater autonomy in these areas.

types of faith school

The term 'faith school' is relatively new, originating during Tony Blair's premiership. 'Faith school' can refer to schools with a religious character in either the state-maintained (non fee-paying) or independent (fee-paying) sectors.

Distinct from previous state-maintained schools with religious affiliation, 'church schools' had, until 1997, been invariably of Christian or Jewish origin. The use of the term 'faith schools' is indicative of a broader desire from other religious groups for their own specialist schools, and the willingness of the Labour government to encourage and support these schools on the grounds of justice and fairness.⁹

A maintained school is deemed by the Department of Education to have a religious character if it fulfils one of the following criteria:

- At least one member of the governing body is appointed as a foundation governor to represent the interests of a religion or a religious denomination.
- If the school should close, the premises will be disposed of in accordance with the requirement of the trust which may be for the benefit of one or more religions or religious foundations.
- The foundation which owns the site has made it available on the condition that the school provides education in accordance with the tenets of the faith.

Within the state-maintained sector, faith schools may be voluntary aided, voluntary controlled, foundation schools, academies, or free schools. Academies and free schools, in turn may not be registered as having a religious character but may still have a faith ethos. The table below, adapted from data gathered by the British Humanist Association, offers

a snap shot of the main differences between state-maintained schools with a registered religious character.¹⁰ The differences between voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools, which form the main focus of our paper are discussed in greater detail below.

Type of school	Community schools	Voluntary Controlled schools	Voluntary Aided schools	Foundation schools	Academies and Free schools
Percentage of which are faith schools	0	97	99	5	17
Percentage of total faith schools	0	36	59	1	4
Funding	From local authority	From local authority	Local authority pays all running costs. Central government pays 90% of building costs. Religious authority pays remaining 10% of costs	From local authority	From central Government. Sponsor no longer required to invest any start-up capital costs
Fee-paying	No	No	No	No	No
Are admissions on the basis of faith permitted?	No.	About a quarter of authorities allow some faith-based selection	Only if over-subscribed	Only if over-subscribed	Only Free schools with a religious character allowed 50% of faith-based selectio
If occupational requirement is demonstrated, can a religious test be used to appoint, remunerate and promote staff?	No.	Only for 20% of teachers	Yes.	Only for 20% of teachers	Yes.

There is a further, crucial distinction to be made between voluntary aided and voluntary controlled faith schools. Both are state maintained, but their freedom and relative

independence from the broader system is markedly different. When a 'faith school' is referred to in public debates, it generally refers to a voluntary aided school as it is these schools which have the greatest autonomy from the local authority (LA).

voluntary aided faith schools

- **Admissions:** the governing body of a voluntary aided (VA) faith school acts as the school's admissions authority (in place of the LA) and consequently may give priority in admissions to pupils of a specific faith. When a VA faith school is oversubscribed, it may admit 100% of its pupils from a specific faith. However, if a VA school is undersubscribed, it must admit pupils from all faiths and none. As with all maintained schools, a voluntary aided faith school must adhere to the Admissions Code and School Admissions Appeals Code.¹¹
- **Employment:** a VA faith school may employ all teaching staff from a specific faith. It may also apply a faith test in the appointment of supplementary staff, where it can demonstrate a 'genuine occupational requirement'.
- **Funding:** a VA school may receive up to 100% of its capital funding at the discretion of the Secretary of State, although it is typical for the governors of the school to provide 10% of capital funds. The land and buildings of a VA school are typically owned by a charity or religious organisation, such as a church.
- **National Curriculum:** both VA and voluntary controlled (VC) schools must follow the National Curriculum. However, VA schools may teach Religious Education in accordance with their particular 'trust deed', or religious affiliation, unless parents request otherwise. These lessons are not subject to Ofsted inspection but must be inspected under the Education Act 2005 by a person chosen by the governing body after consultation with a person deemed appropriate by the appropriate religious authority.¹² A VA school may also decide how, and whether, it wishes to teach subjects which are not on the curriculum, such as Personal, Social and Health Education and Citizenship.¹³

voluntary controlled faith schools

- **Admissions:** in a VC school, the admissions policy is usually determined by the LA which may prioritise pupils of a particular faith, although this is not typical. If oversubscribed, then VC schools may prioritise up to 100% of places on faith-based criteria, and if undersubscribed, a VC school must admit pupils of all

faiths and none. As with all maintained schools, VC schools must adhere to the Admissions Code and School Admissions Appeals Code.

- **Employment:** A VC school must adhere to the employment regulations set out by the LA but may discriminate on the basis of faith for up to 20% of staff (including head teachers).
- **Funding:** A VC school is funded wholly by the LA.
- **National Curriculum:** all VC schools must adhere to the National Curriculum in all areas, including Religious Education – unless parents request denominational Religious Education. As with VA schools, Religious Education is not subject to Ofsted inspection, but is subject to inspection under section 48 of the 2005 Education Act. For VC schools, an inspection is to be carried out by a person chosen by “the foundation governors after consultation with the appropriate religious authority”.¹⁴

There are therefore significant differences between VA and VC faith schools – primarily in relation to the admission of pupils and employment of staff, both of which VA schools have far greater control over. All Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim schools are VA (with the exception of one Catholic foundation school) whilst Church of England and Methodist schools are a mixture of VA and VC.¹⁵

how many faith schools are there?

According to data from the Department for Education, one in three (34%) state-maintained schools in England are faith schools, or 6,750 schools out of a total of 19,783.¹⁶ Of these state-maintained faith schools, about 99% are affiliated to the Christian faith: 68% to the Church of England, 30% to the Roman Catholic Church, and less than one per cent to Methodist and other Christian denominations. Compared to the 4,598 Church of England state-maintained faith schools, there are 41 Jewish schools, 12 Muslim schools, five Sikh schools and eight schools characterised as ‘other’.¹⁷

conclusion

England’s unique dual system of community and faith schools within the state-maintained sector reflects both the legacy of church involvement in schooling and the changing religious composition of society. Today, about a third of state-maintained schools are faith schools. The vast majority are voluntary schools associated with the Christian faith, with about 36% voluntary controlled and 59% voluntary aided.

chapter 1 – references

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- 2 Julia Ipsgrave and Ursula McKenna: 'Diverse Experiences and Common Vision: English Students' Perspectives on Religion and Religious Education' in Thorsten Knauth, *Encountering Religious Pluralism in School and Society: a Qualitative Study of Teenage Perspectives in Europe* (Waxman, Munster: 2008), p. 113.
- 3 Rob Berkeley, *Right to Divide?: Faith Schools and Community Cohesion* (Runnymede, 2008), <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/RightToDivide-2008.pdf> p. 11.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid, p. 12.
- 7 *Faith in the System*, p. 2.
- 8 Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, Schedule 20, para. 3(2).
- 9 Robert Jackson, 'Should the State Fund Faith-Based Schools? A Review of the Arguments', *British Journal of Religious Education* 25(2) (2003): 89–102, p. 91.
- 10 These figures have been rounded to the nearest percent. <http://www.humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/schools-with-a-religious-character.pdf>.
- 11 The Schools Admissions Code and the School Admissions Appeals Code are two key pieces of legislation applicable to the admissions authorities of all maintained schools, and Academies. The aim of the School Admissions Code legislation is to ensure that all school places for maintained schools and academies are allocated and offered in an open and fair way. This piece of legislation is to be read in conjunction with the School Admissions Appeals code, which ensures the independence of admission appeal panels, and to ensure that all appeals for maintained schools and Academies are conducted in a fair and transparent way (Correct according to the Department for Education, <http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/statutory/g00213254/school-admissions-code-2012>, <http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/statutory/g00213244/school-admission-appeals-code-2012>, accessed September 2013).
- 12 The Education Act, 2005. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/section/48>.
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are faith schools divisive?

