

In a world of hate, fear and ‘alternative facts’, education really does matter

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“It cannot be right, that people can grow up and go to school and hardly ever come into meaningful contact with people from other backgrounds and faiths.” David Cameron, July 2015.



Young people are more exposed than ever before to influences of all types and from all parts of the globe. Yet, many have little chance of gaining a reasoned and nuanced world view and are unlikely to be equipped with the critical thinking skills to enable them to navigate safely through this new array of media messages and conspiracy theories – as well as ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’. With these latter threats in mind, should we invest so much in trying to stop such material from appearing, or instead, equip people with the skills to know the difference between fantasy and reality?

Fifteen years ago I coined the phrase ‘parallel lives’ to describe the complete segregation of communities^[1]. People from the same background who live in the same area, go to school with each other, work in the same places or occupations, and share social and cultural activities, are likely to have a limited view of the world. In such circumstances they will have no real opportunity to challenge stereotypes, confound myths and to see the human face of the ‘other’. They lack shared spaces to meet with others and have little reason to venture out of their comfort zones. They lived in self-confirming worlds.

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Though it is true that the extent of time spent in school is dwarfed by the time spent at home, in the community, and online, schools have a crucial role to play and are perhaps the most important influence in shaping the views of young people. They are one of the few safe places to learn about different people and share experiences.

Segregated schools mean that many young people never experience difference and emerge into a multicultural world with little or no cultural navigation skills. They are not equipped for the modern world. But if schools are divided, so too are parental networks, with little or no opportunities to break down barriers between communities by meeting at the school gate, sharing facilities at the school and through cross-cultural friendships, school sports and extra curricula activities. A divided school invariably means a divided community.

The potential of schools, however, is not yet fully recognised, let alone developed into a coherent policy. Practice varies enormously, with institutional arrangements also determining the diversity of intakes and the way in which the curriculum is interpreted and used. This circumscribes the ability of schools to offer a world view.

Educated apart

Schools can contribute to – and reinforce – the idea of ‘otherness’ as in the case of Northern Ireland.

The adoption of a community cohesion strategy following the race riots in northern towns in England in 2001 was founded on the introduction of ‘contact theory’ into policy and practice and saw it extend to cross many divides, not just in relation to ethnicity and faith. Schools can contribute to – and reinforce – the idea of ‘otherness’ as in the case of Northern Ireland:[\[2\]](#)

‘by perpetuating or maintaining, community differences. This is thought to happen because the segregated schools present children with two very different views of the world, or because the categorisation of children into different schools itself contributes to mutual ignorance and hostility.’

The impact of intercultural contact is now well established. A meta-analysis by Pettigrew and Tropp[\[3\]](#) examined 713 independent samples from 515 studies and found that intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice, concluding that ‘there is little need to demonstrate further contact’s general ability to lessen prejudice. Results from the meta-analysis conclusively show that intergroup contact can promote reductions in intergroup prejudice. Moreover, the meta-analytic findings reveal that contact theory applies beyond racial and ethnic groups to embrace other types of groups as well.’

Janmaat focused his 2014 study specifically on the impact of mixing in schools[\[4\]](#) and considered the attitudes of 14-year-old native students in 14 western countries to assess how out-group size, as measured by the proportion of first- and second-generation migrant children in a class, is related to inclusive views on immigrants. He concluded that: ‘on the whole, the results of this study are welcome news for the advocates of desegregation, as they suggest that ethnically mixed schools are well positioned to promote inclusive out-group attitudes among native students’.

It should also be noted that, whilst ‘segregation’ is often interpreted in terms of ethnicity, it can be based upon social class, faith and other characteristics. In its 2012 report, *Education at a Glance*, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development[\[5\]](#) (OECD), found that the UK had unusually high levels of segregation, with poorer and immigrant pupils concentrated in the same schools rather than being more evenly distributed. Among the children of immigrant families, 80% were in schools with high concentrations of other immigrant or disadvantaged pupils, reinforcing the interconnection between faith, ethnicity and social class.

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This was reinforced by a Sutton Trust Report in 2016^[6] that found considerable variation in how much primary school intakes diverge from their local neighbourhood. The top 10% most socially selective primary schools had a proportion of disadvantaged pupils that are at least 9.2 percentage points different from the communities they serve.

A forthcoming study^[7] underlines some worrying trends in school segregation. It will reaffirm the connection between residential and educational segregation in that many of the towns and cities that are residentially segregated have the highest levels of school segregation. However, it is also clear that the emerging trends show that school segregation is becoming independent of residential patterns, probably due to the impact of more variable school admissions policies and parental choice. This confirms a previous study by Burgess *et al*(2004)^[8] that showed:

‘on average school segregation is greater than the segregation of the same group in the surrounding neighbourhood’

It took some time for the Government to accept that school segregation was a significant problem and that intervention was required in order to create a society which was at ease with itself, but in 2015 the then Prime Minister made a bold statement:

‘It cannot be right, that people can grow up and go to school and hardly ever come into meaningful contact with people from other backgrounds and faiths. That doesn’t foster a sense of shared belonging and understanding – it can drive people apart.

