

Thinkpiece 6 A Richer Text

A Study by Barbara Easton,
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Foreword

HTI welcomes this study by Barbara Easton and regards its publication as contributing to the wider debate on types of school.

We regard all schools as being key contributors to their communities and responsible for developing both acceptable values and citizenship in young people. As an independent organisation HTI recognises the importance of all well led schools

The case studies in this publication are of Christian based schools and a proportion of the author's research time was spent in church schools. However opinions were presented and evidence submitted by other faiths. Only time prevented the author from including faiths other than Christian. Throughout the Thinkpiece "church schools" are referred to but conclusions and recommendations are applicable to all faiths.

The opinions expressed are the author's own and not necessarily those of HTI.

We hope you will consider this paper in the light of the ongoing debate concerning different types of schools. It is certainly interesting to observe the involvement of faith groups in the development of trust schools and the academy programme.



Roger Opie, HTI Trust Director.



Executive Summary

By and large, there is nothing that church schools have or do, that community schools could not. However, they are consistently recognised as successful even though the reasons for success are not easily identifiable. Faith schools, themselves, ascribe this success to a 'richer text' – a powerful organising metaphysical philosophy. This Thinkpiece focuses on the impact of this text on the performance of schools and their contributions to wider society.

The large number of church schools in England is the legacy of historical developments in education provision. Since the 1944 Education Act church voluntary aided and controlled schools are accommodated within a single system alongside state schools. Although not popular with the majority of the British public and against a backdrop of declining church attendance, faith schools are well-liked by parents.

The information for this Thinkpiece was collected from interviews, questionnaires, letters and emails, small group discussions and visits to a significant number of church schools. The study concentrates on case studies of various schools as exemplars of good practice. The schools selected were workaday schools (neither 'jewels in the crown' nor 'bad') in which the faith ethos makes a positive contribution to both school and community.

In the study, the author questions the widely held perception that faith schools are divisive. The four case studies described testify to quite the opposite view. All are situated in areas which are multicultural and economically challenged. All are fully committed to inclusivity – albeit with differing emphases.

Hesketh Fletcher School, Wigan, driven by an imperative based on Gospel values, is dedicated to bridging the gap between the school and local area, by providing adult educational facilities and support to needy families.

Residents in the catchment area for the St Albans CE School, Birmingham, are likely to

be members of another faith or have no faith at all. The school has an inclusive Christian ethos which creates a warm, friendly and compassionate environment. It offers a model of inclusion by being responsive to the multifaith nature of its intake and the surrounding community.

At King's School, Wolverhampton, (a CE school), the admissions policy has been hailed as a model of good practice. The school has about double the city's average black and Asian minority ethnic students. It is deeply committed to interfaith activity and building mutual understanding.

St Francis of Assisi Academy, Liverpool, attracts attention for its environmentalism but is equally pioneering in its ecumenism. It brings clear values-driven education to one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city, giving young people an environment which is both architecturally and morally inspiring.

The author found little research which explores links between church schools and social division. In this Thinkpiece, she highlights the positive factors which promote social cohesion. She argues that because there are usually only a few church schools in an area, they tend to draw their students widely bringing together students from leafy suburbs and inner city tower blocks. To accuse faith schools of fostering intolerance is to prejudge the message taught in them. All the religions with schools in Britain teach values such as love and respect for others. Church schools also aim to develop children's self confidence about their identity. Although opponents of multiculturalism may feel nervous about this, young adults, who feel happy and secure about who they are, are less likely to turn to extremism to reinforce their sense of self. Britons, who have become extremists or terrorists, have defined themselves by faith rather than race. Therefore, if our efforts to build social cohesion are to be worthwhile, we must recognise fully the role of faith.

The author has identified several negative issues facing church schools, namely, difficulties in recruiting teachers with the appropriate faith background; oversubscription and the rejection of would-be pupils; the occasional confused delineation of authority between diocese, parish and local authority; the sometimes difficult relationship with the religious community and hostility generated by unbalanced media reporting.

Conversely, church schools can be generally proud of their academic success; their caring ethos; their holistic approach to developing the whole person; their engendering of powerful core values; their ability to generate social stability and develop empathy for people of other faiths.

The author recommends that:

- support for faith schools should be continued
- partnerships between secular and faith schools should be encouraged
- there would be many benefits from moving faith schools into the public sector
- the Northern Ireland initiative of bringing together children from different religions to create positive interfaith environments would be beneficial to modern Britain
- more favourable publicity would help to foster good relations between the public and faith schools
- there should be greater public accountability for the religious character of faith schools via inspection and reporting
- the barriers to multifaith religious education, such as proper teacher training, should be addressed
- leaders in church schools need support to reduce the isolation felt in fulfilling their role as 'the interpreters of faith for the whole community'
- religious pupils need to be encouraged into teaching to relieve the shortage of teachers with an appropriate church background
- further research into areas that are currently of public concern should be undertaken.

The Headteacher at St Alban's School, David Gould's words, "It is notable that against the challenges of recent times, such as 7/7 and 9/11, the community has pulled together and hung together because of its inclusive ethos," speak volumes for the success of faith schools.

About the Author



Barbara Easton, Vice Principal, The King's School, Wolverhampton and HTI Fellow.

Barbara Easton became a Fellow with the HTI Trust early in 2006 for a period of 12 weeks. At the time, she had been Vice Principal at The King's School, Wolverhampton, a Church of England school for 11 – 19 year olds, for six years. She started teaching Religious Education (RE) in 1981 at Colton Hills School in Wolverhampton taking on additional responsibilities such as cross-curricular multi-cultural education and marketing and promoting the school while she was there.

In 1993, when Barbara was Head of RE, her department was recognised as the most outstanding in the country when the school won the prestigious Farmington Award for RE.

Barbara was awarded her MA, with distinction, in RE from the University of Warwick in 2001.

Her responsibilities at The King's School included the development and leadership of the ethos and activity of the school as a Church school. She also liaised with the parishes, Diocese and Church groups and with other faith communities across the City.

Barbara is also a qualified Inspector of Church schools, a Local Preacher in the Methodist Church, a Board Member of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Council and a member of the Wolverhampton SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education).

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Introduction and Purpose of this Thinkpiece

It seems that it is very difficult for those who have faith and those who have no faith to understand each other. To people without faith, religious belief is a private matter, an adjunct to ordinary life which can be separated and left outside the public arena. For religious people, faith is the defining principle of their lives and lies at the core of all their daily actions. It cannot be set aside in schooling because it underpins the knowledge and values which are acquired, grounds the ethics and building of community and runs as a thread through all the individual's dealings. The religious perspective on life is one in which holders would want to nurture their children; to the non-religious this smacks of indoctrination and yet, within a democratic society, it is as

tenable an approach to the transmission of societal values as the secular.

By and large, there is nothing that church schools have or do that community schools could not. They feature consistently in lists of the most successful schools but they are not the only schools to be 'good'. However, among the varyingly successful sorts of English schools, it is a sector that seems to 'work'. Church schools would put this down to a 'richer text' – a powerful organising philosophy and *raison d'être* that confidently underlies all aspects of the school's life and work and gives it metaphysical consequence. The impact of that text on the performance of the school and its contribution to the wider society is the focus of this study.

Background

Past, Present and Future

The existence of large numbers of Church schools in England is the modern legacy of historical developments and rationalisations in the provision of education. For almost as long as Christianity has been in Britain it has been associated with learning and, by the 19th Century, most access to education was through the different churches. As the secular machinery of the state came, later, to the provision of schooling, so arrangements were made to accommodate both state and church schools within the one system. The 1944 Education Act finally settled on a system of voluntary aided and voluntary controlled faith schools to sit alongside county schools. From the churches' point of view they retained ownership of their buildings and the running of schools while the state funded the learning. In controlled schools, the church ceded more control to the Local Authority than in aided schools. Today, the church is still responsible for part of the capital costs. It is interesting to note the number of church schools that were, before the 1970s, secondary modern. Other groups also have a long involvement in education: Roman Catholic, Non-conformists and Jews, as dissenters, were to some extent excluded from the mainstream of schooling and had their own motivations for educating their own. Other faiths, although newer to the country, have always placed strong emphasis on learning to allow participation in and transmission of the religion.

Currently Church schools form part of the menu of choices for families, alongside selective, grammar and academies, some of which overlap. There are about 650 faith-based secondary schools across the UK. It is surprisingly difficult to be precise about the number because of the various ways they are categorised on different lists, for example middle deemed secondary. The largest group is Roman Catholic, and the numbers of other faith schools is small, but growing. In some areas the aspect of choice is removed, either because the local area only has a church school, to which all children must go or, more likely, because there is no faith school for miles around. The Church of England has disproportionately few secondary schools in relation to its primary provision; this causes consternation to families whose children, accepted at primary, are rejected for secondary places.

The number of Church secondary schools is slightly increasing. Privately established schools of minority faiths are being given the opportunity to come into the fold of the maintained sector – though these are not 'new' schools. Following the Dearing Report of 2001, the Church of England has adopted a plan for 100 new schools in 10 years and is well on the way to fulfilling this ambition; this is largely through the challenge of giving a new lease of life to failing schools. Some communities are also looking forward to the impact of the falling birth rate on their specific provision. The present government has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to creating more faith schools. At the time of writing, this is subject to the plans for Trust Schools under the terms of the Education and Inspections Bill 2006. Some commentators believe the desire of the government to enhance social cohesion and the intention to allow more single faith schools to be mutually exclusive and some hint that the growth of the faith sector will be very closely controlled.

