

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY: Faith Schooling in Rural Communities

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so, the issue of faith-based education has featured prominently in media, policy and academic forums. The establishment of state-funded Islamic schools in England has fuelled existing concerns about the potential impacts of faith schools on community cohesion and inter-faith relations, particularly in urban, multicultural neighbourhoods. Yet, much of the faith-based education sector actually consists of small, rural, Anglican primary schools. These schools may feature much less frequently in public or scholarly debates, but are nevertheless important for making sense of the significance of faith-based schooling for children, families and wider society.

Research Context

Educational research on small rural schools in general has been rather limited to date, particularly sociologically informed studies. The relationship between rural schools and their wider communities, including through the eyes of pupils, has been identified as a key under-researched area, but the issue of religious character is rarely mentioned in this context. This represents a serious omission given that, of the 5037 schools in England designated as 'rural' in 2012, over 50% of them were faith-based, compared with around 35% for English schools as a whole. Recent research on rural schooling has engaged with themes such as parental choice, rural gentrification and community politics but the issue of faith-based education in rural contexts has been left largely unexplored. Similarly, researchers have examined the significance of rurality for making sense of contemporary childhoods but have rarely considered religion in this regard.

This study seeks to address the conspicuous gap in the literature by exploring the distinctive role that church primary schools play in contrasting rural contexts, and the implications that this has for understanding faith-based education. It aims to broaden and inform the public policy debate about faith schools, social cohesion and children's rights, whilst also contributing to better understandings of rural communities, childhoods and schooling more broadly.

Research Design, Sample and Methods

This study involved in-depth fieldwork in two Anglican primary schools and their surrounding localities. 'School A' was a Voluntary Controlled Church in Wales school, located 2 miles from the edge of a large urban area in a small village in South Wales. The majority of the pupils here commuted in from a low-income suburb of the nearby urban area. In contrast, 'School B' was a Voluntary Aided Church of England school, located in a larger rural village in West England, situated 8 miles away from the nearest urban settlement. The pupil intake in School B was made up from local residents, as well as children from surrounding villages and towns. Both schools were designated as 'small' with fewer than 150 pupils on roll.

Fieldwork took place during the autumn of 2014, for approximately 12 weeks in each school, for at least one day a week. In both schools, the focus of the research was with pupils from Years 5 and 6 (age 9–11 years). The study employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with senior staff members and villagers, focus groups with parents, and paired interviews, map-making and collaging with pupils. The research was funded by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

Key Findings

(1) The research findings have implications for the debate regarding faith-based schooling and community cohesion. Rural Anglican schools may be limited in the extent to which they can facilitate inter-faith contact, as a result of non-diverse pupil intake and geographical distance from multicultural urban settings. This means they are more reliant on the curriculum to teach pupils about different religions and cultures, as well as general values of respect and tolerance for difference, and there was evidence of success in this regard. However, this does not mean that rural Anglican schools are not relevant to the debate about faith schools and inter-religious cohesion. In this research, School B was very active in facilitating positive relations between two previously divided Christian communities in the surrounding village. However, in so doing, the school inadvertently created tensions with the local non-religious community, which objected to the increase in religious events that were taking place in school as a result of these new relations. This further confirms findings from the author's previous research that faith schools can have *both* a positive *and* a negative effect on community cohesion.

(2) Another way of approaching community cohesion in a rural context is to consider how schools might contribute to a broader sense of village identity and coherence. Many rural communities in twenty first century Britain face significant challenges, such as ageing populations and reductions in local facilities and services. Rural churches have also experienced significant decline in congregation numbers. This research found that church schools can play a role in encouraging vibrant village life, facilitating intergenerational relations and even promoting engagement with the Church. However, success in this regard was influenced by geographical context and was dependent on a number of factors, including the particular approach the school took to engaging with the local community, the

existing facilities or services available in the village, and the views and perceptions that villagers held of the school.

(3) The study highlighted some of the ways in which village schools are valued by their various stakeholders, including for their small size, positive relationships, close-knit community and the images of safety and family that are often associated with these characteristics. These views tended to intersect with constructions of childhood and the rural idyll, which was further enhanced through understandings of religion that emphasised tradition, nostalgia and cultural heritage. However, neo-liberal education reforms concerned with performativity and parent choice that created the demand and the opportunity for pupils outside of the local villages to attend the schools, were paradoxically threatening the very environment that attracted them there in the first place. Increased levels of commuting resulted in parking and traffic problems, tensions with the surrounding village community, and concerns about the effect of changing pupil demographics on school ethos, factors that played out differently in the distinct school contexts.

(4) Although not limited to rural contexts, the research raised important issues about the role of religious practices in church schools in the context of debates about children's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The study found that the whilst religiously-inspired ethos values generally attracted broad support from members of the school communities, responses to religious practices in school were more mixed. Furthermore, the ways in which these practices often became intertwined with behaviour management threatened to undermine their intended purpose. This was a particular concern for those non-religious pupils and depending on the specific approach and response of the school, had the potential to compromise the Anglican educational commitment to provide for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils.