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The Evidence Base on the Effects of Policy and Practice in Faith Schools

PAUL PETTINGER

ABSTRACT This article analyses some of the common assertions made in the public debate about the merits and disadvantages of faith schools and tests them against actual research findings. It argues that there is a growing body of evidence showing that current policy and practice in faith schools creates social division and that faith schools need to do more to respect the rights and beliefs of staff, pupils and their families.

For too long, the debate about the role of faith schools in our education system has been dogged by the opinions of those who argue from entrenched and ideologically fixed positions.

In order to try to provide objective facts and give the debate focus, the Accord Coalition has assembled a databank of information summarising high-quality research from reliable sources on policy and practice in faith schools. To paraphrase the late US Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, we should all have our opinions, but we cannot have our own facts. The databank is freely available on Accord's website [1] and is to be an ongoing project, continually updated with new research.

To be clear, the Accord Coalition is not a politically neutral organisation. It is a campaign coalition launched in 2008 that seeks to change the laws that currently allow state-funded schools with a religious character (faith schools) to discriminate in their pupil admissions and staff employment on religious grounds. Accord seeks to ensure that pupils leave state school with a sound knowledge of the beliefs of others (both religious and philosophical) to guarantee that they are prepared for life in our increasingly diverse society. Accord believes all state-funded schools should be open to all children, regardless of their own or their parents' backgrounds, and that they should be engine rooms for community cohesion, rather than to segregate and act as a source for social division.

Although sociologically unusual, by uniting such a broad range of supporters (including the religious and non-religious) Accord helps by its very

existence to challenge some of the stale stereotypes put forward in the faith schools debate. For instance, the faith schools debate is often framed as being between the religious and non-religious or that it primarily concerns whether faith schools should exist or be state funded or not. (Accord does not take a position on the desirability of having schools with a religious or philosophical ethos or foundation; it merely seeks to reform the way in which they operate.) However, through its databank of research and information, Accord hopes to also offer greater scrutiny over the assertions made about faith schools and help us assess their validity.

What does the research show about some of the biggest questions surrounding faith schools? Do they improve or undermine community cohesion? Do faith schools get better results? Are faith schools better at teaching ethical values?

One of most contentious aspects of the debate about faith schools concerns the faith school sector's effect upon community cohesion. Some argue that single-faith schools help to create a more harmonious society because they believe their religious ethos can help pupils better explore and express matters of faith and belief in ways that can bring communities together, as well as produce pupils who are more secure in their respective religious and ethnic identity. In contrast, some take an opposing view and may point to the heavily segregated school system and intercultural tension in Northern Ireland and draw a causational link, where over 95% of children attend either Catholic or notionally Protestant schools.

The evidence that faith schools increase segregation is overwhelming and few would argue otherwise given that the majority of faith schools in Britain are legally allowed to select pupils for admission on the grounds of religion and belief if they are oversubscribed. However, selection on the grounds of religion can also serve as a proxy for segregation on the grounds of race and ethnicity and, as is increasingly apparent, lead also to divisions on socio-economic lines, which is closely related to faith schools' better exam performances.

The vast majority of faith schools in Britain are Christian [2] and a 2009 survey [3] by the Christian charity Tearfund showed a correlation between Church attendance and socio-economic background. It found above average levels of annual church going among socioeconomic groups AB and owner occupiers without a mortgage (32%), with below average levels of annual church going among C2 (21%) and DE socioeconomic groups (22%) and those who were local authority tenants (19%). The admissions policies of many faith schools require regular church attendance over the course of several years, so it comes as no surprise that oversubscribed faith schools will select out all but the most religious pupils, who are more likely, according to this research, to be from higher socioeconomic groups.

A common accusation fielded against faith schools is that religious admission polices also favour those from families with greater aspirations for their children and who are more likely, therefore, to play up or even feign religious observance in order to get their child in to a better-performing faith

school. Perhaps unsurprisingly, evidence for or against this assertion does not extend beyond the anecdotal, but it is clear that faith schools that control their own admissions are less likely to be representative of their local community than are schools that do not use religion as part of their oversubscription criteria.

In 2007 the Institute for Public Policy Research [4] found that schools without a faith designation, that are allowed to operate as their own authority on admissions, are six times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than community schools which had their admissions policy controlled by the local authority. However, faith schools that control their own admissions are ten times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than faith schools where the local authority was the admission authority.

Furthermore, there is a range of evidence that shows a very strong relationship between the academic performance at faith schools (which annual government league tables suggest is stronger than at non-faith schools) and the ability and social profile of their pupils. In 'Faith Primary Schools: better schools or better pupils?' [5] (March 2009) Stephen Gibbons and Olmo Silva from the London School of Economics found that 'most of the apparent advantage of faith school education in England can be explained by differences between the pupils who attend these schools and those who do not'.