Why do Religions Want Their Own Schools?

Although the global term 'faith schools' is often used, it can mask wide diversity within the sector. As all faith communities are not the same, so their schools differ, reflecting the fundamental beliefs of the religion, their approaches and attitudes to the world around them, and the current situation of the faith in contemporary Britain. Communities also have different expectations of their schools, and these can shift with the fortunes of the community, putting the schools under varying pressures. So, what it means to be a Muslim school might be very different from what it means to be a Church of England school, yet both are often grouped together in discussion. This could be thought to weaken the egalitarian argument for the opening of more faith schools. Those who argue for new faith schools on the simple grounds of equity between the faiths often are overlooking the fact that they are not talking about the same thing.

Below are some of the reasons faith communities want to have their own schools rather than just 'good' schools. As has been

suggested, they do not apply equally at all times or in the same way to all communities and observers might want to argue about their desirability.

Nonetheless schools are places where:

- specific religious requirements or desirables can be ensured: eg in Jewish schools the kitchens are entirely kosher and the working week is adjusted to accommodate the start of Shabbat
- there is an element of worship, stillness and spirituality
- children can grow up confident in their faith, free from ridicule because of it, and explore its integration with every aspect of their daily lives
- the religion can be learned more thoroughly: there are some private religious schools where children are not entered for GCSE because they are felt to detract from the time taken to teach religion
- young people can be sheltered from some of the perils of teenage life; faith based morality can be protected and nurtured and modern, secularist, materialist values can be challenged
- faith, culture and tradition will flourish and be passed on to future generations: eg the singing of church music
- parents can feel their children will mix with people like them
- the benefits of the faith can be offered to the wider community.

Conflict and Contradiction

There is a lot of contentious debate about church schools, with vehement opposition from some groups such as the British Humanist Association. The disagreements highlight some interesting contradictions:

- faith schools are not popular with the British public but are very popular with parents trying to find a secondary school for their children. Recent opinion polls show between 64% (CM) to 96% (New Statesman) against, although the latter was set against the backdrop of the London bombings
- far more parents want their children to go to church schools than want their children to go to church. As church

attendances decline in Britain the popularity of church schools continues

- statistics can be used to show that church schools are more successful and very inclusive (National Institute for Christian Education Research); they also seem to be able to show that they are not (British Humanist Association)
- are faith schools only successful because they are selective or are they only selective because they are successful? Is it only the selective schools that are successful while faith schools, per se, are not significantly better?
- some of the allegations against church schools are frequently quoted but seldom encountered. For example, within this country, schools that teach Creationism rather than the standard science curriculum are a very tiny minority.

Methodological Issues

The information for this study was collected from interviews, formal and informal, with a range of individuals involved in church schooling, questionnaires, letters and emails, small group discussions and visits to a significant number of schools. There was an amount of reading, both of published literature and on the internet. There are church schools all over the country, representing a number of faith groups. The sector involves teachers, school leaders, governors, support staff, inspectors, experts, parents and, not least, children. In undertaking this study, I have endeavoured to honour that breadth. One significant limitation has been the 60 days time frame of the secondment: it was not possible to cover all regions and all faiths in that time. It is a cause of particular regret that efforts to arrange a visit to a Muslim school were 'timed-out' and the study is the poorer for it.

The study has yielded far too much information for the intended format of this Thinkpiece. I have therefore made the decision to focus on the case studies of individual schools and give only brief coverage of the other material, interesting though it is. This is because I have found the church sector quite well written but its work not well publicised. By introducing readers to the different schools I can offer something which is not extensively covered elsewhere. I have also encountered quite a lot of hostility towards faith schooling. I acknowledge these arguments but in selecting material for publication I have focused on exemplars of good practice which reflect the sector favourably. This is because the brief for this study was to highlight good practice and I find the arguments in favour of church schools warrant better publicity. I also did not visit any 'bad' schools. The schools chosen are not the stereotypical 'jewels in the crown', but interesting, workaday schools in which the faith ethos makes a positive contribution to both school and community. The examination results, used as a base line reference, are those published for 2005. At the time of publication, results for 2006 are just becoming available and reflect positively, in some cases outstandingly so, for the schools featured.

This secondment took place in the spring and summer of 2006, against the shifting background of the government's proposals for trust schools and the national debate about multiculturalism and social integration prompted by the London bombings of the previous summer. In response to this I have written additionally about the contribution of faith schools to social cohesion. There was not space to look in depth at all the arguments and those against faith schools in this respect are fairly obvious and oft repeated. Philosophically, I share anxieties about possible elitism and segregation in schooling, but am swayed by the arguments in favour of faith schools. The selection of focus schools in this study shows a bias towards Anglicanism: this is because, working in a CE school I found speediest access to this sector although I am not myself an Anglican. Anglican schools are also probably the most open and offer an interesting spread within the context of the study. My own background is in multifaith comprehensive schools in the Midlands, predominantly in the community sector. I am personally religious: a practising Christian with strong interfaith involvement.

Many very busy people gave generously of their time and thinking in support of this study. It is unfortunate that pressures of space may have resulted in some contributions being pruned out of the final publication. To all of you, many thanks.



Case Studies

Hesketh Fletcher School, Wigan

Hesketh Fletcher is a visionary church school in the north west, pioneering inspirational models of working with the community through innovative extended school activity.

The Context

Hesketh Fletcher is the only secondary school in the town of Atherton. Although within the Local Authority of Wigan, it is at the eastern end of the Borough, a long way from Wigan centre. For most people in Atherton, it is the local comprehensive school although the admissions policy does offer priority to church going youngsters. The school traces its history in the town back to 1840 and there is a strong sense of loyalty as succeeding generations of the same family have attended Hesketh Fletcher or its predecessors. Atherton's former prosperity as a town was built on cotton mills, coal mining and nail making. All of these industries are now gone. As a ward, Atherton is in the 11% most deprived areas in the country. OfSTED commented that the school seems to reflect greater deprivation than the statistics indicate. This is partially due to the close proximity of a large, most intensively deprived, housing estate from which great numbers of the children come. In 2005, 32% Year 11 achieved 5A* - C and about 20% of the year group had special educational needs. The school has regularly appeared in the top 9% for value-added at A*-G in recent years, and this, perhaps, reflects the significantly low scores with which, OfSTED observes, children enter the school.

Hesketh Fletcher is proud to be part of the memories of the past, but is visionary about the future. There is hope that a local regeneration business package will revitalise the town and the school is working towards developing young people who will be able to play a rounded part in this. The head, Dr Ted Walker, sees the school's specialism as a Humanities college as ideal for the school and community, poised as they currently are: it ties the school's development of its Christian distinctiveness to enhanced employability for youngsters in the community. This is achieved through the combination of the outstanding achievements available to children in drama and the development of emotional literacy in PSHE, alongside the work in RE (Religious Education) and literacy across the curriculum.

It also gives youngsters the opportunity to enlarge their own vision beyond Atherton. The school recently featured on television as the lead UK school for BBC News School Day: South Africa. This opportunity grew out of the inspirational work that students have done in drama and citizenship exploring issues of world citizenship and social justice arising from the head of drama's recent visit to South African schools.

Faith and Impact at Hesketh Fletcher

The School's Strategy for Involving the Community

The school's visionary approach is seen most clearly in its commitment to innovative community education through embracing the Extended Schools programme. As the school came out of Serious Weaknesses in 2001, the leadership team and governors recognised a need to improve the take up of educational opportunities by young people in school by reaching out to parents. In the past, the school had been a hub of community activity, with Brownies etc. meeting in the premises. Now the school was quiet outside the school day. Moreover, it was felt that, if parents had better educational skills and a better rapport with the school, the learning and attitude of students would improve. As new opportunities for community working came on line, the head saw the opportunity 'to do something extended and innovative in the extended schools development.' And so The Extended School Programme at Hesketh Fletcher, trading under the name of Genesis Action Ltd was born.

The initial impetus was to develop adult and community learning provision. The difficulty here was not so much the provision of classes, but getting local people to come – especially the people the school wanted to draw in. The inspirational Extended Schools leadership came up with the idea of approaching the cleaners, some of whom became learning ambassadors, bridging the gap between the school and local area. A mixed programme of starter activities, both on and off site, drew new learners with their families and neighbours into the school. Many of these stayed on, to join other courses that they would never have previously considered and some have since won Borough awards for life-long learning, describing their experience at Hesketh

Fletcher as transformational. The night school manager still takes a very hands-on approach to recruitment. He is usually to be found going round with the tea trolley in the middle of the evening, chatting to the classes and coaxing them to come and try other, and sometimes more challenging, courses.

