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Faith Schools: minorities, boundaries, representation and control

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ABSTRACT This article explores the implications of funding increasing numbers of religious schools on the children of minority communities. It argues that handing responsibility for schooling to religious bodies undermines transparency, democracy and accountability in educational provision. Far from promoting 'inclusion' as the Government claims, increasing the number of religious schools atomises and isolates communities, stifles debate and marginalises complex expressions of identity.

'Give me the child until he is seven, and I will give you the man', the founder of the Jesuits is reputed to have said. Other branches of the church have been less brazen about celebrating their skills in brainwashing the young but have nevertheless hung on tightly to the schools they run according to their own religious beliefs. They have also negotiated hard and successfully for the taxpayers to finance them.

The high number of state-funded religious schools in Britain, with varying degrees of control over their own admissions and curriculum, has always sat uncomfortably with concepts of broad, liberal, outward-looking, comprehensive education. Over the course of the twentieth century this came into increasing conflict with internationally accepted standards of human rights, children's rights and freedom of expression. At the start of the twenty-first century, though, a government prepared to push through profound changes in education is invoking the language of rights not to open doors to new worlds and ideas for all children but to distribute more state money and the political power that goes with it to groups and institutions with a narrow religious agenda.

State funding of church schools (and from the early twentieth century, a handful of Jewish schools) has risen consistently since 1833, when the Government first gave grants towards school provision for poor children by Christian groups. Since the 1944 Education Act, for example, 'The proportion

of church school building costs funded by the taxpayer rose to 75% in 1959; to 80% in 1967; to 85% in 1974; and to 90% in 2001'.[1] In England there are 600 secondary and 6400 primary faith schools. The Church of England has 4540 state primary schools and 204 state secondary schools. There are approximately 2000 Catholic schools, as well as 36 Jewish schools, seven Muslim schools and two Sikh schools.[2]

In a context where the state finances so many institutions which have a 'mission' to educate children according to 'Christian principles' – and where those institutions fail to reflect the social make-up of their local areas [3] – it is clearly unfair and discriminatory, if not racist, to fail to fund Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Jewish schools proportionately, and the Government could face a challenge under the Human Rights Act if it did not allow Muslims and members of other religions the same right to a faith-based education as Christians.

This could have been an opportunity to fight the long overdue battle with the churches: to insist that educational policy must be strategically planned, democratically accountable, egalitarian, accessible, and predicated on human and children's rights. Taking control of schools away from religious institutions and putting it back in the hands of politically accountable strategic bodies (such as local education authorities [LEAs]) might have started to address the racism, low expectations and unequal opportunities many children from minorities experience in and beyond the education system. But the Government has avoided all these issues by deciding to promote the takeover of more schools by religious institutions in the form of academies and trust schools, arguing that this extends 'parental choice' and 'inclusion'. In fact it promotes the redefinition of complex and shifting ethnic, cultural and national identities purely as *religious* identities, and contorts education (and other services) into a religious frame of reference. This religious identity is defined by religious leaders and institutions that are opaque and unaccountable to the users of the services that have been handed over to them to administer.

If a Muslim school is set up in a particular locality, for example, must it accept all Muslims who live nearby? Would it teach or accept dissident views or the children of 'secular Muslims'? If it were run by adherents of an austere version of Islam that outlaws music, dance and colourful dress, would it allow expression of the musical traditions of Sufis or the vibrant clothes of Nigerian Muslims? Would girls be free to choose their own form of dress or might strict interpretations of 'modesty' be imposed in the form of school uniform?

The Government has already tripped painfully on a central contradiction of its own policy. Mindful of its human rights obligations, it tried to force 'inclusion' on faith schools by compelling them to accept 25% of their intake from other religious or non-religious backgrounds. An outcry ensued, particularly from the Catholic Church and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. In fact, Jewish schools are an exception to the rule, where minorities are concerned, and illustrate the dilemma vividly. Having received state funding since early in the twentieth century, now around 50% of affiliated Jews send their children to Jewish schools. The communal leadership is not about to

relinquish control over admissions, which, as the proportion of Jewish children in their schools grows, starts to merge with 'admission' to the Jewish community as a whole.

