

Fair Admissions Campaign

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One of the key issues which the World now faces is ‘how we live together in an era of globalised and diverse communities?’ It must be clear – especially from recent events – that so many of the tensions and conflicts in the UK and elsewhere are based upon faith and ethnic divisions. Our communities remain riven by the differences that we should have learnt to set aside long ago. Schools that practice religious selection cannot of course be held solely responsible for these problems, but they do underpin a system in which children learn that they are ‘different’ and in which everyday contact is denied. The separation of children between schools reinforces wider divisions - parents do not meet at the school gate, children do not have cross-cultural birthday parties and communities are not drawn into shared sporting and cultural associations. They are not able to build friendships with ‘others’ and fail to learn that what we have in common is much greater than our differences.

In a time of growing extremism, we should recognise that faith schools are an anachronistic bastion of a divided society. But instead of helping us to move towards the bridging of our communities, schools are becoming more divided. The only national study of school segregation showed that schools were becoming more segregated rather than less and were actually more segregated than the neighbourhoods in which they were situated. Wilson and Burgess who carried out this comprehensive quantitative research into educational ethnic segregation in England (2004) commented:

Our main findings are that levels of ethnic segregation in England’s schools are high. There is, however, a significant degree of variation both across LEAs and across ethnic groups: segregation is higher for pupils of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin than for pupils with black Caribbean or African heritage . . .we identify areas of particularly high segregation, especially for pupils of Asian origin. These areas coincide almost exactly with the locations of urban unrest in the summer of 2001

These findings have been supported by more recent local studies by the Institute of Community Cohesion over the last six years and by a London study. The recent 2011 Census also shows that whilst most majority areas are becoming a little more mixed, many minority areas have become more segregated (Demos; iCoCo Foundation preliminary analysis, 2013) and this will almost certainly create even more segregated schools, especially at the primary level.

Further, the Government has presided over an even more divided school system with more selective admissions under the academy system and new free schools. They have also supported the introduction of more faith schools with the approval of a growing number of minority faith schools. Whilst most UK faith schools have been either Anglican or Catholic, recent approvals include Hindu, Muslim, Sikh schools and even evangelical Christian schools are now beginning to apply. They cannot be refused of course, but this Government, like the last, have become trapped – they do not want to upset the faith lobby, but have to approve new faith schools whilst being fully aware of the threat to integration policy that they are supporting.

And meanwhile, the Coalition is placing even fewer demands upon all schools to learn about ‘others’ by scaling down the citizenship curriculum and by taking the duty to promote community cohesion out of the OFSTED regime. All schools – and especially those that do not have mixed intakes, including many faith schools – have been sent a clear signal that intercultural education is no longer important.

Schools in Britain are unlike those in most of the rest of Europe, permitting selection on religious grounds (Musset, 2012). This is in itself problematic, given that choice is inevitably constrained by locational factors – all faiths are not uniformly represented in school provision in neighbourhoods – and choice is especially limited for those of no faith. However, as noted above, faith divisions are also compounded by ethnic divisions, with the newer faiths almost entirely confined to non-White British residents.

Further, as the recent Sutton Trust report shows, faith schools compound socio-economic selection – and again this is particularly relevant for minorities who are disproportionately represented in lower socio-economic groups. This

is particularly disappointing given that the ethos of faith schools has been one of tackling disadvantage through education provision. The picture is therefore one where faith, ethnic and social class segregation is compounded by schools operating religiously selective policies.

The Government has produced an integration 'document' in [Creating the Conditions for Integration](#). Civil Servants were forbidden to call this a 'strategy' and perhaps the reason for that is becoming evident – there will be no accountability and checking on performance. This lofty statement of intent may therefore unfortunately have little value, even though the sentiment is right:

“Integration benefits us all, and extremism and intolerance undermine this as

they promote fear and division. An integrated society may be better equipped

to reject extremism and marginalise extremists”.

Our school system is not fit for the modern age. It is based on the faith provision of the 19th Century, when Britain was essentially mono-cultural and still nursing the wounds of the Catholic/Protestant divide. Faith organisations provided the first formal education system for our children. The State simply filled in the gaps, inadvertently institutionalising faith based provision. It has endured for more nearly a hundred and fifty years. Britain is now a multi-faith country and super diverse with over 300 languages in London and 200 in most other cities – it is time our schools came to terms with our present day society and to positively contribute to the process of integration, promoting tolerance and tackling extremism.