Scope of Community Activities

The Night School was only the beginning of the Extended Schools work which now flows out of Hesketh Fletcher into the local community creating, with local primary schools, a hub of educational and social care provision. On my visit I met community play leaders, play workers, mentors, community theatre leaders, sports co-ordinators and house parents employed by the school as well as other care professionals working in partnership. The school does not only offer extended services on its own premises but is getting out into the heart of the community. The AtTIC is a project aimed at promoting physical and emotional health and reducing teenage pregnancy. Based in the rented upstairs of a local building, it has all the advantages of being tied to the school without the drawbacks of being perceived to be in the school building. The school provides a captive market of young people while they are comfortable with the distance provided for nurture activities, counselling and out of hours access. Even though Hesketh Fletcher is a secondary school, a lot of work is established through Sure Start. Tots is a favoured title. The Extended School offers Swim Tots, Techno Tots, Toe-tapping Tots and Tots Plot in centres in the local area. In Techno Tots I saw a peripatetic play worker bringing IT opportunities to groups in a local nursery; in their Tots Plot, little ones learn to harvest their own fruit and vegetables. The school is linked with a high street shop where Sure Start activities are promoted as parents access the toy library. In September, Home Economics staff planned to open a Community Café in a local clinic.

Outstanding Project Promotes Citizenship

One particularly inspiring and moving project offers Home from Home. Children of all ages are referred in small groups to the project because circumstances at home make it desirable for them to have somewhere else to go after school a couple of evenings a week. The school has secured a flat on the estate which is furnished as a normal home, without the beds. Youngsters who go there after school spend time 'chilling' for a while,

before sitting down at the dining table together for a proper cooked meal eaten with a knife and fork. The play or sport workers might organise activities, outdoor games or something as simple as doing a jigsaw. There is also a television and computers. After the meal, youngsters are given time, space and support to do their homework. It gives the children an experience of the stability and normality of home. The school employs house parents who run the centre every night, with different groups. It has proved immensely popular. The flat was set up with enhanced security but there has been no vandalism whatsoever. Neighbours, who might have been cautious, are very supportive of the scheme and parents, who might themselves be struggling, never fail to pick up their children at the end of the session. The Council's Housing Department took a bold risk in supporting the idea by providing the flat but feel they have been vindicated. They see Home from Home not only providing immediate support for families in difficulty but also developing citizens for the future who will have positive attitudes and a stake in the community.

It might seem as though a lot of this activity is a long way from what goes on in the secondary classroom. But the school sees this as a very powerful investment in their future clientele. In the words of the chair of governors: "We backed a long game". But, through its work, the school is also building a relationship with the community which creates a positive climate enabling it to be more successful now:

"Unless we do work in the kids' context and community there is no way these children can come into the school and learn. Unless we engage with that child's family and what's going on at home they haven't got a chance. They haven't got a starter".
(Project Leader)

Outcomes Measured

The Extended School activities also provide educational opportunities for young people inside and beyond the classroom. Learning in Health and Social Care has been enhanced with practical examples, while youngsters helping in the Community Café gain valuable work based learning which is also accredited to various qualifications. The initiatives also give direct support to learning within the school, through academic mentoring, nurture and drama which have been evaluated: monitoring shows the changes to the rank



order of learners in Keystage Four because of mentoring. Evaluation of the students on the Green Grass Project shows how their attendance, punctuality and attainment have improved. Governors are happy that when they come into the school in the evening it is buzzing again; 'You feel part of a living thing'.

Christian Ethos is Powerful Driver for Success

Does it make any difference to this work that Hesketh Fletcher is a church school? At one level, the answer to this is No – all of these developments could be created in a community school. Most of the partners, and almost all of the funding, are from secular institutions. However, that superficial understanding fails to take into account the drive that motivates this success. The school's intentions are identified in its mission statement: 'This Christian school serves the community' and staff speak of the community outreach of the school as 'extending the vision'. The head talks about an imperative based on Gospel values: the message of social justice in the Old Testament and the bias to the poor in the New. "It is a personal driver for us and the governors" says the Extended School leader Patsy Hodson, an ex-HTI secondee. That means that work which might be sidelined because it is not core business is at the heart of the school: "Because it's a church school, they are so receptive. I don't have to justify it in any other sense. I just have to say to the head, 'These kids need it' and the governors are an open door." And it is a very powerful personal driver – most of the staff recruited to the Extended Schools team are committed Christians and they have provided the motivation, vision and ambition which have made the work happen and persuaded others to come on board.

Atherton is an area where the church still has credibility but few people go regularly. This applies especially to young people. Out of 1,000 students, only three attend the parish church regularly. Attendance at other denominations and midweek activities might bring the total up to just over one in 20. For the church, the school is an important part of its activities, and this brings additional support through the diocese and the local church, both as a body and through the work of individuals. The local curate and Salvation Army workers contribute generously to the school. One recent activity brought together the school, as Humanities College and Extended School, with the community and

church. This was a visit to Poland in May 2006, where an equal number of children and adults shared the experience of visiting Auschwitz and expressed their learning through drama, music and writing. This clearly had a profound effect on children and adults alike, as the accounts on the school website testify. The church status of Hesketh Fletcher is fundamental to its work enlarging the opportunities it offers to its students and neighbours. The head of a local community primary school commented:

"I like the connection, even from the church point of view. Because of the work of the secondary school, we are able as a primary school to get out onto the estate. The impact is the developing relationship on behalf of the children that provides them with greater opportunities. I like to access that connection. It's character building and provides for a better future for them when they have a wider picture."

St Alban's School, Birmingham

St Alban's, Birmingham, is a remarkable school. The only secondary school within the inner city, defined by the barrier of the fast-moving A4540 Birmingham middle ring road, it serves an area of considerable deprivation, one of the tenth poorest wards in the country. The school occupies a small site with little outdoor space for students. It is surrounded by shops, light industry and mixed housing while, from the first floor windows, there are views across the rooftops to the newly regenerated city centre and iconic Selfridges building.

The Context

In many Local Authorities the sole Church of England school might be expected to draw Anglican children from all over the city and create an ethos quite alien to the geographical area where it is situated. St Alban's is not this sort of church school. HMI commented that 'St Alban's School is not like any other' and staff themselves say 'There's something different here'.

The school has by far the highest proportion of students with Special Educational Needs of any Church of England school in England. In 2005, this represented 72.7% of Year 11, yet 27% of the same year group was able to score 5A* - C grades at GCSE. The percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals is well above the national average and many pupils come from families where there is no employment. The attainment of students on entry is exceptionally low with literacy problems significantly hampering development. Within this small school community, the range of languages spoken is broad: currently 27, but in the recent past as many as 37 languages have been used. Mobility is unusually high, with a significant number of New Arrivals having limited prior experience of formal education. A child in Year 9 may not only lack familiarity with the English language but also with how to handle a pair of scissors. A Year 11 student of Yemeni origin, who proudly showed me her very promising Design coursework, told me she had never drawn before coming to St Alban's three years ago. The school is a member of the Octet, a small group of schools highlighted by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills) as working in exceptionally challenging circumstances.

The Church of St Alban the Martyr, which adjoins the school, is a huge Victorian red brick building, 'with the feel of a small cathedral'. Built at the height of the Oxford Movement, its founders were inspired with the vision of 'bringing the Gospel to poor areas of large cities, where there were no schools, no churches, little sanitation and much disease'. This 19th Century theological model of community regeneration aimed to draw people to salvation by giving 'a dramatic contrast to pinched and often ugly home surroundings', offered through the beauty of the church experience and the message of the Gospel. The school was founded as part of the outworking of this mission in 1871. Despite the changes that the last 130 years have brought to the Highgate area, the church and school are still here, serving a local community overshadowed by new social deprivation. The significant change is in the religious complexion of the area: local residents are as likely to be active members of another world faith or Free Pentecostal Christian Churches as they are to have no faith at all. The dome of Birmingham Central Mosque dominates the Highgate skyline, while the congregation of St Alban's, attracted by the Anglo Catholic High Church theology and practice, is drawn from all over the city.

Faith and Impact at St Alban's

An Inclusive Faith Community

Given the context in which the school operates, it might be thought that a church school would be, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, divisive in this part of inner city Birmingham. In reality, faith is an important part of the positive impact the school is able to have both within and beyond its gates. The Christian presence of the school is distinctive without being ostentatious; compelling, but not compulsory. It is an ethos the head, David Gould, has sought to develop, because he saw "a powerful strength not being fully exploited". The head speaks of the school's role, as a church school "not here to serve Christians as such, but the people who live here". St Alban's has an inclusive Christian ethos which creates a warm, friendly and compassionate environment in which every child matters. It is a gentle school in which students are caring and mutually supportive, yet it is also driven by a sense of mission, to challenge every individual to make the most of their God given talents. It is an ethos that the head believes takes years to build: the children have low self-esteem because of their experience of life and it is fundamental to the school "to show repeatedly to

the youngsters that they are valued and respected by staff – on the basis that they will have very little experience of that in the rest of their lives".