A review [6] of the evidence on the relationship between admissions and performance in faith schools by the House of Commons Library, also in March 2009, found that 'recent research on primary schools suggests that performance difference can largely be explained by prior attainment and background. The remaining differences are due to parental self-selection and selection methods used by some faith schools. Further analysis of GCSE results shows a different pattern of results for faith and non-faith schools with similar governance arrangements and control over admissions. Non-faith schools perform better in certain categories, faith schools do best in others and there is no clear difference in some' (p. 2).

The report also found that faith schools in England had a lower proportion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). In 2008 1.2% of pupils at state faith schools had statemented and 15.9% unstatemented SEN, compared to 1.7% statemented and 18.9% unstatemented SEN in mainstream schools with no religious character (p. 5).

Meanwhile, in their report 'Can Competition Improve School Standards? The Case of Faith Schools in England' [7] from April 2009, Dr Rebecca Allen and Dr Anna Vignoles found 'significant evidence that religious schools are associated with higher levels of pupil sorting across schools, but no evidence that competition from faith schools raises area-wide pupil attainment' (p. 3).

While it is relatively easy to establish whether or not faith schools facilitate greater segregation in the education system and that their better exam results can be explained by their pupil intake, making a causal link between

increased segregation leading to social division is an altogether together different enquiry.

In November 2009, a report [8] commissioned by the Church of England was published which looked at how community cohesion was promoted in different types of schools and found that secondary schools with a religious character were on average graded higher by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) on how they promoted community cohesion than schools without a religious character. However, Ofsted inspections assess what proactive steps schools take to try to improve community cohesion. They do not attempt to inspect schools' overall impact on community cohesion and take no account of schools' admissions policy or of the kind of religious education or collective worship they provide, which are frequently considered among the most important issues in relation to faith schools and community cohesion.

In contrast, faith schools have been cited as a cause of social division by a range of sources. The 2001 Home Office report commonly referred to as 'The Cantle Report' [9], which was published after race riots in a number of towns and cities in Northern England that year, noted how riots had not arisen in diverse areas such as Southall and Leicester where pupils learnt about different religions and cultures in local schools, and found that 'faith schools appear to be operating discriminatory policies where religious affiliations protect cultural and ethnic divisions' (p. 33).

Looking at this issue from an alternative angle, research has found a positive effect of mixed schooling upon community cohesion and the growth of mutual understanding. Among the key findings of 'Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy' [10] by Professor Irene Bruegel of the London South Bank University Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group (2006) were that 'Friendship at primary schools can, and does, cross ethnic and faith divides wherever children have the opportunity to make friends from different backgrounds. At that age, in such schools, children are not highly conscious of racial differences and are largely unaware of the religion of their friends … There was some evidence that parents learned to respect people from other backgrounds as a result of their children's experiences in mixed schools' (p. 2).

'Identities in Transition: a longitudinal study of immigrant children' [11] by Rupert Brown, Adam Rutland and Charles Watters from the universities of Sussex and Kent (2008) found that 'the effects of school diversity were consistent, most evidently on social relations: higher self-esteem, fewer peer problems and more cross-group friendships. Such findings show that school ethnic composition can significantly affect the promotion of positive intergroup attitudes. These findings speak against policies promoting single faith schools, since such policies are likely to lead to reduced ethnic diversity in schools.'(p. 9)

Meanwhile, the 2001 'Oldham Independent Review' [12], which was commissioned by the Government, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and the local police authority, found that 'Educational mixing … is closely linked to residential, and in our view it is desirable in principle that as many schools as possible, should have mixed intakes so that children growing up can learn one

another's customs and cultural backgrounds and accept that stereotypes and racism are unacceptable' (p. 7).

While there is a body of evidence showing that segregation in education can create an environment where mistrust between different communities can more readily grow, there is a gap in the research around whether different types of schools are better at teaching values. Knowing more about how best to inspire pupils to be more ethical and conscientious would be to the benefit of a society as a whole. However, while there may be more to learn about the promotion of values in schools, there is established evidence demonstrating that faith schools in particular can fall down when it comes to respecting the beliefs and lifestyles of others.

Two reports in recent years from the lesbian, gay and bisexual rights charity Stonewall have shown that faith schools have a greater problem with issues of sexual diversity than do other schools. Stonewall's 2007 'The School Report' [13] showed that while almost two-thirds of young gay people at secondary school had experienced homophobic bullying, in faith schools that figure was three in four. Meanwhile, their 'The Teachers' Report' [14] (2009) found that staff in secondary and primary faith schools were only half as likely to say that homophobic bullying is a serious problem in their schools compared to staff in non-faith schools, suggesting a great complacency among some staff.

Furthermore, whereas schools without a designated religious character must teach religious education (RE) that is generally broad and balanced, allowing for critical approaches and the growth of mutual understanding, most faith schools can teach whatever they choose to in their RE lessons. There is a shortage of evidence showing what is taught in RE in these schools; as has already been mentioned, Ofsted does not inspect RE in faith schools. However, as 2011 guidance [15] from the Scottish Catholic Education Service on the teaching of RE in Catholic schools suggests, faith schools do use their freedom in this area to provide a narrow and instructional RE curriculum.