David Cameron July 2015^[9]

The Casey Review of Integration^[10] was set up in large part, as a result of the above statement, but also as a result of the apparent growth of extremism in schools following the so-called ‘Trojan Horse’ affair. In the resultant report, Dame Louise did indeed urge the Government to “focus on de-segregation” and recognised that “some children’s experience of school was marked by segregation” and also that “some communities are becoming more divided”. Casey called “for radical change and a new approach across all schools” and argued for firm proposals “to encourage a range of school provision and projects to ensure that children from different communities learn alongside those from different backgrounds”. As yet, no action has followed, though the Government response to this review (under a new Prime Minister) is still awaited.

In the meantime, school policy over the last twenty years or so has created more institutional divisions, with the advent of academies, free schools and a wider variety and number of faith schools, all of which have developed their own independent admissions policies. There are now very real barriers to more mixed intakes in which students can interact with each other and, moreover,

begin to develop friendships across boundaries which bring family networks and communities together.

The learning experience

Louise Richardson, now Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, believes that young people are vulnerable to the appeal of terrorists because they promote an ‘oversimplified view of the world’ which they see in black and white terms’ and suggests that:

"Education robs you of that simplification and certitude. Education is the best possible antidote to radicalisation."[\[11\]](#)

There is now general agreement that young people also need the skills to equip them for ‘life in modern multicultural Britain’ as both the Government and Ofsted would argue[\[12\]](#), and that means acquiring the cultural navigation skills and religious literacy to enable them to become comfortable with diversity and to thrive in a more diverse and complex world of competing and contradictory views.

Louise Casey also suggested[\[13\]](#) that schools have to do more to give children a wider view of the world to “build integration, tolerance, citizenship” but noted that teachers’ skills in this area will have to be developed and the effectiveness needs to be tested in the school Ofsted inspection.

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Intercultural education will be critical to tackling prejudice and intolerance. In Britain, this is mostly taken forward through the ‘British Values’[\[14\]](#) agenda (and formerly under the ‘duty to promote community cohesion’) and through religious education. There are clear concerns, however, about the extent and nature of the teaching in this respect, as evidenced by the numerous criticisms of individual schools by Ofsted. Similarly, the Commission on Religious Education (the Woolf Review)[\[15\]](#) established to review the legal, education and policy frameworks for Religious Education and the subsequent *Living With Difference* Report was critical of existing arrangements and recommended, *inter alia*:

‘Much greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels. The potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification based on ignorance is huge.

All pupils in state-funded schools should have a statutory entitlement to a curriculum about religion, philosophy and ethics that is relevant to today’s society.

Bodies responsible for admissions and employment policies in schools with a religious character (‘faith schools’) should take measures to reduce selection of pupils and staff on grounds of religion.’

Intercultural education should not just be based upon 'chalk and talk' lessons and are likely to have more impact when based upon real experiences in local communities. School linking[16] for example, partners schools that are comprised of children from different backgrounds and would otherwise have no chance of meeting each other. This also applies to tackling extremist views as the *Think Project*[17] has shown.

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However, such learning would be much easier and far less resource intensive if simply carried on through the day to day experiential learning process in mixed schools. Professor Miles Hewstone from the Oxford Centre for the Study of Intergroup Conflict has explored the role of intergroup contact in areas of high ethnic diversity. Part of this work included a review of intergroup contact and social integration in all state schools in Oldham[18]. This used longitudinal surveys, social network analysis, and observational methods, to review relations between 11 to 18 year old White-British and Asian-British (primarily Muslim) students in mixed, segregated, and recently-merged schools. The fieldwork demonstrated the reliability of intergroup contact in improving intergroup attitudes by improving trust, enhancing positive behaviour towards outgroups, and reducing prejudice.

In addition, while children can be positively influenced by their school experiences, this can be undermined and even countermanded by negative influences within the home and the local community. The point here is that mixed school intakes do not just influence the pupils, they also have a profound impact on the whole community. Children form friendships at school, but then also visit each other's homes and attend out of school events together, on an ongoing basis. Moreover, parents also meet at the school gate and are drawn into the friendship networks of their child. Mixed school intakes do not just influence the pupils, they also have a profound impact on the whole community.

The education sector offers the greatest opportunities for providing young people with the skills and experience to further integration and to live successfully in an ever increasingly diverse and globalised world. Indeed, they will need such skills to compete in the future job market. Every opportunity should be taken to build critical thinking and resilience by introducing key contemporary issues into all areas of the school society. This should include controversial discussions or 'dangerous conversations'[19] which are often avoided in schools, partly because teachers lack the confidence and training and partly, because of the fear of upsetting some part of the school's community.

There is clearly a considerable amount of work to do, perhaps reflected in a recent attitudinal survey[20] that found that 23% of 15 to 29 year olds would prefer to live in 'an area where people are from the same background as me' (compared to 29% of all age ranges). Another survey found that 25% of 17 to 34 year olds admitted to some level of racial prejudice[21]. There are also clear

links between the extent of segregation and the levels of cohesion and tolerance[22], due largely to the way in which diversity becomes familiar and is less likely to be seen as a threat – again contact works, but cannot fully succeed when constrained by segregation.

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[16] See for example the [School Linking Network](#) which organises linking and provides guidance and resources -

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