St Alban's is emphatically a multifaith community. This is not particularly a focus in denominational worship, which is offered weekly in the church to children who opt in. However, the school does not disregard the diversity of its students' faith. In building its ethos the school acknowledges and draws on the rich seam of faith which runs through the school and the community: "It works well because our community is much more specifically Godfearing than many We are talking to an audience who believe in God," says the head. Through links with the Mosque, reflected in the governing body, and using the diversity of staff, partners at all levels work to ensure that the school operates as a cohesive, inclusive faith community. Not least in this are the children themselves, who actively respect and support each other. This mutual respect, which stems from the school and spreads through the wider neighbourhood, goes deeper than a secular tolerance:

"There is something real and spiritual and different and if it's not there, it's not there – it needs commitment from governors and staff and to some extent parents. The school becomes, through it, a corporate enterprise."

David Gould.

Being a church school helps St Alban's to establish discipline in a tough setting; within the diversity, there is a consensus about what is right and proper and that a higher authority than moral relativism requires it. This is not restricted to the faithful:

"In a challenging area, where people have no moral code, saying, 'We are a church school' strengthens that [the establishment of discipline] against people who don't accept it. All the senior team feel that would be very difficult to do if they weren't a church school."

David Gould.

Within the school, visitors remark on 'an overwhelming impression of a respectful and well ordered community when the opportunities to be otherwise would be legion'. Beyond the school, this moral lead based on a partnership of faiths extends into the local area. In a strong union with local Muslims and Baptists, leaders are empowered to challenge wrongdoing in the community

and feel confident to move beyond their own comfort zones into situations which can sometimes be threatening or intimidating.

"The school sees its Christian mission of working alongside other faiths as a powerful model:

It is notable that against the challenges of recent times, such as 7/7 and 9/11, the community has pulled together and hung together because of its inclusive ethos".

David Gould.

Powerful Partnerships

St Alban's is a partner in a number of developmental relationships for school improvement which have arisen through ordinary Local Authority and extraordinary DfES routes and have no connection with the faith status of the school. However, as a church school, St Alban's also has access to partnerships of particular strength. The diocese of Birmingham is a strong partner and provides powerful, supportive advocacy for this, the only church secondary school in the city. This is available in the consistent support of the diocesan director of education, Mary Edwards, who brings to the role all her experience as a former secondary head in a multifaith church setting. At the head of the diocese, John Sentamu, when he was Birmingham's charismatic and outspoken Bishop, was a strong and forthright supporter of the school. It can only be a benefit to any school to have John Sentamu so obviously on your side.

The church connection also works in St Alban's favour as a source of governors of calibre. The high churchmanship of St Alban the Martyr attracts into the area people who, in addition to their goodwill towards Highgate, have a level of qualification, experience and skill which greatly enhances that available locally. In conjunction with its work through the school, the church is very active in the community and has contributed the expertise of its members to many local projects: the chair of governors is a university professor, for example, and it is he who is leading on the development of Extended Schools within the area. This adds value to the whole area, not just the school as it bolsters up local community leadership within the other churches and the Mosque and provides valuable role modelling and support for the development of leadership on the ground.



Most innovative of the church partnerships in which St Alban's is engaged is that of the Lichfield Foundation. Through this the school is working with S. Peter's Collegiate School in Wolverhampton. S. Peter's has a different experience as a faith school from St Alban's – it is high achieving and oversubscribed. The proportion of Christian students is much greater while SEN (Special Education Needs), free school meals and EAL (English as an Additional Language) are all low. It is a Leading Edge School and the relationship with St Alban's forms part of its outreach work. Yet both heads speak strongly of this as a real partnership, one in which each partner can learn from the other and actively seeks to do so. Through the Foundation these two very different schools have the opportunity to engage with a partner, working out what it means to be a church school in very different settings. There has been joint staff training, a long term mutual exchange of governors and visits between the head boy and head girl team. St Alban's staff, working in such a small school where they might be the only teacher in a department, particularly benefit from sharing with subject colleagues. For each it offers the opportunity to learn and reflect beyond the Local Authority setting:

"Distance brings trust here – there is no element of competition and we have different lords and masters. It enables us to have very honest relationships".

David Gould.

Conclusion

St Alban's is able to function well as a school in extremely challenging circumstances because of the very fact that it is a faith school. Its continued presence in the Highgate area is sustained by its Christian mission, yet it offers a model of community inclusion by being responsive to the multifaith nature of its intake and community. As such it sits at the heart of Highgate and, working with its partners, is able to deliver Birmingham's Flourishing Neighbourhoods policy. The headteacher states that 'the church sees it as a duty to support education here' and it effects this vision through its commitment to involvement with the school, and beyond the school to the local community. It is likely that, if it were not for the church, there would be no secondary school working in the Highgate area.

The King's School, Wolverhampton

The King's CE School is a pioneering school, which has blazed a trail of interfaith inclusion that counters claims that faith schools are necessarily divisive.

The Context

King's was opened on 1st September 1998 giving a fresh start to the former Regis School which had closed down on the same site the day before. Regis had once been the flagship comprehensive school of the city; the first head is said to have been the first serving headteacher to receive a Knighthood. But school reorganisation, falling rolls, depressed results and a loss of parental confidence had brought the school to the brink of closure, with many students going out of borough rather than to other City schools. In the mid 1990s, a rescue package was put together by the Local Authority partnering Regis with its successful neighbour, S. Peter's Collegiate School. Within this, it was S. Peter's success and the drive and dynamism of its Principal that led to its initial attraction as improvement partner; its faith status was not a main priority. However, in the post-Dearing climate, the Church of England locally recognised an opportunity to build on the popularity of its existing church school, extending its work and the availability of places through making the old Regis into a new church school.

Governors and other stakeholders wanted the new King's School to emulate S. Peter's in success but not become a clone of its neighbour. This applied particularly to its faith status. S. Peter's is an historic foundation, and has a more traditional admissions policy: hugely oversubscribed, most places are available to practising members of the Church of England and other Christian groups. There was a degree of disquiet around the time of the change as to the appropriateness of opening another Church of England school in place of one which served a majority of Asian families. The new school had a different mission: to reassure families of the traditional catchment area and beyond, that, within this new church school, their child's spiritual needs and religious identity would be honoured. The admissions policy was established accordingly, with the majority of places allocated residentially according to Parish; the proportion of students who

could come from the multi-ethnic area between the school and the city centre was maintained. The admissions policy has since been hailed as a model of good practice at national level. It was a few years before the school regained some of its former popularity so, although The King's has been open for eight years, it is only in the last couple of years that the acclaimed admissions policy has been invoked.

When The King's opened, the majority of children attending the school were Sikh. Since its redesignation as a church school, the proportion of Muslims choosing the school has increased each year, creating another significant faith group. Amongst the Christian children, practising Anglicans would be in the minority. The school has about 65% black minority ethnic students, about double the average for the city, with over 40% students from Asian families.

Soon after reopening, the school was designated a Specialist College in Visual Arts and, following that success, given second specialism in Sport with Science. The School's success in these areas, like its initial improvement partnership, has not been dependent on its being a faith school. However, the faith identity of the school has worked in mutually supportive partnership with the Specialist College initiative, particularly in the exploration of links between creativity and spirituality.

Faith and Impact at The King's

A Journey of Faiths

A visitor to the school today finds an institution which is both distinctively Christian and deeply committed to interfaith activity and building mutual understanding. The challenge for the school has been to turn a community school into a church school, holding together both the aspirations of local Christian communities and communities of other faiths. One way in which this has been attended to is in the physical environment of the building. The outside of the school, previously blank, is now distinguished by a large cross of St Chad. This particular form of cross is said to symbolise the love of God pointing to all four corners of the globe. The school identifies itself not simply as a church school but one in the Lichfield diocesan family, serving all who come. In the peaceful garden next to the student entrance there is a bench and plaques by the trees: an area of remembrance for two students and a member of staff who died suddenly in recent years, one Roman Catholic and two Sikh.

Inside the building, there is a faith centre and not a chapel. The altar, chalice and other Christian artefacts were the gift of one of the local churches; the artist in residence produced the stained glass window featuring the Millennium Prayer, which is flanked by a ceramic cross and stained glass plaque of domes resonant of a mosque or Gurdwara. These, and the liturgical banners hanging in the school hall, were made by children in the school.

A Vision for all Faiths

Since the inception of The King's it has been important to engage with leaders from all the local faith communities. From the opening of this Church of England school, people of other faiths have been on the governing body and the Lichfield Foundation Council. Two groups of stakeholders meet regularly to steer the faith development of the school. The extended clergy teams of the four different partner parishes meet as a team – an act of goodwill which overcomes the archaic geographical boundaries of the Church of England – and act as a forum for the Christian development of the school. No less important is the Faith Forum which brings together leaders of all local faith communities to support the interfaith initiative. The vice principal is a board member of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group and sits on SACRE (Standing Advisory Conference on Religious Education). The new chaplain is shared with the original partner school, with whom The King's is still in active partnership; a new Anglican priest herself, she is beginning to develop groundbreaking models of interfaith chaplaincy.