The Cattle Report found that the 2001 riots in the cities of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham were the outcome of “the ‘parallel and polarised lives’ of residents who were ‘self-segregated’ in neighbourhoods and schools”.¹ Some argued that the report conflated cause and effect; by criticising victims of social exclusion for favouring ‘divisive educational policies’, it failed to consider how this could be an expression of other forms of social exclusion.² Nonetheless, the tragic events of 9/11 and 7/7 underscored the urgent need for multicultural societies to better balance diversity and cohesion. In this climate, faith schools came under attack. The state-maintained faith education sector, some claimed, both embodied and perpetuated social divisions. To the extent that faith and ethnicity are correlated, faith schools were seen as promoting social segregation on both grounds.³ These schools were simultaneously represented as recruiting grounds for terrorists and religious extremists.⁴ The UK government’s response was to enact legislation, which placed a legal obligation on schools to promote both community cohesion and the wellbeing of students.⁵ This legislation also conferred Ofsted with powers – repealed in 2011 – to inspect how effective schools were at “helping pupils empathise with others, value diversity and promote shared values”.⁶

social cohesion in faith schools

The perception that faith schools *therefore* act as a cradle for social division and unrest, however, appears to be unfounded. Runnymede, a race equality think tank and member of the Accord coalition, found that despite common perceptions, the intake of faith schools *is* ethnically diverse.⁷ The report suggested that despite faith schools being more “effective at educating for a single vision than at opening a dialogue about a shared vision”, they had some success in providing opportunities “for young people of different backgrounds to mix in faith-based and secular spaces”.⁸ For example, the report highlighted for most ethnic minority groups, “Catholic schools, parishes and organisations provide a meeting place and important support in becoming fully integrated into society”.⁹ Further, Roman Catholic schools were found to have a much higher population of black Caribbean and black African young people than any other

group of schools, but a lower population of pupils with an Asian background.¹⁰ Similarly, in certain places, 60-90% of pupils in Church of England schools are Muslim.¹¹ Despite several good-practice examples, Runnymede found that faith schools generally failed to systematically articulate what a faith-based approach meant for diversity and equality.¹² They observed, with disappointment, that given faith schools' emphasis on:

whole-child approaches, values and moral education, their teaching of race, gender and disability equality is similar to that offered by non-faith schools, and they are therefore no better placed to respond to the needs of young people.¹³

Consequently, they concluded that the experience of effective intervention by faith schools to promote race equality is as mixed as it is within the broader education system.

Church groups and religious organisations argue that faith schools play an important role in promoting social harmony. The Church of England and the Centre for Christian Education, for example, have separately conducted research examining Ofsted inspection findings on schools and social cohesion. The Church of England research revealed that although there was no difference between schools at primary level, faith schools at the secondary level fared better on average than schools without a religious character.¹⁴ The Centre for Christian Education's findings were more emphatic. In the three year cycle between 2008 and 2011, it found that "Catholic schools [at the primary and secondary level were] more effective in promoting community cohesion, as defined by government, than other educational institutions".¹⁵

Other research appears to confirm this conclusion. The Catholic Education Service highlights the role of faith schools in encouraging participation of minority communities, irrespective of their faith or denomination, within mainstream society.¹⁶ Runnymede agreed that "inequalities and the failure to tackle religious discrimination in non-faith schooling are significant drivers for faith school attendance".¹⁷ A limited study exploring data from one academic year only appears to reinforce these choices. It found that students from minority ethnic communities and disadvantaged backgrounds in Catholic schools appear to be achieving "higher scores in National Curriculum tests and in the various measures of examination attainment favoured by government for comparing institutional performance" than their counterparts in non-faith schools.¹⁸

The Accord coalition and the Fair Admissions Campaign, while not engaging in the question of religious discrimination in non-faith schools, dispute the assertion that faith schools are better at promoting community cohesion. They suggest Ofsted's inspection criteria were limited and failed to consider "how representative schools were of their local communities in terms of religion or belief, ethnicity or socio-economic factors".¹⁹ This argument is explored further in the next chapter.

social capital and models of integration

There is extensive research which establishes that school diversity has a positive impact on community cohesion and mutual understanding. Diverse ethnic composition at a school level promotes positive inter-group attitudes and more cross-group friendships.²⁰ The benefits of mixed primary schooling are found to extend into the early years of secondary school.²¹ Further, there is “some evidence to suggest that parents learned to respect people from other backgrounds as a result of their children’s experiences in mixed schools”.²²

That social harmony is a good is not in dispute. Instead, it is competing constructions of ‘social capital’ and models of integration that lie at the heart of this debate.²³ Social capital, although contested, refers to “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures”.²⁴ At the heart of social capital theory is the assertion that “relationships matter”.²⁵

In simple terms, [it] claims that a society with high levels of social capital is a cohesive, well-functioning society, with improving socially desirable outcomes, such as high educational achievement, and fewer negative ones, such as crime and social exclusion.²⁶

Faith schools are keen to emphasise their historical role in promoting integration. Church of England schools have traditionally sought to cater to the needs of the poor and less privileged. Jewish and Catholic schools have played an important role in the successful integration of earlier minority faith immigrants. Today, Muslim schools seek to provide an environment for children and young people to develop the confidence to play a role in the wider community and to theologically explore their dual identities as Muslim and British.²⁷ To the extent that the Muslim model (and older models of Catholic and Jewish schools) counter the dominant model of the community school, they may be seen as prioritising “bonding social capital” or the development of a collective identity over “bridging social capital” or the development of connections between people who are different.²⁸ In this sense, they embody different positions on whether high bonding capital or high bridging capital is better for civil society. An alternative view expresses concern about a sole emphasis on high bonding capital. To mitigate the risk that religious identity might undermine community cohesion, some call for a framework for civic engagement, which also emphasises bridging capital.²⁹ However, it would be misleading to suggest that all faith schools champion a particular model of cohesion which prioritises

Despite common perceptions, the intake of faith schools is ethnically diverse.

bonding rather than bridging social capital. Indeed, in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, England has seen faith and ethnic communities embrace different and changing visions of social capital and models of integration.

conclusion

The evidence suggests that faith schools in general do not promote social division on racial and ethnic lines. Faith schools are ethnically diverse spaces. They have drawn on the discourse of social capital to emphasise their commitment to immigrant social mobility. At worst, faith schools' efforts at promoting cohesion are as good as the broader education system.

chapter 2 – references

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are faith schools exclusive and elitist?

The assertion that faith schools are exclusive and elitist has at its core the assumption that faith-based pupil selection criteria have the effect of favouring the socio-economically privileged. As outlined in Chapter 1, faith schools (at the time, solely Church schools) began with a mission of ameliorating poverty and inequality by providing education for all. Their stated policies continue to reflect this commitment. However, it is often asserted that in practice faith-based schools do not reflect the socio-economic composition of their communities, educating fewer children from poorer backgrounds. This chapter has three purposes. Firstly, it provides an overview of the relevant legislation governing admissions. Secondly, it explores the claim that the admissions in faith schools contribute to a socio-economic bias. Finally, it asks whether there is an exclusive correlation between faith-based selection and socio-economic filtering.

the law governing admissions

There is legislation in force which prevents admission decisions that discriminate on the basis of socio-economic criteria. Prior to 2007, admission authorities were allowed to set admissions criteria that did not comply with the Code of Practice on School Admissions if they had good reason.¹ The 2007 Schools Admissions Code applied to admissions from September 2008, as a statutory requirement for all school admissions authorities. A further code, which came into effect in February 2009, continued to mandate statutory regulation in this vein. The 2007 Schools Admissions Code enforced several legal requirements with regard to the admissions policies used by state-maintained schools. The Code stipulated:

In drawing up their admission arrangements, admission authorities must ensure that the practices and the criteria used to decide the allocation of school places:

- a) are clear in the sense of being free from doubt and easily understood...;
- b) are objective and based on known facts. Admission authorities and governing bodies must not make subjective decisions or use subjective criteria;

- c) are procedurally fair and are also equitable for all groups of children (including those with special educational needs, disabilities, those in public care, or who may be a young carer);
- d) enable parents' preferences for the schools of their choice to be met to the maximum extent possible;
- e) provide parents or carers with easy access to helpful admissions information...;
- f) comply with all relevant legislation, including...on equal opportunities...

Failure to comply with the mandatory provisions means that the body concerned is in breach of its statutory duty to act in accordance with the provisions in the Code, and could result in an objection being made to the Schools Adjudicator or a complaint being made to the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families.²

The primary importance of the Schools Admissions Code for faith schools, and all voluntary aided schools with responsibility over admissions, is in terms of the 'supplementary information forms'. As the name suggests, supplementary information forms may be supplied by such schools in addition to the Common Application Form provided by the local authority. In relation to these forms:

Admission authorities must not use supplementary application or information forms that ask:

- a) for any personal details about parents, such as criminal convictions or marital, occupational or financial status;
- b) for details about parents' achievements, educational background or whether their first language is English;
- c) for details about parents' or children's disabilities, special educational needs or medical conditions, unless this is in support of positive action...;
- d) about parents' or children's interests, hobbies or membership of societies (this does not apply to membership or participation in activities as part of religious observance or practice at schools designated as having a religious character).³

Therefore, schools are effectively prevented, by law, from discriminating against particular socio-economic groups, or from taking parental information into account

when applying oversubscription criteria. Schools may not interview prospective pupils, parents or carers and they must not accept monetary donations. These things are illegal for all state-maintained schools, including faith schools.⁴

socio-economic bias?

Extensive research conducted prior to the introduction of this legislation made the case that there was “a direct correlation between the number of potentially selective admissions criteria that schools use, and the extent to which their intakes are advantaged”.⁵ A 2007 IPPR Report argued that there was no justification for schools to act as their own admissions authorities, other than to select students by ability or socio-economic background.⁶ It demonstrated that schools that act as their own admission authorities were both “hugely over-represented in the top 200 comprehensive schools as measured by examination results” and “much more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their local areas than schools whose admissions are controlled by the local authority”.⁷

The National Union of Teachers endorsed the recommendation of this report that “no school should be its own admissions authority.”⁸ The report, concluded that the current system of admissions is a direct cause of “segregation by social class and ability across our schools system” and recommended that all local authorities should “move towards a system of area-wide banding, where the objective of achieving a mixed ability intake of pupils at every school would sit alongside other factors such as parental preference and the distance from home to school”.⁹

Rebecca Allen’s doctoral research corroborated these findings.¹⁰ Her work demonstrated that “own-admissions schools have intakes that are more advantaged than community schools, even when the characteristics of local neighbourhoods are taken into account”.¹¹ This phenomenon is not restricted to any particular denomination of faith schools, but is a pattern common to all voluntary aided schools.¹² However, the Accord Coalition’s reading of the IPPR report suggests that while all schools that act as their own admissions authorities are likely to be unrepresentative of their local areas, this is particularly pronounced in faith schools.¹³

Despite the introduction of the 2007 legislation, the data suggest there is some cause for concern that faith school admissions continue to perpetuate socio-economic divides. A 2012 *Guardian* report found that the vast majority of Catholic and Church of England schools continue to have a lower proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than the average for the local authority area and amongst children in the same postcode. The *Guardian* reported:

Some 73% of Catholic primaries and 72% of Catholic secondaries have a lower proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than the average for the local authority. It is the same for CofE primary and secondary schools. Some 74% of these primaries and 65.5% of secondaries have a smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than is average for the local authority. In contrast, non-religious schools tend to reflect their neighbourhoods. Half (51%) of non-religious primaries and 45% of non-religious secondaries have a smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than is representative for their local authority.

Faith schools fared no better when examined at a more local level. We compared the proportion of poor pupils in each postcode with the proportion of poor pupils in faith schools and non-faith schools studying in that postcode. The data show 76% of Catholic primaries and 65% of Catholic secondaries have a smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than is representative of their postcode. This is the case for 63.5% of CofE primaries and 40% of CofE secondaries. Non-religious primaries and secondaries are far more likely to mirror the proportion of poor pupils in their postcode – just 47% of non-faith primaries and 29% of non-faith secondaries take a smaller proportion of free school meals than is representative for their postcode.¹⁴

“Own-admissions schools have intakes that are more advantaged than community schools.”

Drawing on Department of Education performance data, the Fair Admissions Campaign also argues that faith-based selection criteria result in socio-economic sorting. Their research found that Catholic primaries and secondaries in England have on average 26% and

20% fewer pupils, respectively, requiring free school meals than their post codes, while Voluntary Aided Church of England schools have 17% and 8% fewer. Schools without a religious character have 17% more at primary level and 26% more at secondary level.¹⁵

The use of free school meals eligibility as a proxy for whether the school’s intake reflects the socio-economic make-up of its community is something of a blunt instrument. The Catholic Education Service, for example, suggests that fewer eligible children might claim free school meals because of the associated stigma. They also assert that their catchment areas are wider than the postcode or local authority where their schools are situated. Similarly, the Catholic Education Service contests the claim that Catholic schools are unrepresentative: separate figures from the DfE showed 18.6% of pupils at Catholic primary schools live in the 10% most deprived areas of England, compared with only 14.3% of primary school pupils nationally. Some 17% of pupils at Catholic schools lived in the 10% most deprived areas compared to 12% of pupils nationally.¹⁶ Claiming

that the local authorities controlled the admissions for more than half its schools, the Church of England challenged the assertion that their schools were unrepresentative of the local communities and that admissions were failing to mirror local diversity.¹⁷ Despite this, the balance of the limited and contested evidence appears to point to some degree of socio-economic sorting.

causation

The numerous, sometimes conflicting theories which attempt to explain the perceived socio-economic sorting at oversubscribed faith schools suggest there are complex and multiple causal factors. One commentator, for instance, argues that socio-economic sorting is inevitably bound to systemic issues like 'location disadvantage'. He argues that house price premiums in residential areas linked to the catchment areas of high-performing state schools serve to exclude many middle- and low-income households. Unless the argument is made that all fee-paying independent schools should be abolished and access to high-demand housing made more equitable, then a focus on faith schools as creating 'education apartheid' limits the state's role to preventing social separation on the basis of religion but not doing so on the basis of parents' economic (and indeed social and cultural) capital.¹⁸

For academic Geoffrey Walford, diversity of school choice will always come at the cost of equity. He suggests freedom of choice advances an "individualistic and inequitable education system".¹⁹ Indeed, as many disillusioned parents have found, once popular schools are oversubscribed, it is the schools that select children rather than parents having a 'choice' of school. Within each area there is a likelihood that a hierarchy of schools will develop, and there is growing evidence that various privileged groups are better able than others to influence the selection of their children by those schools at the top of the hierarchy. Those with most concern about the education of their children are able to 'play the system' such that their children have a greater chance of being selected by the prestigious schools.²⁰

Rebecca Allen and Anne West conducted research which demonstrates that "parents reporting a religious affiliation are more likely to be better educated, have a higher occupational class and a higher household income" and that "higher-income religious families are more likely to have a child at a faith school than lower-income religious families".²¹ Earlier research conducted by the IPPR supports this claim. The research found that families for which the mother had a degree or higher qualification are three times more likely to say that they knew how popular schools allocate places, and twice as likely to apply to a school outside the local authority.²² In contrast, parents from low

socio-economic backgrounds “are more likely to consider their child’s friendship groups and proximity to the school as more important than its performance table position”.²³ It is important to emphasise two things. First, the research does not point to a deliberate policy of socio-economic discrimination in faith schools. What is causing the perceived socio-economic sorting is unclear, but few suggest that faith schools admission policies are deliberately designed to that effect. Second, to the extent that a school’s perceived success is often bound to academic attainment, there are fewer incentives for oversubscribed schools to expand school places or radically alter existing admission policies.²⁴

The primary mechanism which may be facilitating this sorting appears to be the use of supplementary information forms (SIFs).²⁵ In 2009, an London School of Economics report found that SIFs were sometimes used to request information that was either unrelated to the school’s admission criteria or was impermissible under the School Admissions Code.²⁶ This information could have been used to select students on the basis of class. In addition, SIFs sometime feature questions permitted by the code, which nonetheless gather information about socio-economic status. Some examples include information about the child and parents’ language skills, the language spoken at home and previous schools attended. The use of open-ended questions and long questionnaires can disadvantage people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, in the absence of data linking patterns of applications with patterns of offers, no conclusive link can be drawn between admissions criteria, and practices and school composition.²⁷

In practice, complaints about a lack of clarity around admissions criteria seem to be fairly rare. Speaking to the House of Commons Education Select Committee on Wednesday, 2nd February 2011, Dr. Ian Craig, head of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA), sought to clarify the media interpretation of a recent OSA report, revealing that just 45 of the 151 cases reported to the OSA regarding admissions in 2010 were related to faith schools who were their own admissions authorities.²⁸ Twenty-three of these 45 were submitted with regard to SIFs, and 12 were submitted in regard to the ‘clarity and complexity’ of faith school criteria. This amounted, as Damian Hinds MP made clear in the discussion, to “12 or 23 out of 6753 religious schools in this country”.²⁹

The ability of oversubscribed faith schools to prioritise students from their faith communities is often cited as the causal factor for faith schools’ less representative socio-economic make up. Some suggest that parents from more privileged backgrounds seek to enrol their children in high performing, oversubscribed faith schools by feigning religiosity. It has been suggested that because they have greater resources at their disposal that they are better able to manipulate existing faith-based selection criteria.³⁰ We have not found any concrete evidence to support this idea.

However, it has been suggested that faith-based selection criteria often work to exclude devout families from immigrant or lower socio-economic backgrounds.³¹ This is supported by Allen and West's research, which finds that poorer religious families are less represented at oversubscribed faith schools.³² This might occur for two reasons. First, supplementary information forms gather information on church attendance and may sometimes require a reference from a priest. However, parents who are new to the country or working several jobs may not have established patterns of church attendance. Additionally, they are less likely to be involved in their church community.³³ Second, complex application processes and the composition of oversubscribed schools sometimes act as 'social clues' which have the effect of deterring less privileged families.³⁴

While there is evidence linking selection criteria with advantaged intakes, it is unclear whether faith-based selection is the sole determinant. The Fair Admissions Campaign is seeking to conduct a mapping exercise to establish the extent of religious selection. While this will be helpful, there is a need for greater research establishing a causal link between faith-based selection and socio-economic privilege. As previously mentioned, Accord's analysis of a 2007 IPPR report did make the case that VA faith schools were ten times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than faith schools where the local authority acted as the admission authority. However, it also concluded that non-religious state schools which acted as their own admission authorities were six times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than schools for whom the local authority is the admission authority.³⁵ This research suggests that faith-based selection is not the sole cause of socio-economic sorting. This effect appears to be more widespread and linked to the existence of schools which act as their own admissions authority.

The use of long questionnaires can disadvantage people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

conclusion

The research thus far, although neither complete nor conclusive, points to some degree of indirect socio-economic sorting in schools which act as their own admission authorities. Whether faith-based selection can be isolated as the sole determinant, however, is not firmly established. While there may be good reasons to challenge faith-based selection, it would not solve the wider problem of socio-economic filtering which occurs at all oversubscribed schools.

chapter 3 – references

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is there a faith school effect?

