

**Religious Composition and Admission Processes of
Faith Secondary Schools in London**

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In 2006, the London School of Economics and Political Science was commissioned by Comprehensive Future, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Limited, to carry out an independent pilot research project to examine the religious composition and admission processes of publicly-funded secondary schools with a religious character in London. The context for the research was the Labour government's aim to increase the number of faith-based schools. However, there is no information available about the composition of publicly-funded secondary schools with a religious character in terms of the religion of the pupils enrolled. London was chosen as the location for this research given its religiously diverse population and the high proportion of publicly-funded religious schools in the capital.

The aims of the research were:

- to establish the religious composition of publicly-funded secondary schools in London with a religious character; and
- to examine the admissions policies, and in particular, whether the schools concerned give priority to children of other faiths in their admissions criteria, including nominally setting aside a number of places for children not of the school's faith or of no faith.

Methods

A short questionnaire was sent to all voluntary-aided secondary schools and academies in London that were classified by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as having a religious character (N=106). This asked for the numbers of pupils on roll at the school that were of different religions or no religion. Fifty schools/academies (47 per cent) provided useable information. Religious admissions criteria used by the schools were also analysed as were a sample of supplementary forms used by schools with a religious character. The admissions processes used by schools that appeared to be inclusive of other faiths (or no faith) were also examined.

Findings

Religious composition

- There were differences in the religious composition of schools that were Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish and of other Christian denominations.
- In Church of England schools, around seven out of ten pupils were reported to be Christian; just under one in ten to be Muslim and a similar proportion to be of no faith (for the remainder, no information was available).
- In Roman Catholic schools, over nine out of ten pupils were reported to be Christian. Very small percentages were of other religions or no faith.
- In the three Jewish schools, all pupils were reported to be Jewish. In the two schools of other Christian denominations, around eight out of ten pupils were reported to be Christian.

Supplementary forms

- Supplementary forms were available for 24 of the 44 Roman Catholic and Church of England schools. All required a reference from a priest/minister/religious leader to confirm that the information provided by parents on their religious background and practice was accurate. Eight out of ten forms sought information on church attendance; half on involvement in the church and a third asked for proof that a child's religious milestones, such as baptism or first holy communion had taken place.
- Comparison of the supplementary forms with the local authority forms found that the former, in general, were more complex than the latter: they were longer and more space was provided for parents to give reasons why they wanted their child to attend the school. In some cases personal information was sought such as parents' occupation, details of the schools attended by all other children in the family or other schools they were applying to. However, some forms were brief and simple to complete: they asked for basic details about the child, their parents/carers and a church contact so that a religious reference could be sought.

Inclusion and community cohesion

- Further analyses were undertaken of the admissions processes used by schools that appeared to be inclusive of other faiths. It was found that they tended to set aside a proportion of places for those of other faiths/no faith, by dividing the available places between 'foundation' and 'open places.' On the other hand, the school with the highest proportion of non-Christian faiths was a Church of England school that did not set aside places in this way.
- Schools that were inclusive of other religions were not necessarily inclusive in other respects. In particular, an analysis of admissions criteria and supplementary admissions forms used suggested that, in some cases, they offered schools opportunities for social selection.

Conclusions

- The analysis of the religious composition of schools with a religious character in London found that the student mix varied. Overall, Church of England schools were more religiously inclusive than Roman Catholic schools.
- If community cohesion is to be fostered, schools with a religious character should be inclusive of all religions (or no faith). At present this is not the case. Major tensions arise in balancing policies that aim to increase the number of faith schools and promote religious inclusion. These are not easily resolved in a pluralist society, but given that public money is used to fund schools with a religious character there is a strong case to be made for such schools to be open to the wider community in the interests of enhancing social cohesion.

1 Introduction

In 2006, the London School of Economics and Political Science was commissioned by Comprehensive Future with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Limited to carry out an independent pilot research project to examine the religious composition and admissions processes of publicly-funded secondary schools with a religious character in London. The context for this research was the Labour government's aim to increase the number of faith-based schools (DfES, 2005). In particular, a significant proportion of new and planned academies are faith based. *The Independent* (2006) reported that 42 of the first 100 academies had Christian sponsors.