Faith is the Basis for Inclusion not Division

Structurally, the school has striven to secure credibility within Wolverhampton's diverse faith communities and this has taken time, effort and a lot of goodwill from all involved. Children may not be aware of these committees behind the scenes, but they do see their work on a daily basis, and contribute to it themselves. It is not the religious practices of the school which are in themselves unusual but their execution: everything is done to make faith the basis of inclusion rather than division. For example, it is not unusual for a school to arrange a facility for Muslim students to pray during Ramadan, but at The King's the prayers are open for all children to attend. As the school has developed its Christian identity, celebrations of the Eucharist have become more central but staff have managed these so that it is appropriate and

comfortable for all students to participate, not just the Anglican minority. The school's patronal festival is celebrated as The Feast of Christ the King with the focus on living in God's kingdom. Students spend the day welcoming the stranger, working for charity and expanding their creativity. Some of the highest points of the school's spiritual journey have ironically been when it was at its lowest ebb: the whole school interfaith worship after 11th September 2001 and memorial to mark the sudden death of a head of year have stayed in the consciousness of everyone involved. On such occasions it is the students, of all faiths, who ask for a liturgical response; it is not the initiative of staff. Indeed, the will of the young people themselves to be an inclusive and united community which is based on faith is the real triumph of the faith ethos of the school.

Positive Student Response to Faith Dimension

While this Thinkpiece was in preparation, the school was conducting its own study into student attitudes to the faith dimension of the school. This gives powerful evidence as to the impact of attending a faith school which is firmly committed to inclusion specifically on the grounds of faith. Youngsters in the school show considerable breadth and depth of reflection in their responses to the study. They feel that the school is distinctive as a Christian school because of the values encountered at The King's. They value the Eucharist as a core liturgical activity at the heart of the spiritual life of the school, even though they have very different levels of participation. They see forgiveness, the opportunity for a fresh start, the sense of encouragement as central values of the school. They perceive relationships as critical – relationships with staff and between students. In particular, and this is very relevant to the arguments about the divisiveness of faith schools, they believe that the school is almost entirely free from racism. They believe the school engenders unity, not despite the diversity of faiths but because of it. It provides a forum for children to talk openly about their differing beliefs in a secure, nurturing environment, saying

"Learn to respect is the biggest value taught"

and

"Walking in love. Respect is that."

The youngsters see the school as a model of how they would like the outside world to be. One sixth former commented:

"I would hope that the community I have found at King's reflects the wider community of Wolverhampton."

Conclusion

The King's has been given a unique opportunity because it found itself in a unique situation in 1998. Charged with developing a new Church of England school for an explicitly multi-faith clientele, it has responded with creativity and sensitivity. Some schools are carrying out a brave experiment in ecumenism, bringing together Christians from different backgrounds. The King's is taking the experiment one bold step further.

St Francis of Assisi Academy, Liverpool

The St Francis of Assisi Academy in Liverpool is a groundbreaking ecumenical initiative in the Academies programme. Replacing a former Roman Catholic comprehensive school, it has been built to focus on the environment through both its building and curriculum design.

The Context

As an Academy, St Francis of Assisi is a new school in a very difficult part of the city. The Kensington area is ranked at 48th most deprived in the country, featuring in the bottom 10% of all wards nationally. Traditionally, children have gone out from the area to secondary schools all over Liverpool and low pupil numbers was one of the main factors in the closure of the former school. Our Lady (formerly Our Lady of Fatima), although at that time felt to be slowly improving, was one of those named and shamed by the Secretary of State in the late 1990s. Following this, children would even report being derided by bus drivers for going to the school. In combination with run down buildings, some difficult behaviour and low rates of examination success the school was brought to the brink of closure. What saved secondary schooling in Kensington was a plan for regeneration of the whole area with a new school at its heart. The Academy was the particular inspiration of the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, but is fully an ecumenical project between his team and their Catholic partners. The Bishop combined his own passion for Green issues with the ecumenical drive which has distinguished recent Christian leadership in Liverpool. Both of these bring a distinctive faith impetus to the opportunities for innovation under the Academies programme and the City's regeneration agenda.

The school stands somewhat bravely at the vanguard of the wider redevelopment of Kensington. The location of this expensive enterprise was initially controversial as it was felt parents would not want to send their children into the area for schooling. Signs on nearby streets warn of the penalties for kerb crawling and the school employs security at its entrance. But the Academy is already oversubscribed in the lower years. People within the area are very proud of the school. It has brought life to a locality which was previously run down, and attracted a lot of

favourable attention and prestigious visitors. Staff say "the location is idyllic compared with where we were". However, St Francis of Assisi has not become an instant Utopia. Children transferring from the former school have brought with them many of their problems: eligibility for free school meals is very high and the number of students with statements of SEN is high for Liverpool.

Faith and Impact at St Francis of Assisi

Sustainable Living

St Francis of Assisi has already attracted significant media and political attention because of its environmental focus. Commentators have written widely about the groundbreaking school design and innovative curriculum initiatives. As most press attention came at the time the Academy was opened, less well written is the impact of the experience of the buildings and the curriculum on pupils and staff. Yet to come is the evaluation of the impact on learning and teaching and its outcomes: the Academy has not had an OfSTED and, at the time of writing, the first cohort was awaiting its exam results.

The links between the environment and spirituality which inspired the project are less well publicised. The Academy has its theological roots in Archbishop James' reflection on his discussions with teenagers at the beginning of the millennium and its subsequent publication as *Jesus and the Earth* which went on to be the Church of England's Lent Study Book in 2004. In the book he explores a broad theology of creation in which the material, as well as the spiritual, has a purpose and destiny with God; and Christ, as the firstborn of creation, who reconciles all things to God, is set forward as bringing salvation for the planet and not just for the individual. In his discussions with them, the Bishop understood that young people may have little comprehension of formal religion, yet are very concerned about the environment. He understood that, through a shared concern for salvation, the church had a route to engage with young people where each might inform the others' vision. As a faith school, the Academy is not just important for Kensington or for Liverpool. It is also at the vanguard of the developing understanding of the whole Christian community as it models, through practical examples, how environmentalism might be part of the holistic response to salvation through Christ.

The Academy Design at the Cutting Edge of Sustainability

Even without the theological understanding which underpins it, the Academy is a fascinating building. Some of the low-rise teaching blocks have planted roofs and walls to improve drainage and insulation; from the outside, they merge into the parkland environment on the edge of which the school was built. The storeys of the main part of the school are all brightly lit by virtue of the huge glass atrium which provides about 3% of the school's energy. On the wall of the central meeting area, a large digital display gives minute by minute information to students and staff about how much energy is being produced and how much used. Within the curriculum there is a reflective as well as a functional response to environmental issues so that besides engaging with the environment through topics in maths and science, students think about the impact of design on mood and well-being. The curricular flexibility of Academy status enables students to be active in additional projects: each Year 7 form has its own garden and while I was there they were outside in their gardening clothes working on the landscaping of their plot. Asked about the impact of the building on the spirituality of the children, one teacher commented:

"You don't need a building to support your Christianity. But there are lovely gathering places, a lovely openness about it, nothing is hidden. The building supports it; the kids feel it."

One of the criticisms of the Green movement is that it does not engage the majority of the population: 'The whole subject of the environment is very sterilised, academic, scientific and middle-class' (Jagdeesh Singh, London 21). This Academy project, in a socially deprived area is addressing this by marrying the agenda for urban improvement with that of sustainable living. Moreover, it is an ideal grounded in theological reflection, as the same teacher explained:


"I think this is a point theologically where spirituality is growing. People are coming to an understanding that we are stewards of the earth and must care for the environment. Given that, the school is here to support the regeneration of a very deprived area, empower them to take care of their environment, show sustainable living is possible in the inner city as well as in the shires – we all have to learn to live in a way that is responsible."

Ecumenical Co-operation

Although it is the initiative for which it has perhaps received the most attention, the environmental focus is not the only issue which makes the St Francis of Assisi Academy distinctive as a faith school. Sponsored by the United Learning Trust, the Academy is also an experiment in ecumenism in Christian education. It is still unusual for two parts of the same faith to work together in the delivery of education in Britain. The intentions of each community for their schools and the legacy of educational history tend to the maintenance of separate systems. Pragmatism, however, as well as theological goodwill is driving forward this development. The Academy replaces a Roman Catholic school but Catholics only have 50% of places at the new school. There are those within the Catholic community who see this loss of exclusivism as a retrograde step, but this overlooks the fact that the previous school struggled to fill more than 25% places with practising Catholics and the Catholic Church stood to lose its secondary educational base in this area altogether. The Anglican places in the school are allocated according to the Dearing model on the basis of local residency in the Kensington Regeneration Area. This creates an ecumenical community in which most of the children might not have a faith but might still claim for themselves a religious identity.

The Academy extends the enlightened ecumenism which has been a feature of the recent religious leadership of Liverpool beyond cathedrals and churches into communities where the echo of religious sectarianism lingers. These young people might not know what it means to belong to a Protestant church but share in a deep collective memory of what it means to be Orange. Staff describe the 'tribal' Catholicism of some of the other children. The ecumenism of the Academy addresses historic sectarianism at grass roots level as young people develop the self awareness and expression of cultural identities. On opening the school, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, praised this, as well as the environmentalism, as pioneering:

"Here we have people from different parts of one faith coming together and making something special for all the children..... I know in times to come in this community this school is going to stand as an example not just of education but of co-operation and partnership and of faith in its best sense. That's something which is very special about the ethos of this school."