One of the most popular arguments in favour of state-maintained faith schools is that these schools achieve better academic results than community, or non-religious state schools. It is to this argument from attainment – the ostensible ability of faith schools to achieve higher levels of pupil attainment by means of their superior ‘ethos’ – that Tony Blair turned to justify his encouragement of the increase in the numbers of state-funded faith schools in England and Wales. The Labour government Green Paper, *Schools Building on Success* (2001), cited the “good record” held by these schools in “delivering a high quality of education”, and this association between faith schools and greater academic attainment has continued to influence government policy ever since.¹ Against this, faith school critics claim that the admissions policies of these schools (referring here in particular to voluntary aided faith schools) allow these schools to handpick students by ability and socio-economic position under the guise of religious faith, and that this process accounts for any and all levels of heightened academic attainment. This chapter examines two questions: Do faith schools promote higher academic achievement? And if so, what are the causal factors?

higher academic achievement

A recent investigation carried out by *The Daily Telegraph* used data provided by the Department for Education to illustrate that 60% of ‘top-scoring’ primary schools in England, schools in which all pupils achieved the expected attainment levels in English and Maths, were faith schools.² Of the 898 state-maintained primary schools in England which achieved government targets for Key Stage Two (KS2) examinations across the board – all pupils achieving a Level 4 in the KS2 National Curriculum Tests (SATs) – 64% were faith schools, despite only constituting around 35% of primary schools overall.

At the top end of the scale, the dominance of faith schools in the league table is even clearer: of those schools which dramatically exceeded government targets for KS2 in 2012, with 75% or more of all pupils attaining a Level 5 in their KS2 assessments, 70% (48 schools) were faith-based. A 2008 report confirmed that in primary education, taking account of the prior attainment levels of pupils and allowing for other factors known

to influence pupil attainment, such as ethnicity, sex and socio-economic position, faith schools do have higher levels of pupil progress than non-faith.³

It appears that the academic effect of faith-based primary schools is strongest for children with special educational needs: a 2005 study found whilst pupils at faith-based primary schools had an average academic advantage of one year over their counterparts at non-faith schools, this rose to 1.5 years for the academically weakest quarter of pupils. Examination results of pupils at non-faith-based primary schools were three times poorer than those at faith-based primary schools.⁴ These data point towards a level of greater academic attainment in primary level faith schools, and are supported by a number of further studies.⁵

This picture of higher academic attainment seems to translate into secondary education, though not at the same magnitude. Data released by the Department for Education in February 2013 revealed that of all the state-maintained secondary schools in England where 50% or more of pupils achieved the government target of five A* to C grade GCSEs (regardless of whether these schools were selective in admissions in terms of religion or academic background, i.e. whether these schools set entrance examinations) just under a third of these schools (32%) were faith-based, where faith schools are around 20% of the total. Moreover, of those schools which dramatically exceeded the government target, with 80% or more of their pupils attaining five A* to C grade GCSEs, over half (53%) were faith schools.⁶ A series of studies carried out by Andrew Morris between 1993 and 2005 illustrates that students in Catholic secondary schools tend to fare better in GCSE examinations – but notes that this effect does not continue to A-level.⁷ Both of these points are backed up by a 2006 report produced by the Catholic Education Service.⁸

causation

Faith school critics argue that any positive differences between the academic achievements of faith schools and other state-maintained schools are directly attributable to the admission policies of faith schools, and thus to the previous attainment levels and the contextual socio-economic make up of their pupils. This claim is corroborated, at least in part, by government-sponsored research. A report published by the Centre for the Economics of Education – an independent research centre founded by the Department for Education and Skills – sought to compare the achievement of pupils at faith and non-faith-based state-maintained schools at the end of their primary education (aged 11). This study estimated that there is only a “small advantage” (approximately a 1% increase on age-12 examination results) from attending

a faith-based primary school, and surmised that the so-called 'faith school effect' can be largely attributed to differences "between pupils who attend these schools and those who do not".⁹ Interestingly, this study found that all faith-based primary schools (both voluntary aided and voluntary controlled), and all primary schools without a religious character but with a degree of autonomy from their local authority (e.g., control over admissions policies) start from an academic advantage when compared to non-autonomous state-maintained schools. Pupils arrive at these schools with a 1.2 to 1.7 point head start on their contemporaries (where one point is equal to one school term).¹⁰ Again, this suggests that improved academic attainment is not due to a faith school effect, but to autonomy over selection criteria.

While the authors of the 2006 report suggested that any academic benefit of attending a faith-based primary school can be primarily attributed to its VA status¹¹, the report found 'no evidence' that pupils who attended a VC faith-based primary school outperform pupils from non faith-based state primaries at age 11 examinations.¹²

A 2005 analysis of statistical evidence also suggests that not only is the difference in attainment between faith-based and other state-maintained schools 'extremely small', but that in cases where faith schools do achieve "good 'raw' results" – in this case referring particularly to the quality of the results of Church of England schools – this is generally attributable to the "nature and quality of their intake."¹³

Higher levels of academic attainment in faith-based primary schools cannot be solely attributed to the faith-based nature of the school itself.

A succession of studies carried out in relation to faith-based primary schools in England in 2009 suggest that any increase in academic attainment can be primarily attributed to "prior attainment", "background", "parental self-selection", and the "selection methods used by some faith schools".¹⁴ This report also found that while "non-faith schools perform better in certain

categories, faith schools do better in others and there is no clear difference in some."¹⁵ Higher levels of academic attainment in faith-based primary schools, it seems, cannot be solely attributed to the faith-based nature of the school itself.

The Accord Coalition also asserts that better exam results in faith schools are due to the profile of their pupil intake.¹⁶ They conducted research to test the claim that students in faith schools fared better academically than students at non-faith schools. They compared faith school performance in exam result league tables and Contextual Value Added score (CVA) league tables. The CVA is regarded as the fairest government indicator of school performance. The measure adjusts the impact of external factors like "pupil mobility, ethnicity and deprivation on school attainment".¹⁷ This comparison revealed that faith schools perform better overall in exam result league tables than CVA

league tables. This seems to support their claim that superior academic results are the result of student selection rather than the 'faith' status of the school.

Andrew Morris however disputes the assertion that there is a link between higher academic achievement and student selection. He states that his analysis "provides firm evidence that (for the particular cohort he examined) the higher attainment and greater progress of pupils attending Catholic schools is not explained by socio-economic factors or pupil characteristics".¹⁸ However, he goes on to argue, while it is certainly the case that different statistical approaches would result in some variation in the detail of our findings, the extent of the Catholic differential could be in either direction. They may find a narrower performance gap. On the other hand, they could show even stronger evidence than we have done for the existence of a 'Catholic school effect'.¹⁹

Nonetheless, there is some evidence that the "values, attitudes and practices seemingly inherent in the traditional confessional model of Catholic school can provide a particularly supportive environment for high academic attainment, especially by socially disadvantaged pupils".²⁰ Data presented in a small-scale study suggested that "the Catholic sector schools seem able to generate and sustain a positive school culture that can mitigate the effects of deprivation more easily than the generality of other schools".²¹ These findings call for more extensive research into the impact of ethos on academic attainment.