Concerns about religious segregation were expressed, and in 2006, agreement was reached that faith schools should teach about other faiths (DfES, 2006a).¹ Further, on 3 October 2006 the Bishop of Portsmouth wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to say that new Church of England schools should make 25 per cent of places available without a test of faith (Church of England Board of Education, 2006). However, soon after, on 18 October 2006, the Secretary of State, Alan Johnson, issued a press release announcing that the government was proposing to add an amendment to the Education and Inspections Bill. The amendment was to make new faith schools more inclusive by enabling local authorities to 'ensure that up to 25% of places in new faith schools are open to families of different or no faith where there is a local demand' (DfES, 2006b). Then, on 26 October, the proposal was withdrawn. Subsequently, a voluntary agreement was made 'to ensure that up to 25% of places in new Catholic schools for pupils from other or no faith would be additional to the demand for faith places (Catholic Education Service, 2006). It was, also agreed, and is part of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, that the governing bodies of all schools, including those with a religious character, have a duty to promote community cohesion.

In spite of these legislative and policy moves, there is no information available about the composition of publicly-funded secondary schools in terms of the religion of the pupils enrolled. A recent parliamentary answer confirmed this (House of Lords Hansard, 2006). Because of this lack of information, a pilot project was undertaken. London was chosen as the location for this research given its religiously diverse population and the high proportion of publicly-funded religious schools in the capital.

The aims of the research were to:

- to establish the religious composition of publicly-funded secondary schools (voluntary-aided and academies) in London with a religious character; and
- to examine the admissions policies, and in particular, whether the schools concerned give priority to children of other faiths in their admissions criteria, including nominally setting aside a number of places for children not of the school's faith or of no faith.

This report presents the findings from the research project. A review of relevant research follows. The research methods and findings are then presented. The final section concludes.

2 Relevant research

No previous research appears to have been carried out on the religious composition of schools with a religious character. However, most voluntary-aided schools use the pupil's religion to decide who should be admitted to the school (see West et al., 2003; 2004) and religious affiliation tends to vary according to ethnicity. In England, Black students are more likely to be Christian than are students of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, who are more likely to be Muslim.

¹ Signatories include the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Muslim Council of Britain, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist organisations (DfES, 2006a).

In light of this association, it is not surprising that there are differences in terms of the ethnic group of pupils attending voluntary-aided comprehensive schools (most of which have a religious character) and non-religious (community/voluntary-controlled) schools in London (West and Hind, 2007): there is a higher proportion of Black students and lower proportions of Bangladeshi/Pakistani and Indian students in voluntary-aided schools, the majority of which have a religious character and are Christian.

The research also found that voluntary-aided schools had, on average, pupil intakes with higher levels of attainment at the age of 11, prior to entering secondary school, than those schools whose admissions are under local authority control (community/voluntary-controlled). On average, levels of free school meals eligibility (an indicator of poverty) were lower in voluntary-aided schools than in community/voluntary-controlled schools, as were levels of special educational needs. This, it has been argued, is because voluntary-aided schools are responsible for their own admissions and are able to 'select in' and 'select out' certain students. In addition, a significant minority of secondary schools in London that are responsible for their own admissions use selective or potentially selective admissions criteria such as giving priority to the children of teachers/governors/former students² (see Table A1 in the Annex) (West and Hind, 2006; Pennell et al., 2006). In addition, many of these schools use supplementary admissions forms which allow them to collect additional information on those applying to the school; this could be used to socially select pupils (Pennell et al., 2006).

3 Methods

There were three phases to the research. First, a short survey of publicly-funded secondary schools in London with a religious character was carried out. The schools surveyed comprised all voluntary-aided schools and academies classified by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) as having a religious character at September 2005 (N=106). A questionnaire was devised which asked for the numbers of pupils currently on roll that were of different religions or no religion. This was sent to schools in June 2006 with a letter explaining the nature of the research. Fifty-two questionnaires were returned giving an overall response rate of 49 per cent; two questionnaires could not be used and the one response from an academy was excluded from the analysis to preserve anonymity, therefore the analyses are based on returns from 49 schools (46 per cent of those surveyed). Of these, 33 were Roman Catholic, 11 Church of England, three Jewish and two were of other Christian denominations. The second phase of the project involved collating information from local authority admissions brochures on the religious admissions criteria used by these schools. Many schools with a religious character require parents to complete supplementary forms in addition to the common application form that parents need to return to their local authority. The supplementary form allows schools to judge applications against the specific religious criteria used by the schools. Supplementary forms were available for 24 of the Roman Catholic and Church of England schools (15 and nine respectively). The third phase of the project involved examining in more detail schools that appeared to be inclusive of other faiths (or none) with a view to providing information about the different approaches used.