The Academy represents faith communities coming together to work for the good of the area in which most of the people are not of faith. Staff find that it is not just the ecumenism of the school which has an impact on the learners, but the core values of Christianity:

"Forgiveness, equality, reconciliation should be in all schools but they are explicit here. They are, and they are absolute news to a lot of kids. It's not where they are coming from."

The school embraces some difficult youngsters from challenging backgrounds, complicated by poverty, low aspiration, mobility, instability, dysfunction and trauma. At the previous school 25% of the students were transitory asylum seekers with level one language skills, although this figure is now reduced.

'Forgiveness and reconciliation are not part of their moral landscape at all. And it's something that we are very strong on. It's a big step when your whole family story is one of strife and struggle.'

The mission of the school is therefore presented as 'Incarnational' – God is made present in the lives of the children as they are. 'For us, faith is walking with them in their lives. It's about helping them to relate the Gospel values to the lives they lead and experience. We have to accept the person as they are and help them grow to be the best they can be'. This adds a dimension of moral regeneration to the geographical regeneration of the area.

Conclusion

The St Francis of Assisi Academy attracts attention for its environmentalism but is equally pioneering in its ecumenism. As a faith school it is offering young people opportunity to explore cultural identity in a setting which remodels their historic religious heritage rather than denying it. It is also bringing clear, values driven educational opportunities to one of the most disadvantaged areas of the inner city, giving young people the experience of living in a setting which is both architecturally and morally inspiring. Early indicators suggest that this is having a positive impact on educational attitudes and outcomes. This is an opportunity provided by the church from which the wider society can only benefit.



Exploring the Value of Church Schools: Are Church Schools Necessarily Divisive?

Through conducting the research for this Thinkpiece, I have identified a number of arguments for and against church schools which I describe in this section.

Faith Schools and Social Harmony

One of the key criticisms made against faith schools is that they make a significant contribution to social division. This is particularly a concern of teaching unions, especially the NUT, and some politicians at local and national level. It has become a particular concern since the Millennium with the riots in the north west and the national soul searching that has followed the 7th July London bombings.

There does not seem to be any hard research which explores possible links between faith schools and social division; indeed it is difficult to see how such research might be conducted. The argument is therefore pursued around perception and opinion, some of it quite strident. It is closely tied to the broader social policy debate about the relative merits of assimilation and multiculturalism in the development of social cohesion: should education be the vehicle of transmission of some ideal of Britishness and should schools, in particular, be places where young people encounter a breadth of tradition beyond their own?

I acknowledge the ranging arguments against faith schools. However, as they are frequently aired I will focus here on discussion of some of the more positive factors.

Ethnicity and Diversity in Church Schools

Such research as there is focuses on race: NICER finds that minority ethnic children are more highly represented in Church of England secondary schools. However, within these figures the numbers of black Caribbean and black African children are high whereas the numbers of Indian and Pakistani children are proportionately low. It is likely that this reflects the fact that the former groups are more likely to be Christian and therefore to satisfy the admissions criteria. This would mean that children in CE schools are, broadly speaking, likely to grow up alongside youngsters of a different colour but less likely to experience their schooling alongside people of a different faith. It is interesting to speculate to what extent the obverse is also true: that the corralling of Christian children into church schools means that children in community schools have a diminished experience of encountering young people of the Christian faith. Various commentators on the Oldham riots have raised concerns about the segregation of schools as a contributory factor, pointing to the fact that in 17 primary schools in Oldham, 90% plus of the school roll are of one ethnic group. However, these are not faith schools and this highlights the way that discussion about the divisiveness of faith schooling can become confused with broader issues about social segregation.

Of all faith schools, CE schools tend to have the broadest intake. This is partly because most of the voluntary controlled faith schools, which have no control over their own admissions, are CE. This should be borne in mind when considering the figures. Other communities have far fewer schools to serve their needs, so these are usually heavily oversubscribed and have no spare capacity to admit children from other communities. An exception to this would be King David's in Liverpool where the small local Jewish

community only fills 25% of places in this very popular, oversubscribed school. Other children are admitted on the basis of some other faith allegiance. Staff here said that having a mixed faith school was felt to be a positive factor in the relatively small incidence of anti-Semitism locally. Appearances can also be deceptive: students attending the only Sikh school in the country are entirely Asian, but that does not mean they are exclusively Sikh. Muslim and Hindu children also have places and the school is looking to broaden its admission policy to allow for more people from other faiths.

Children from Different Backgrounds Brought Together

There are other aspects of the contribution of faith schools to social cohesion which can also easily be overlooked. Because there are usually only a few faith secondary schools in any geographical area, they tend to draw their students widely. In most parts of the country there will perhaps only be one church school within a city, which will therefore draw together students from every part, from leafy suburb to inner city tower block. The school might well be the only place in which children from widely divergent socio-economic backgrounds meet and make friends. Church schools are generally not neighbourhood schools therefore there is no de facto selection by postcode or mortgage. In one school, staff spoke about how their community was the only place people from north and south of the river would come together. The chaplain at another faith school made an interesting observation about social integration:

"[the] students are delightful to each other; you look at the kids in the playground and you see completely mixed friendships as well as internal group friendships even if their parents have different hopes and aspirations."

Children also have friends and social networks beyond the school; going to a faith school does not mean children do not have friends of other religions. This would be like assuming that girls who go to a single sex school do not know any boys! Travelling in from a wider range of primary schools, students are more likely to have friends

locally who are neighbours, colleagues from previous schools or local clubs. One girl at the Guru Nanak School spoke about her contacts at dance, youth club, ballet as well as friends in her local area. However, these are all elective relationships and are to an extent determined by the community's attitude to mixing with others. Opportunities for significant encounter with others are not only affected by single faith schools. They are also likely to be reduced where local demographics have resulted in ghettoisation, where there is pressure on members, particularly girls, to be more insular, where the religious community forms the major focus of children's social life and where children move from primary to secondary school within the faith. This is as much a danger for the white community as for minority ethnic groups and would make an interesting focus for further research.

Promotion of Tolerance

Likewise, to accuse church schools of fostering intolerance is to prejudge the message taught there: many people in Britain who did not experience cultural diversity at school have nonetheless grown up to be tolerant adults able to relate to others from different backgrounds. All the religions with schools in Britain teach values such as love for neighbour and respect for others. This makes them no different from community schools except that they believe that these values come with a metaphysical dimension and divine imperative. For example, children at a Roman Catholic School in the Midlands said the main value taught at the school was 'Learn how to treat people fairly': One child commented:

'I know God says we are all his children so we must treat them [people of other faiths] as our brothers and sisters.'

Self Confidence in Identity Developed

Faith schools are arguably likely to produce citizens who will have greater empathy for others, not less. To an extent this partly reflects the historic teachings of the religion and the current state of self-confidence of the community; so Sikh children in Southall say:

"Our religion says no matter what colour, caste or religion, you should be welcomed everywhere"

and

"It doesn't matter what religion we are because we have to be divided into [sic] people's hearts. That's what causes division but religion don't, it's about people's thinking."

Faith schools are also aiming to develop children who are self confident in their own identity. Although opponents of multiculturalism may feel nervous about this, young adults who feel happy and secure about who they are would be less likely to feel marginalised and turn to extremism to reinforce their sense of self. Despite its editorial intention, a recent BBC radio programme found children at the Muslim school in Birmingham speaking positively about the way the school prepares them for life in a multifaith society: our 'identity is British Muslim'; 'Islam teaches us to eradicate racism'. During the research for this Thinkpiece, children at the all-Asian Guru Nanak school made comments such as "I know what I am" and "I get to stick to my roots" but they also speak about their Britishness:

"I am British ... I may go to an Indian school but that doesn't affect it."

At an institutional level, schools within Local Authorities also have greater interaction with each other than previously. As Beacon Schools, or part of area-wide consortia or collaborations, all the schools visited were involved in some sort of work in established partnership with other schools and this involved bringing young people together. The desire for faith schools to build relationships specifically with schools of other faiths was one repeatedly expressed at the National Society conference this year; Anglicans think of themselves as having a special duty, as

the national church, to serve all the people within the community. In his speech to the Conference the Archbishop of Canterbury (Rowan Williams) said:

"We as a National Society have a responsibility for building relationships. ... all faith schools should show goodwill and respect."

Those inside faith schools are no less concerned than outsiders about social divisiveness. Leaders of faith schools express concern that they should not be contributing to intolerance. As one faith school leader said:

"You couldn't sleep at night if you were adding to that [intolerance]."

What are the Issues for Faith Schools in the Future?

The Role of Faith Needs Full Recognition

People who fear that faith schooling might be divisive are usually against religion in school altogether; they believe that young people should be brought to learn together in secular educational institutions. However, it is faith itself which lies at the crux of our current national predicament: those Britons, who have turned in recent years to the extremism which fosters terrorism, have defined themselves by their faith rather than race or colour. If our efforts to build social cohesion are to be worthwhile, we must take fully into account the role of faith. David Randolph-Horn, a vicar who has worked extensively with Leeds Muslims following the 7th July bombings commented to the BBC:

"In a secular society, I don't think we really know any more how to relate to each other as people who may have faith as an important part of our lives."