"non-faith schools perform better in certain categories, faith schools do better in others and there is no clear difference in some."

conclusion

Reports of higher academic attainment in faith schools frequently make the headlines. The research seems to support the claim that students in faith schools, generally do fare better academically than their counterparts in non-faith schools. At the moment, the body of evidence appears to suggest this is probably primarily the outcome of selection processes. It is possible that faith schools could "do well because the families represented are a part of a recognisable community, and that as a consequence there would be shared values, a high degree of parental support and good home-school relations".²² However, this hypothesis has not been tested in any of the research we have reviewed. Further, the impact of ethos on academic attainment has not been systematically explored. The research also points to the possibility that faith schools may have a more positive effect on students from deprived backgrounds, although more research on 'ethos' is again required to substantiate this claim.

chapter 4 – references

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do faith schools offer a distinctive education experience?

Critics of faith schools suggest that these schools do not serve a genuine religious function. Instead, they argue that parents' decisions to send their children to faith schools are informed primarily by the schools' academic performance. A 2010 YouGov/ITV Daybreak poll, appears to support this claim. It revealed that just 9% of parents consider the religion of the school to be one of their top three factors when choosing schools.¹ Factors such as the school's performance, how easy it was to get into, the area in which it is situated, the preference of the child, the facilities, class sizes and curriculum offered were ranked ahead of the school's religious affiliation. Such research however fails to grapple in a meaningful and nuanced way with the enduring appeal of faith schools. In particular, do faith schools offer a distinctive education experience? Is there something about a faith school's ethos, which promotes higher academic attainment and the development of character (or virtue)?²

There does not appear to be a common language amongst researchers or research participants for talking about values, character development, spirituality or ethos; nor are there agreed definitions for these concepts.³ What is the difference, for instance, between a school's culture, climate and ethos?⁴ Further, is 'ethos' confined to the classroom or school, or is it embodied in a broader philosophy of education? These questions point to the difficulties associated with defining, quantifying and therefore studying 'ethos'.

Although ill-defined, Andrew Morris suggests that pupils have some awareness of 'ethos'. Interviewing students who moved from a Catholic school to a secular sixth-form college, Morris noted that these pupils highlighted the difference in ethos, paying tribute to the 'secure' atmosphere of the Catholic school and mentioning its 'aura' – noting that a "very strong Christian outlook on life comes through."⁵

academic attainment

There is some research, which suggests that schools with a strong sense of identity or ethos perform better academically.⁶ As previously outlined, Andrew Morris' research

suggests that higher academic performance is linked to a school's ethos rather than other socio-economic determinants. Some commentators offer reasons why ethos may influence academic attainment. These include:

- A religious stance that is shared, celebrated and motivates the school community to respect and honour the innate abilities of self and others;
- A greater sense of vocational commitment on the part of teachers to sustain a faith ethos;
- Greater parental involvement and commitment to the school;
- An emphasis on the pastoral activities of the school with a marked focus on building a community with high expectations of behaviour and attendance;
- An emphasis on a wide range of pedagogical methods and less emphasis on wholesale 'child centred' approaches and a stronger atmosphere of order;
- Greater emphasis on academic as opposed to vocational courses, particularly a strong focus on religious education and the humanities;
- An atmosphere of success and belonging with strong parental support – on average, providing a more homogenous school system of norms and values.⁷

In the absence of a definition or method of quantifying ethos, however, much more research is required before these claims can be substantiated.

character development

The idea that there is a connection between educational ethos and character development dates back to Aristotle.⁸ Although there is no systematic study of ethos in character development, some research suggests that faith schools might be able to support character development. Theos' *Mapping the Field* review found that pupils at church-maintained schools and independent Christian schools showed a more positive attitude towards religion and better spiritual health than pupils in other schools.⁹ The Learning for Life project on character education, which is funded by the Templeton Foundation and administered by Canterbury Christ Church University, also found that students lacked a formal language to express concepts of values and virtues.¹⁰ They found that 'the most important pedagogical strategy for character formation in schools is teachers modelling values. Students see schools as places that help to shape their values, but not through assemblies, tutor time or in non-examinable subjects'.¹¹ That

faith schools have the potential to meet these needs in a unique way ought not to be understated. Trevor Cooling, for instance, challenges the assumption that education is a worldview-neutral activity.¹² He underscores how faith schools can offer a foundation for character education beyond RE classes, for example, in subjects like history, literature, biology, and mathematics. His thesis rests on the claim that “what teachers teach and the way they teach it is heavily coloured by who they are and what they understand as being of value”.¹³

conclusion

It is clear that the actual impact of ethos in faith schools is under-explored. As a result, it is impossible to offer even a tentative answer to the question posed by this chapter. It is hoped that these gaps will be remedied in part by the findings of Trevor Cooling’s two year project investigating “the impact of a distinctively Christian education”. The project due to be delivered in August 2014, will investigate the impact of secondary schools’ implementation of a distinctively Christian ethos in their approaches to teaching and learning.

chapter 5 – references

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conclusions and recommendations

This report has tried to offer a summary and analysis of the evidence on 'faith schools' in England. It has asked two interrelated questions: 'What do state-maintained "faith schools" offer students?' and 'How do state-maintained "faith schools" impact society?' These are explored through four different issues: potential divisiveness in relation to race and ethnicity; potential socio-economic sorting; the effect of faith schools on pupil outcomes; and faith schools' ability to deliver a distinctive education experience. Despite the certainty of many commentators on these questions, we have come up with no conclusive answer to any of the four. This is partly due to the need for further research, but also may reflect the diversity of even those 'faith schools' we have included in this report. As noted, speaking about these schools as a monolithic block is necessarily misleading, and the distinction between faith schools and community schools is less clear-cut than often perceived.

With these caveats, this survey of the existing evidence points to the following conclusions:

- Faith schools' contribution to community cohesion in relation to race, ethnicity and minority religious communities, despite some dire public warnings, does not seem to be problematic. The research we have reviewed suggests that faith schools do not promote social division along racial or ethnic lines. While some research suggests that faith schools may have actually had a positive impact on community cohesion, at worst their efforts would appear to be on par with the broader education system.
- Our review of the existing research confirms that there is some evidence of indirect socio-economic sorting in schools which act as their own admission authorities, irrespective of their faith status. Using the contested measure of pupils' eligibility for free school meals, faith schools (particularly voluntary aided schools) are less representative of the socio-economic composition of their local authority and postcode compared to community schools. While the use of faith-based selection criteria in oversubscribed schools may indirectly privilege pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds, there is no evidence that this

is the intention of schools. Neither is its eradication likely to be a panacea for the broader, deeper and more complex socio-economic context of English society of which faith schools are a small part.

- There is some research which indicates that faith schools have particular strengths in meeting the needs of primary children with special educational needs. In addition, there is some evidence of higher academic attainment in faith schools, particularly at the primary school level. In the absence of research which examines the role of a faith 'ethos', the balance of evidence suggests this is the outcome of pupil selection processes rather than the 'faith' status of the school.
- Whether faith schools offer a distinctive education experience remains the most difficult question to answer. Ethos is a difficult concept to define and quantify. Consequently, the claim that a school's ethos might contribute to academic attainment or character development in a way that is distinct from schools without a religious character is hard to verify.