The problem was articulated by Rabbi James Kennard, head of King Solomon High School in Barkingside, Essex. He said:

> While the proposed policy may be appropriate for schools affiliated to the Church of England – the country's main faith, which does not fear assimilation and is keen to spread its message to non-adherents – the principle on which it is based does not necessarily translate well to other faith communities. The Jewish community is small, needs to maintain its distinct identity and ethos, and has no interest in spreading its message to others.

He goes on to describe how Jewish studies is taught as 'religious responsibilities that are binding on our pupils ... part of their heritage – a notion parents buy into when they enrol their children'.[4] It is highly unlikely, given the diverse Jewish community represented at King Solomon High, one of the biggest Jewish schools in Europe, that 'buying into' religious responsibilities is the main motive of parents for choosing to send their children there. Indeed, research carried out by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research concludes that four themes are central for parents who choose a Jewish school for their child: 'academic standards, ethos, geographical location and other added values'.[5]

In order to obtain these benefits, many parents close their eyes to the gatekeeping function that religious schools perform – unless they unexpectedly find themselves locked out. This has happened to at least two families at the Jewish Free School in north-west London where, in 2005, two children were refused admission because the school's religious authority, the Office of the Chief Rabbi, refused to recognise their mothers' conversions to Judaism. One of the mothers was head of English at the school.

Clearly, while the notion of 'inclusion' might be stretched to apply to schools that represent the majority faith which also happens to be a proselytising religion, it cannot possibly apply to schools set up in minority communities who are retreating into a ghetto in response to the twin threats of racism and pressure to assimilate. In the event, the intensive lobbying persuaded the House of Lords to throw out the proposed insistence on schools accepting 25% of students from 'other religions'. By this time, the debate was starting to resemble an Alice in Wonderland world where words mean whatever you want them to mean. Following the Government's forced retreat on admissions, a Department for Education and Skills spokesperson continued to claim that they were furthering the cause of inclusion, saying: 'Faith schools already integrate fully into the state sector. They make an important contribution to community cohesion by promoting inclusion and developing partnerships with schools of other faiths, and with non-faith schools'.

There are so many agendas at work here. Clearly the governments of Blair and Brown, like those of Thatcher and Major that preceded them, are

determined to privatise education and to fatally undermine comprehensive schooling. Rather than address the threats and discrimination that make minority communities feel justifiably insecure, they are handing money and political power to those who have risen to the surface as 'community leaders' to provide services that should rightly be the duty and responsibility of the state. And what leaders would turn down such a gift?

Instead of supporting mainstream, comprehensive schools, ensuring that they value and nurture students from diverse communities with diverse histories, needs and cultures, the Government is atomising education, setting schools and religious groups in competition with each other for resources and recognition. Where does this leave families who do not want their children to be indoctrinated with religion or to identify themselves by static, religious criteria? Where does it leave dissidents – minorities within minorities? What will be the funding, political and social implications for the (secular-ish) comprehensive schools that remain in multi-ethnic localities? Will they be relieved of any obligations to address the complexities of multicultural education by the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh school down the road?

Notes

[1] Derek Gillard's website, 'Education in England'. http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com/history/text03.shtml

[2] Sarah Cassidy (2006) Special Report: state and religion, *The Independent*, 10 September. http://education.independent.co.uk/news/article1433332.ece

[3] '"Richer pupils" at church schools', BBC News report on research by the Institute for Research in Integrated Strategies, 13 February 2006.

[4] Nathan Jeffay (2006) Betrayal of Faith, *The Guardian*, 24 October 2006. http://education.guardian.co.uk/faithschools/story/0,,1929370,00.html

[5] Oliver Valins, Barry Kosmin & Jacqueline Goldberg (2002) The Future of Jewish schooling in the United Kingdom. The Educational Marketplace: how Jewish parents choose between different schools. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. http://www.jpr.org.uk/publications/publication.php?id=138&sid=158

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