For example, the guidance notes that 'Catholic religious education is "confessional" in nature. In particular, teachers should avoid taking a phenomenological approach, thus presenting all denominations or faiths as equally true. While respecting pupils' opinions and faith backgrounds, teachers must propose Roman Catholic beliefs and values as objectively true' (p. 10) and that 'explicit phenomenological study of stances for living which may be independent of religious belief will not form part of the content of religious education in Catholic schools' (p. 12). Not only are these schools encouraged to provide a limited education about the religious beliefs of non-Catholics, they are not supposed to afford these beliefs the same or even similar value as the beliefs of the school, while the beliefs of the non-religious are supposed to ignored entirely.

What can we then do as a society about these issues concerning state-funded faith schools is a matter for a wider debate. Accord does, however, offer its own solutions; stopping religious discrimination in pupil admissions and staff employment; requiring schools to provide children with a core entitlement to a

broad and balanced education about the range of religious and philosophical beliefs held in society, and ensuring that they receive thorough Personal, Social, Health and Economic education, which promotes respect of sexual differences and diversity. However, it is clear that specific problems within the faith school sector do exist and they have not yet been fully addressed.

Notes

[1] Accord Coalition (2011) Databank of Independent Evidence on Faith Schools. Available at http://accordcoalition.org.uk/evidence-on-faith-schools/. Last accessed August 2011. The Accord Coalition brings together a diverse range of religious and non-religious member groups and individual supporters, including the Christian think tank Ekklesia, the British Humanist Association, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, The Hindu Academy, The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and Lesbian and Gay Christian Association. They are also joined by (among others) the Association of Teachers and Lectures, the Campaign for State Education, the race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust and members from the four largest groupings in parliament.

[2] See Table 2c from the Department for Education (January 2011) *Schools, Pupils, and their Characteristics.* Available at http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001012/sfr12-2011.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[3] Survey by Tearfund into Church going (January, 2009). Available at http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Tearfund-churchgoing-survey-in-word.htm. Last accessed August 2011.

[4] Brookes, R. & Tough, S. (June 2007) *School Admissions Report: fair choice for parents and pupils.* IPPR. Available at https://www.ippr.org.uk/members/download.asp?f=/ecomm/files/schooladmissions.pdf&a=skip. Last accessed August 2011.

[5] Gibbons, S. & Silva, O. (March 2009) *Faith Primary Schools: better schools or better pupils?* IZA Discussion Paper No. 4089. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1369835. Last accessed August 2011.

[6] House of Commons Library (March 2009) *Faith Schools: admissions and performance.* Available at http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN04405. Last accessed August 2011.

[7] Allen, R. & Vignoles, A. (April 2009) *Can Competition Improve School Standards? The Case of Faith Schools in England.* London: Institute of Education. Available at http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/1292/1/qsswp0904.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[8] Jesson, D. (November 2009) *Strong Schools for Strong Communities: reviewing the impact of Church of England schools in promoting community cohesion.* Church of England Archbishops' Council Education Division. Available at http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1204726/strong%20schools%20for

%20strong%20communities%20-%20cofe%20report%20final.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[9] Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: a report of the Independent Review Team.* London: Home Office. Available at http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/communitycohesionreport.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[10] Bruegel, I. (2006) *Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy.* London South Bank University Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group. Available at http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[11] Brown, R., Rutland, A. & Charles Watters (2008) Identities in Transition: a longitudinal study of immigrant children. London: Economic and Social Research Council. Available at http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Identities-in-Transition.-A-Longitudinal-Study-of-Immigrant-Children.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[12] Ritchie, D. (2001) *Oldham Independent Review.* Available at http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/Oldhamindependentreview.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

[13] Hunt, R. & Jensen, J. (2007) *The School Report: the experiences of young gay people in Britain's schools.* Stonewall. Available at http://www.stonewall.org.uk/other/startdownload.asp?openType=forced&documentID=1704. Last accessed August 2011.

[14] Guasp, A. (2009) *The Teacher's Report: homophobic bullying in Britain's schools.* Stonewall. Available at http://www.stonewall.org.uk/other/startdownload.asp?openType=forced&documentID=1695. Last accessed August 2011.

[15] Scottish Catholic Education Service (March, 2011) *This Is Our Faith: guidance on the teaching of religious education in Catholic schools in Scotland.* Bishops' Conference of Scotland. Available at http://www.sces.uk.com/attachments/download/185/This%20Is%20Our%20Faith%20draft%20March%202011.pdf. Last accessed August 2011.

PAUL PETTINGER has been the Coordinator of the Accord Coalition since May 2010. He graduated with an MA in Politics from the University of Exeter in 2004 and has since worked in a range of political and campaign roles. *Correspondence*: paul@accordcoalition.org.uk