It is hoped that this report will be of use for those wanting a balanced summary of the existing evidence on these questions, so the authors have refrained from offering opinion or recommendations up to this point, seeking simply to offer a resource. However, in light of these conclusions the report concludes with some tentative recommendations.

recommendations

The research around faith schools, despite some excellent work, is as yet relatively sparse and inconclusive, although one would not always know this from the tone of the debate. This shows how ideologically-loaded the issue has become, acting as a battleground on which to fight larger battles about the role of religion in an increasingly plural society.

- We recommend that all those engaged in the debate acknowledge the partiality and contested nature of many of the conclusions and seek to make conversations more constructive.
- In particular, participants in the debate should be more open about the values underpinning it. At base, this is not a debate that can be decided on evidence alone, but is also about the kind of society we want to live in. Differing conceptions of pluralism, secularism and the primacy of equality over other moral concerns

are often the true points of tension, rather than any one group having a unique concern for quality education or the well-being of pupils. Being clearer about where the points of tension really are might help make the debate more honest.

- As it stands, the evidence that the higher academic attainment of faith schools is due to something other than pupil selection criteria is weak. Therefore, for supporters of faith schools, we recommend moving away from a justification on the basis of academic outcomes and instead developing a stronger understanding and articulation of the value of an education in a school with a religious character, possibly in relation to ethos, a more holistic approach and development of character. More research into this will be required.
- For Christian schools in particular, there seem to be good reasons to reassess policies around pupil selection. The most pressing concern should be to ensure that applicants from less privileged backgrounds are fairly represented in the school's intake. Secondly, some schools may wish to explore ways to maintain their religious character whilst broadening their selection basis because of their historic ethic of hospitality and concern for the poorest in society.

responses

Simon Barrow, Ekklesia and the Accord Coalition

In averting to the way debates about religion in the public sphere influence thinking about education, *More than an Educated Guess* asks how we envision common spaces like schools in our society. “Are they ‘neutral’ spaces that require us to disregard our religious, philosophical and cultural identities? Or can they be spaces where we come together in difference *and* equality?”

The way these questions are formulated could lead us to suppose that non-partisan approaches to schooling must somehow be sterilising of identities, that identities are more received than developed, or that difference and equality might require (rather than need to negotiate with) the prescriptions of denominationally-based schooling.

As in other areas cited, the issues do not have to be construed in this way. While entrenched or ideological positions are bound to exist in any public policy deliberation, the encouraging news is that the ground is gradually shifting in the debate about schools of a religious character. The case for reform is being articulated more broadly than ever before – not in opposition to diversity, but precisely in order to ensure it.

That is why the Runnymede Trust, in its groundbreaking report *Right to Divide? Faith Schools and Community Cohesion*, argued that in order that “faith should continue to play an important role in our education system” selection on the basis of religious affiliation should be ended, children should have a greater say in how they are educated, RE should be part of a core national curriculum, and faith schools should serve the most disadvantaged and value all young people – a shared ethos to which people of all faiths and none can contribute.

The trajectory of *More than an Educated Guess* seems less persuaded of the need for this shift. It rightly speaks of a desire to “clear the ground” and to consider “all available and relevant research” in assessing the impact of “state maintained” (in fact state-funded) religious foundation schools. Yet serious questions will inevitably be raised about its selection, comprehension, interpretation, evaluation and presentation of research data and findings – as well as the account given of several organisations involved in the current debate.

For example, it assesses positively the Church of England report *Strong schools for strong communities*, which Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools Lord Nash cited (22 July 2013) as demonstrating, on the basis of Ofsted data, that in the secondary sector “faith schools contributed more highly to community cohesion than community schools.” But it does not relate this to the Education Act 2011 actually removing Ofsted’s requirement to inspect the contribution made by schools to community cohesion, or to its previous inspection taking no account of a school’s admissions policies, assemblies or provision of Religious Education – all vitally important areas when considering the impact of publicly funded faith schools on society and students.

Questions are raised against a “reading of the IPPR report” (*School Admissions: Fair choice for parents and pupils*) which “suggests that while all schools that act as their own admissions authorities are likely to be unrepresentative of their local areas, this is particularly pronounced in faith schools.” Yet this is the actual finding of IPPR’s research, which unambiguously states that “Faith schools which are their own admission authorities are ten times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than faith schools where the local authority is the admission authority”, while “Non-religious schools which are their own admissions authorities are six times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than community schools for whom the local authority is the admission authority.”

Equally, it is not the case that the Accord Coalition and the Fair Admissions Campaign argue for just one model of inclusive education – their diverse members promote a range of practical reforms and derive inspiration for their values from different sources, religious and non-religious. Nor is it the case that they do so “without regard to religion or belief” – both use this term specifically to argue against *excluding* pupils and staff on grounds of religion or belief. This is entirely different and indicates respect rather than disregard for such differences.

There are also some surprising omissions. There is no reference to the widely discussed data showing that faith schools take fewer children with Special Educational Needs than other schools.

These and other important questions raised by the approach, method and findings of *More than an Educated Guess* illustrate the vital need to continue the conversation about how faith schools can contribute to education that truly serves the needs of the whole community – not least those marginalised by the increasing segmentation of our schooling.

The Right Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP, Chairman of the Catholic Education Service

In a public sphere where there is a fair amount of heat in the debate surrounding schools with a religious character, this report attempts to provide a balanced overview of the current research, which is much needed. It is refreshingly professional in its discussion of the complex issues surrounding faith schools.

We very much welcome the report's conclusion of the need for substantial additional research in this field. We also welcome the recommendation that all those involved in the debate seek to make conversations more constructive. As a contribution to this process, the Catholic Education Service (CES) intends to respond in a more detailed way following the publication of the report.

One particular area where further research is needed is the question of whether schools with a religious character, and especially Catholic schools, are less socially mixed. As an education provider with a particular mission to the poor, we find that the measure of Free School Meal take-up does not accurately represent our school communities. We know from the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDAC Index) that Catholic schools serve poorer communities than other schools (20% of pupils at Catholic maintained secondary schools live in the most deprived areas compared with 17% of pupils nationally), but this isn't always indicated in the uptake of Free School Meals in those same schools.

Although we appreciate that policy makers (particularly in the Department for Education) perceive Free School Meals data to be the least inaccurate indicator, it clearly conflicts with other available data. This conflict needs to be explained. There could be a range of reasons why eligible pupils in Catholic schools aren't claiming Free Schools Meals. Research which is currently being carried out by the CES highlights that pupils aren't claiming due to immigration status, a lack of recourse to pupil funds, cultural differences as well as the fact that some local authorities already provide Free School Meals to all pupils, so parents see no reason to claim.

We believe it would be helpful if the government and commentators would look at a range of indicators rather than just one, to get a more accurate and rounded picture. We would like to see, for instance, research on how much difference different types of school make to those pupils with the most challenging backgrounds. The Catholic Church has always set itself the mission to make the greatest difference to those who are poorest – in the broadest sense of the word. We need to challenge ourselves to ensure we continue to live up to that mission.

A large part of the history of English Catholicism over the last two hundred years has been a story of immigration. The Catholic community here has been strengthened by these waves of immigration with huge numbers of Irish in the nineteenth century through to more recent times with large numbers of Eastern European, African and South American immigrants. This cultural and ethnic diversity in our churches is even more marked in our Catholic schools which have higher proportions of pupils from ethnic minorities than the national averages.

One of the celebrated strengths of our English education system is that it has never been a 'one size fits all' system. The former Education Minister, Lord Hill of Oareford described it as "a patchwork quilt of provision." We celebrate the diversity which has been reflected in English education law from the very beginnings of state funded education.

A golden thread which has run through education policy over the last century is the one of parental choice, and it is in this context that having a diverse educational system is a strength rather than a weakness. A wide range of education provision to suit the needs of local communities is essential to the continuing success of English education and Catholic schools play an important part in this rich tapestry.

We welcome the recommendation that a stronger understanding of the place of values and ethos in education needs to be developed. Nevertheless, we also place an emphasis on Catholic schools performing well. Canon Law 806 §2 states that schools have a duty to ensure that "academic standards, [are] at least as outstanding as that in other schools in the area." This duty is shown in the success of pupils at Catholic schools in all stages, with Catholic schools outperforming the national average at SAT level and in GCSEs.

The Catholic Church owns over 2,100 schools in England; educating over 808,000 pupils, and employing over 45,500 teachers. This is all part of our contribution to civil society and to the Common Good.

We thank Theos for highlighting the important role that Church schools and other schools with religious character play in contributing to the common good of society as a whole and we look forward to the future research which will support this.

Right Reverend John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford, Chair of Church of England Board of Education and National Society

I welcome this report and its attempt to draw together some of the evidence about schools with a religious character (which the report refers to as faith schools). The report argues against drawing simplistic conclusions and we echo its call for further research in a number of areas. It also recognises that 'faith schools' are diverse in nature, so we must be careful not to make sweeping generalisations about such a complex sector.

The report warns of the danger of making schools, and the education of our children, a battleground for a discussion about the role of religion in a plural society. Campaigns led by the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society and Accord continually seek to question the legitimacy of faith schools and their existence within this country's education system, which inevitably leads to a defence from the churches and, all too quickly, schools do find themselves at the centre of a debate which should properly be focused elsewhere. Shifting this debate away from its simplistic focus on schools would leave educationalists free to examine the role faith-based schools play in developing character and securing educational achievement, as well as being more able to make an honest assessment of why such schools remain so popular.

The report asks whether faith schools are divisive and elitist and whether their ethos has any effect on achievement. Our own recent reports (*Church School of the Future* and *A DBE for the Future*) enable me to frame my response using rather more positive language, referring to our schools as being effective, distinctive and inclusive: positive terms which are actually borne out by the substance of the Theos report.

How we measure the effectiveness of an education and of our schools is clearly an area which needs a great deal more research. We choose to focus overtly and transparently on ethos and the values underpinned by the Christian narrative because we believe they lead to the development of character and virtues which will serve children well through their adult lives. This may, or may not, have a significant impact on their academic achievement (and my expectation is that the research will demonstrate that it does) but, whilst we are 100% committed to the need for our schools to enable children to achieve their very best academically, we do not think that this is the sole purpose of education. In calling for further research, I would also welcome some more longitudinal studies which assess the effect of ethos- and virtue-based education on: a child's development into adulthood; the family; the workplace; and what is broadly defined as social capital. Our Church schools' distinctive approach stems from the absolute belief that such things really matter for the good of society, these are far greater goals than the position of the school in this year's performance tables.

Since the Dearing report (2001), the Church of England has emphasised that our schools are inclusive as well as effective and distinctive, and I am pleased to see that this report recognises two very important facts. The first is that faith schools contribute successfully to community cohesion; they are culturally diverse and there is no evidence that there is any social division on racial or ethnic grounds.

This distinctive and inclusive approach naturally leads to an examination of admissions and so the second important fact acknowledged in the Theos report is that faith schools do not intentionally filter or skew admissions in a way which is designed to manipulate the system.

The report rightly recognises the complexity of the situation and cautions against drawing simplistic conclusions, but affirms that faith schools' admissions policies are clear, transparent and fair. Attendance of a church is the only basis upon which objective assessment can be made, but this is an activity entirely open to all irrespective of wealth or background. Nevertheless, we are still left with some challenging questions about how we can ensure that pupils from less privileged backgrounds are fairly represented in the school's intake. But, as the report makes clear, this is a problem throughout any system which espouses parental choice, it is not peculiar to faith schools. Any over-subscribed school faces the same issues, not least because of the link between the popularity of a school and the value of housing in its catchment area.

One conclusion to all of this might be that, rather than continually adopting the 'battleground' approach, which often leads to a reticence on the part of local authorities to expand faith school provision, a better way would be to celebrate the quality, popularity and success of faith schools and seek to expand them. This way the problems of oversubscription and resulting admissions criteria would be greatly reduced.

Such an approach would refocus the debate to make it more about the philosophy of education and the place of ethos, values, virtue, character and spirituality in the development of a successful school system. It may not attract the sensational headlines of some of the more familiar debates, but I suggest it would serve our children well.

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More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools

Elizabeth Oldfield, Liane Hartnett and Emma Bailey

The Church pioneered mass education in Britain but over the last ten years, as the 'church school' sector has morphed into 'faith schools', the role of religious groups and institutions within the education sector has become highly contentious.

Much of the debate is by nature ideological, revolving around the relative rights and responsibilities of parents, schools and government in a liberal and plural society. Invariably, however, ideological positions draw on evidence pertaining to the actual experience and impact of 'faith schools'. Questions like – Are 'faith schools' socially divisive? Are they exclusive and/or elitist? Is there a special faith school effect on pupils? Is there anything distinct about the educational experience offered by faith schools? – become key to the debate.

Unfortunately, this significance is not always matched by subtlety, with the answers given and conclusions drawn frequently going beyond what the evidence actually says. *More than an Educated Guess* attempts to give an honest and accurate picture of what the evidence does say.

Drawing on an extensive range of studies on faith schools in England, the report shows that, while there is evidence about their social and educational impact, it is rarely simple or straightforward, and that conclusions drawn from it should be tentative – certainly, more tentative than they have been of late.

Ultimately, the authors argue, we need to be more honest about what the evidence says, and should avoid treating faith schools as a proxy debate for the wider question of faith and secularism in public life.

More than an Educated Guess will be an essential contribution to a major public conversation, which will make uncomfortable reading for participants on each side of the debate.

Elizabeth Oldfield is the Director of Theos. Liane Hartnett has a Master of Philosophy in International Relations from the University of Cambridge and is studying for a PhD in International Relations at the LSE. Emma Bailey has worked as a research associate at Theos and is now a research analyst at ComRes.

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