

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY: Religion in the Primary School

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Introduction

Religion and its relationship to schooling is an issue that has become increasingly topical in recent years in the UK, amid on-going debates about the role of religion in public life, and the increasingly multi-faith nature of British society. Whether concerning the effects of faith-based schooling on social and community cohesion, the appropriateness of the daily act of collective worship in school assemblies, or the values promoted in schools within particular faith community contexts, questions regarding the place of religion in education remain prominent. This study explores some of those questions through an in-depth comparison of two English primary schools in a multi-faith, urban location. Drawing on original, ethnographic data, the research grapples with questions about school ethos and values, inter-faith relations, community-building and religious identity and difference in the everyday school context.

Research Context

The study of Religious Education has traditionally received quite a lot of attention from the research community but this work has sometimes been rather narrow in its focus, understandably reflecting an overarching concern with curriculum and pedagogy. Although a renewed academic interest in faith-based schooling has been apparent over the last decade or so, much contemporary work continues to be based around theoretical or political debates and stances. Similarly, while scholarly interest in children's own religious identities, practices and perspectives in the school context is on the

rise, there remains a way to go before this body of literature reaches critical mass. This study further enriches the field by drawing on empirical data to explore the issue of religion and schooling from an inter-disciplinary, social scientific and child-centred perspective. The analysis therefore engages critically with wider contemporary debates on secularisation, citizenship, social cohesion and children's rights and agency to address some of the gaps in the existing literature.

Research Design and Methods

This study involved fieldwork in two state-funded primary schools both within similar multi-faith locations in an urban area in the North of England. They comprised a community school and a voluntary aided Catholic school, both with multi-faith and multi-ethnic pupil intakes. Fieldwork took place during the 2007-8 academic year, for approximately 10 weeks in each school, for three days a week (during autumn for the community and spring for the Catholic school). In both schools, the focus of the research was with pupils from Key Stage 2 (age 7–11 years). The study employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with parents and staff members, paired interviews with pupils, and role-play drama to explore pupils' values. The research was funded by the ESRC.

Key Findings

(1) The research findings have important implications for the debate regarding faith-based schooling and social/community cohesion. One way to think about social cohesion is to consider the values that

schools are imparting. Both schools in the study were encouraging positive inter-group relations between pupils through the promotion of values such as tolerance and respect for difference, behaviours such as empathy and emotional literacy, and a climate where racism and bullying were unacceptable. In this respect, both schools were promoting social cohesion. However, pupils in the schools did not always put these values into practice in their everyday interactions and some children were hearing prejudiced messages at home. Schools may ultimately be limited in how far they can really influence the development of tolerance and respect if they are competing against alternative values transmitted in other spaces.

(2) Another way of thinking about social cohesion is the extent to which schools are involved in community-building. In this regard, the Catholic school was more successful in forging a close-knit school collective through its extensive use of religious rituals. However, this same process also created potential exclusion for non-Christian pupils who could not take part in the rituals. Although both schools were active in their local communities, their focus differed, with the community school directing most of its attention to the neighbourhood community whilst the Catholic school showed more concern with engaging the Catholic community. Taking these and the findings relating to values into account, the schools in this study were therefore more socially cohesive in some ways than others. There will no doubt be different issues facing other schools with less diverse ethnic and religious intakes.

(3) The study also has relevance for the debate over how well different school types are able to provide for children's religious and spiritual needs, through assemblies and religious education, the celebration of festivals, and the provision of food, dress and prayer needs. Although the Catholic school was better at catering

for the needs of its Catholic pupils than the community school was for its Christian pupils, it was less adept at providing for pupils from religious minorities or those with no religion e.g. lack of recognition for other religious perspectives in assembly and religious education. However, there were certain problems in both schools, as demonstrated by the children in the community school who were forced to pray in the school toilets. Pupils attending schools of all types would benefit from a more consistent approach to both valuing and providing for (non-)religious needs.

(4) Opponents of faith-based education often suggest that it can be responsible for limiting children's autonomy through indoctrination and failing to respect the rights of the child to freedom of religion. The study did find limited evidence that non-religious pupils may experience less respect for their positions than those from Christian or minority faiths. However, the study also highlighted how this debate needs to recognise that children are religious agents in their own right rather than dupes unable to question or challenge what adults tell them. Pupil autonomy can be exercised in ways that adults do not necessarily know about or recognise e.g. refusing and pretending to pray, or actively rearticulating the meaning of prayers.

(5) Finally, the research found that although there were many differences between the two institutions, there were also many points of commonality. These included the promotion of common values such as caring, similar techniques for promoting positive inter-group pupil relations, and similar views from parents in terms of what they hoped their children would gain from attending school as well as their tendency to adopt a positive but rather apathetic or vicarious stance on the role of religion in school. It is therefore important not to overstate the differences between schools solely on the basis of their religious or non-religious character.