Schools do not deal with the faith issue by simply ignoring it. Faith schools, especially those with more open admissions policies, build communities where faith is taken seriously and where bridges are built because, rather than in spite of, faith. In Northern Ireland, the government responded to the need to integrate a community divided along faith lines by the introduction of integrated schools rather than secular schools. Within these, communities can be confident that there is the expertise to meet their specific faith concerns and the skill sensitively to build bridges. Individuals who come forward to sponsor Academies tend to be strong supporters of one particular faith but there have been moves led by high powered groups of interfaith leaders to set up integrated schools in England. So far these have been unsuccessful but they seem to be a very positive way forward. What is required are sponsors who have substantial financial resources to put behind the interfaith ideal.

Increasing Knowledge of Other Faiths

Another development in combating the insularity of faith schools is the recent agreement by faith leaders to ensure that all pupils learn about the other main religions in Britain besides their own. This is well intentioned, but a number of issues arise: do faith schools at grass roots level have the will or the capacity to deliver their leaders' promises? Children to whom I spoke in this study, who expressed a view, felt that they should learn about other faiths in school but staff had more reservations. Some believed that the school was tasked with the special responsibility of nurturing children in their own faith – why would they want to spend time learning about others? Where schools are willing, are they also able? Several of the teachers of religion that I met would have difficulty: for example, one had been withdrawn from RE lessons himself as a child and therefore had no grounding in an interfaith approach. Others had only studied within specialist faith schools themselves and had gone on to qualify as teachers within that sector through school-based training schemes. There are considerable training and resource issues for this initiative to succeed. Indeed, the insularity of the experience of some of the teachers in faith schools is an issue beyond RE. If staff have not learned or worked beyond the doors of their own school, how are they to develop the shared values of an integrated and cohesive society with children?

The Regulation of Faith Schools

This highlights a third issue: the regulation of faith schools. One of the arguments in favour of the state funding faith schools is that such schools are consequently under the same statutory direction and scrutiny as all other schools. However, the religious character of the school is not subject to public regulation and scrutiny. It remains under the control of the religious community who inspect it themselves – the control of this aspect of faith school work is entirely self-referential. To some, this sidelining of religion might seem unimportant. However, I would argue that it is very important indeed: to the faith groups themselves, it is the *raison d'être* of the school and the

reason why they particularly chose to send their children there, whereas to the wider community it is the very seat of their concern. OfSTED report whether the Maths being taught is acceptable, but whether the messages about religion that are being given are acceptable, in the sense of being consistent with broadly construed British values, is left for the community themselves to determine. They set the syllabus and the denominational inspection framework, receive the report and make judgements about its acceptability. If children are being taught that their religion requires them to disdain others, to discriminate against women or reject human rights, there is no mechanism for the wider community to be informed or to respond. The areas that lie beyond the influence of the wider society are precisely those about which they might be most concerned.



What are the Issues Currently Facing Faith Schools?

Recruitment:

Within all the pressures of teacher recruitment, it is increasingly difficult for faith schools to find teachers from the appropriate faith background. Without a critical mass of staff who understand and uphold the particular values of a faith school it is difficult to sustain the ethos. As regular church attendance falls, for example, it is difficult to find people even in community schools with the ability to take an assembly. Some faith schools see certain posts as pivotal to their particular work, such as senior leadership, pastoral roles and religious education. This can lead to low numbers of candidates at interview. Where the requirements of the school are particularly restrictive, the difficulties are compounded: Muslim schools are said to prefer all Muslim staff and not to employ men in girls' schools. This leads to schools increasingly 'growing' their own teachers which might give them very limited experience beyond the sector.

There are some difficulties for church schools in recruiting staff generally – one Newly Qualified Teacher reported that peers on her maths PGCE course shied away from applying for her job in the city's very successful church school because they were uncomfortable with the faith identity. One headteacher feared weaker applicants applied, hoping to play on their religious allegiance.

These are issues for faith communities and for training organisations.

Pupil Numbers:

Given the popularity of faith schools with parents, it is not difficult for most to fill all their places and many faith schools are hugely oversubscribed. Contrary to what is sometimes alleged, schools are generally uncomfortable with turning many families away and the resulting ripples of discontent about selection by faith. This is particularly sensitive when the rejection is of people who believe themselves to be religious, but discover that their religion is the 'wrong sort'. Admissions policies rumble on as an issue and schools carry the practical consequences as headteachers can spend three or four weeks of the year out of schools as appeals are held. For some schools, demography is becoming the issue. The fall in the birth-rate is having a particular impact on the Roman Catholic sector, and to some extent on Jewish schooling. This raises the question for admissions authorities of how to manage the spare capacity, and for the schools of how to manage the developing religious diversity, when both communities have a certain exclusivity about their faith. Who else to admit, and what to do with them? What is the theology of outsiders? For the Jewish community there are also issues about the relationship between the location of the schools and Jewish young people. There are only a very few Jewish schools so some children undertake long daily commutes to access them – from Leeds to Manchester for example. Twenty years ago the Jewish community in Liverpool filled a whole secondary school but now only constitutes 25% of places; the school is highly successful, very popular, and strongly supported by the local Jewish community yet demographic predictions suggest further decline.

Structure and Authority:

In established religious communities, some of the organisational structures reflect very ancient traditions. The geographical divisions of diocese and parish do not always sit easily with the modern organisation of the Local Authority or the location of the schools. This language can appear esoteric to modern secular outsiders, until they discover it is a barrier to getting their child into the school of their choice. Community schools are also becoming interested in what the diocesan education staff have to offer. Within more recently established religious communities, there are issues of having come new to the educational table and of size so there is a whole raft of support, monitoring and inspection structures in the process of negotiation and development. Amongst faith schools power really lies with the governors; some governor places are reserved for those who are appointed to reflect religious interests and the chair of governors will often come from this group. Within Anglican schools, the school is part of an overarching diocesan structure, but the diocese has no real power over the school. The introduction of the Academy model brings another layer of authority: beyond the school governors are the sponsors – how does their influence and activity and that of the governors relate?

Relationships with the Religious Community:

These are not always cosy! Faith schools are not the same as a local faith community, being made up almost entirely of young people with all their many traditional responses to religion, from enthusiasm to rebellion. Membership may embrace more than one tradition, or even religion and children do not easily have the same choice of non-attendance. There can be difficulties when issues arise about the ethos or faith matters in school, and the question of who has the authority to act as arbiter. One headteacher spoke of the problems caused by "the odd meddlesome priest" and another described herself as supported by the local church "in an odd sort of way". Religious communities can have huge expectations of the school and what will be achieved with their children – often they are expecting schools to achieve something they are failing to do themselves. The current differing pressures on faith communities, both numerical and political, are reflected in differing ways as pressures on the schools. Another influence is the desires of the community in establishing their schools: where schools have been set up to insulate children from secular Western ideals and mores, there can be a real clash with national educational directives and developments which the school management is left to resolve. Examples given of this would include teaching about human rights or human reproduction in National Curriculum Science.

Perception:

Faith schooling is currently receiving a lot of media attention but the work of the schools themselves is not very well publicised. Although staff work hard for generally good results, there seems to be a lot of hostility to the sector and this can be dispiriting. When asked what is difficult for faith schools, the headteacher of one of the most successful agonised, "that we get up other people's noses!" Schools of minority faiths are particularly vulnerable to the media spotlight. This makes them protective of their privacy which can, in turn, feed suspicion.

What is the Value of Faith Schools?

Opponents would argue that faith schools do not offer anything that cannot be found in a good community school. Many faith schools would say the same: as the headteacher of one popular and highly successful Anglican school, himself an Anglican priest, says "Church schools are not better, because Christians are not better". However, as faith schools continue to form part of the choice of schools available, what might they have to offer?

Academic Success:

The arguments about the whether and why of faith schools' enhanced performance rage on. However, we might accept their success as a working hypothesis. This could be seen in turn as contributing to enhanced social cohesion as successful individuals, who will go on through higher education to higher status employment, have better life chances and are less likely to become disaffected. The service of God is a powerful motivation for high aspirations – they strive to offer their very best in provision and develop the full potential in their children. Only the best is good enough.

An Ethos of Care:

A consistent theme amongst the schools visited was the emphasis put on the care for individuals throughout the school, both children and adults. 'What I love about faith schools is the caring ethos, the genuine care of the youngsters, the love for these kids with huge social problems'. One school, getting about 40% good GCSE passes reported one in 10 children in the school to be the subject of child protection concerns. This care extends beyond their own community – one school had raised £28,700 for charity in just over two years and this was not uncommon. One head said "we have enormous privileges and attempt to use them for the benefit of others".

A Broader Vision:

Faith schools put human development at the top of their agenda. The Head of the Sikh School said "We are chasing the whole person here. We're aiming to produce the future Mother Teresas and Nelson Mandelas – and some of the future England cricket team!" Other schools may do this, but it is a deliberate and stated priority of the schools studied to develop young people who will make a positive contribution to society, 'people [who] become what they ought to be'.

A Core of Values:

Faith schools aim to engender in their students powerful values by which to live, the grounding to understand them and the ability to articulate them. This was witnessed in conversations with young people throughout the study. A non-religious teacher in a state school in the process of becoming a church school said: "the kids here are not thoughtful – they do things without thinking – and that's something that should change". The emphasis goes beyond a functional code of conduct to a rooted way of life with 'purpose, direction and meaning'. 'Our problem as a society is the drift towards being valueless – the distinctiveness of a church school is that it can put values back at the centre of the educational experience'.

An Antidote to Perceived Social Instability:

Faith schools have a coherent basis for a strong moral ethos, and promote this within and beyond the school. The perception of a firm, ordered environment makes them popular with parents who are anxious to steer their children along a right course and protect them from the pitfalls that damage teenagers but the schools hope this will extend into later life: 'The ethos of a church school makes its mark on them. It doesn't stop them making their own choices but it influences them'.

Religious Literacy:

Many people within Britain today do not have experience of the regular practice of a religion. They learn about different religions in schools but their empathy for what it means to be religious is based on very slight encounters with people whose lives are ruled by faith. "As a society we are struggling with multiculturalism" because we cannot relate "where a culture is spiritual rather than material or economic" (Vincent Nicholls, Archbishop of Birmingham). Within a faith school, children experience what it might mean to live as part of a religious community beyond mere classroom study. To some, this smacks of indoctrination but, if faith schools did brainwash children, the churches would be full – some highly successful organisations are proving themselves singularly useless in this regard!

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Maintained Support for Faith Schools:

The many reasons for this have been drawn out in the body of this Thinkpiece. However, it should be remembered that the alternative to faith schools is not community or neighbourhood schools. So long as there is a variety of provision (selective, grammar, specialist, academies for example) and choice is encouraged, families will continue to select schools outside the local area for their children. A move to neighbourhood schools alone would not solve society's ills: children from the leafy suburbs and ghettoised inner cities would still go to different schools.

2. Increased Partnerships Between Schools of Different Faiths and None:

In some areas the facility for this already exists through Leadership Incentive Grant collaboratives, Beacon School activity, Specialist College partnerships etc and this can operate at student level as well as institutional. However, Local Authorities and religious bodies need to take a lead to ensure that all schools avail themselves of the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships within and beyond the local area.

3. Increases in the Number of Faith Schools:

With regard to this area, these are some of the issues to consider. They are:

a. Moving Privately Funded Faith Schools into the Publicly Funded Sector

The choice is not whether we have faith schools or not but whether or not they are within the Local Authority maintained sector. This is wise as it allows for schools to participate in the benefits and constraints of belonging to the national educational community. School children and staff can share in the opportunities and partnerships which are open to state schools while the wider society can benefit from sharing in enhanced understanding of their work through the greater openness and transparency. Some opponents of faith schools support foreign educational models

such as that of France where state education is entirely secular. However, they seem to overlook that faith schools exist in France, banished to the private sector but accessible on low fees. That would not seem to be a desirable model for Britain to move towards.

b. The Increase in Church of England Schools Following the Dearing Report

Of the hundred schools proposed, those so far developed are largely schools floundering in difficult circumstances to which the faith identity has given a new lease of life. They tend to be located in challenging areas, have open admissions policies and, often, a multicultural complexion. They, therefore, offer the perceived benefits of being a church school without many of the aspects often derided by critics. They are to be welcomed.

c. The Development of Integrated Schools

This deliberate interfaith initiative from Northern Ireland has not been much emulated on the mainland. However, bringing together children from different religions to create positive interfaith environments seems to be a very positive way forward in modern Britain and deserves further exploration. It promises to be more fruitful than the secular model of creating schools where religious people are required to abandon their religion at the school gate. More attempts at establishing this type of school are to be encouraged.

d. Securing of Admissions Policies

In line with the admissions code, to ensure that there is no room for accusations of inappropriateness.

4. Greater Publicity for the Good Work of Faith Schools:

The schools themselves are prized within their faith communities and often the subject of envy amongst their neighbours. The area is widely researched and well written and the sectors good results are feted in the press.

However, good work done by the schools as faith schools is not much explored and there is an opportunity here: against an apparent background of somewhat simplistic hostility towards the sector, the schools themselves are their own best argument.

5. Inspection and Reporting:

All publicly funded schools are subject to the same scrutiny by Ofsted and other local bodies of almost all aspects of their work. For faith schools, the area which is exempt is the religious dimension of the school, possibly the most important area of the school's self understanding and, in some cases, the very reason for its existence. When people express concerns about faith schools, this is the aspect about which they are most likely to be concerned. Yet it is the one over which there is no public control and of which there is no public knowledge: the definition of the religious character of the school, the inspection parameters, processes and outcomes are entirely internal to the faith community. The faith group decide what should be the effect of faith in their school and how to monitor it, check it and report back to themselves. It is an autonomous and self-referential process. This is a very sensitive area for outsiders to claim the right to be involved in, but it is one where greater public accountability would be desirable.

6. Teaching of Multifaith Religious Education:

In 2006, leaders from all faith communities made a public statement that their schools would all teach about other religions. This is to be welcomed, but the arrangements need closer scrutiny. There are issues with regard to course content, curriculum time and, above all, staff training. Several of the staff met during this study had never studied other religions themselves, having been withdrawn from RE as youngsters or attended quite enclosed single faith schools. Some staff teaching religion in school are not trained as teachers, let alone RE teachers. There are also issues about inspection and monitoring – see above. There is a real challenge here for the staff, schools and faith communities and a real opportunity for SACREs, training providers and interfaith groups.

7. Support and Training for Leadership:

A recurrent issue in discussion with headteachers was the hit and miss nature of the professional development that had brought people to headship and the support they found when in post. There are several issues here:

- the integration of the faith school dimension within NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headteachers) and Head for the future (formerly LPSH, Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers) so that faith school staff do not have to 'double think' while on the courses (already in development)
- the identification and growth of future leaders for faith schools, which may embrace staff currently outside the sector
- the attitude of the faith community leadership to the school leadership and how they interpret their role of 'critical friend'.

The National College for School Leadership highlights schools leaders as 'the interpreters of faith for the whole community'; this is an awesome responsibility for individuals to fulfil in isolation. Church leaders, who also exercise a similar function, are part of a much more supportive framework while doing so.

8. Diocesan Affiliation Schemes:

Although not strictly about faith schools these schemes, which enable community schools to access the faith resources of the church regionally are to be encouraged to shore up the capacity of schools to deliver their legal responsibilities with regard to religious studies and worship. The possibility of dynamic collaboration with local SACREs is an exciting opportunity.

9. Issues for Local Faith Communities:

There is a real responsibility for local faith communities, who value their faith schools, to work supportively to sustain them. As regular attendance at worship falls, it is increasingly difficult for schools to appoint staff from the appropriate faith background and congregations need to consider how they can work to encourage their young people into teaching and relate differently to their schools, using their own skills in compensation for the shortfall. How will the special, and valued, ethos be secured if the numbers of Christian teachers fall below the critical mass required?

10. Further Research:

There is a fair amount of statistical research published in this area and some contention surrounding its conclusions. There is not very much attitudinal work available. The number of faith schools is large and to construct a broad-based latitudinal study incorporating a range of community schools as comparisons is a challenging prospect. Some faith schools also seem hesitant about admitting researchers. However, it would be particularly valuable to conduct studies about attitudes into areas currently giving public concern: for example, what is the range of in and out-group friendships of children in faith secondary schools compared with those in the community sector? How do school leavers from the same faith communities, who have been in different types of school, fare when they have left school? Any study which informed the anxious debate on the potential for social stability and social cohesion would be welcome.

Appendix 1: About HTI

HTI (Heads, Teachers and Industry), founded in 1986, was the brainchild of a group of visionary business leaders who wanted to contribute to raising educational standards in the UK. They were concerned that school leavers did not fulfil the employment needs of business in an increasingly changing, global marketplace.

Their approach to addressing this enduring issue was to uproot heads and deputies from their comfort zones for a year and give them the opportunity to work in business. At that time there was very little leadership and management training of any kind available to school leaders.

The objective of these secondments was to give school leaders first-hand experience of leadership and management in a different culture and, at the same time, open their eyes to employability issues from a business perspective so that they could better prepare their students for the workplace when they returned to education.

Bridging the gap between education and business continues to be a core focus for HTI but its remit has broadened considerably to offer school leaders at all levels a diverse range of leadership development opportunities.

HTI works in partnership with education, business and government to promote excellence in school leadership and management. It is an independent, not-for-profit organisation and has two distinct business areas: a trading company and a trust.

The trading company – the HTI Leadership Centre – creates and delivers continuing professional development opportunities to stretch and challenge established school leaders and staff aspiring to leadership roles.

The HTI Trust

Formed in September 2003, the Trust's prime aim is to influence thinking at the strategic interface between business, education and government.

There are many organisations which report, research and impact on one or the other but few genuinely fill the space between all three sectors as does the Trust. It is also an independent and impartial conduit for dialogue between business, education and policy makers to more effectively help shape the UK's future workforce. It aims to embed cross sector best practice into educational policy. This involves:

- identifying issues of common priority in all sectors through dialogue and formulating an agenda for action
- understanding these issues through research
- promoting the development of workable solutions
- monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of solutions.

The Trust is supported by a covenant from the HTI Leadership Centre.

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