² Selective/potentially selective criteria included: selecting a proportion of pupils on the basis of ability/aptitude in a subject area/general ability; interviews/pre-admission meetings with pupils/parents; priority to the child of an employee/governor/former pupil; pupil with a family connection to the school; pastoral benefit to the pupil of attending the school; the pupil's primary school report/recommendation of the primary school headteacher; the academic record of the pupil's sibling(s); compassionate/exceptional factors relating to the pupil; the pupil's participation in organisations associated with school; community involvement by parents/children (Pennell et al., 2006).

4 Results

4.1 Religious composition

The analysis of the survey of secondary schools with a religious character revealed some differences between the religious composition of schools that were Church of England or Roman Catholic, Jewish and other Christian denominations.

As shown in Table 1, in Church of England schools around seven out of ten pupils (71.2%) were reported by secondary schools to be Christian; just under one in ten to be Muslim or no faith.

Table 1 Religious composition of Church of England secondary schools in London (N=11)

Religion	Mean percentage of pupils (a)
Christian	71.2
Hindu	2.5
Jewish	0.3
Muslim	8.4
Sikh	0.7
Other	3.4
No faith	7.1
No information	6.3

(a) Percentage does not add up to 100 because of rounding

As shown in Table 2, in Roman Catholic schools, over nine out of ten pupils (95.9%) were reported to be Christian. Very small percentages of pupils were of other religions or no faith.

Table 2 Religious composition of Roman Catholic secondary schools in London (N=33)

Religion	Mean percentage of pupils (a)
Christian	95.9
Hindu	0.6
Jewish	0.0
Muslim	1.3
Sikh	0.1
Other	0.7
No faith	0.7
No information	0.8

(a) Percentage does not add up to 100 because of rounding

In the three Jewish schools, all pupils were reported to be Jewish. In the two schools of other Christian denominations, an average of 83 per cent of pupils were reported to be Christian.

4.2 Religious and non-religious admissions criteria

Tables 3 and 4 present the admissions criteria that relate to the religion of applicants to Church of England and Roman Catholic schools respectively. These were derived from the information contained in the secondary transfer booklets published by local authorities.

Table 3 Religious/non-religious admissions criteria of Church of England secondary schools

Brochure criterion	Number of Church of England schools N=11
Church of England	11
Christian	10
Other religion	7
All others (a)	8

(a) No religion specified (e.g., proximity to the school, open places)

Table 4 Religious/non-religious admissions criteria of Roman Catholic secondary schools

Brochure criterion	Number of Roman Catholic schools N=33
Roman Catholic	33
Church of England	1
Christian	24
Other religion	18
All others (a)	23

(a) No religion specified (e.g., ‘all other applicants’, open places)

4.3 Supplementary forms

Supplementary admissions forms may be used by schools responsible for their own admissions in cases where the local authority form is regarded as being insufficient to allow an admission authority to consider applications against its published admissions criteria. In the case of religious schools the supplementary forms enable schools to assess the religious background of pupils and their families and the extent of their religiosity, in line with their admissions criteria. Supplementary admissions forms were available for 24 of the 44 Roman Catholic and Church of England voluntary-aided schools for which we had survey data (15 and nine respectively).

All these schools required a reference from a priest/minister/religious leader to confirm the information provided by parents on their religious background and religious practice. Over two-thirds (19) of the 24 schools sought information on the family’s church attendance, half on the family’s involvement in the church whilst a third sought proof that a child’s religious milestones, such as baptism or first holy communion, had taken place and (in some cases) at the appropriate time.

A comparison of the supplementary forms with the local authority application forms showed that the former were generally more complex to complete than the latter. In particular, they tended to be lengthy with half of them of three pages or more; the longest was over nine pages. In addition, more space was provided on the supplementary form for parents to give reasons why they wished their child to attend the school in question; this would provide schools with information on the levels of literacy of parents, which

could affect their views on applicants. In other cases, personal information was sought – for example, requiring parents to state their occupation, provide a copy of their marriage certificate, provide details of the schools attended by all their other children or list the other schools they were applying to. On the other hand, there were examples of forms that were brief and simply asked for basic details about the child, the parent(s)/carer with whom the child lived and a church contact so that a religious reference could be sought by the school.

4.4 Inclusion and community cohesion

The School Admissions Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) noted ‘that faith schools can contribute to community cohesion by having admission arrangements that are inclusive of other faiths and of all elements of the population of their local area’ (p. 12). Further, it noted that some faith schools achieved this by designating a proportion of places for children of their own faith and the remainder as ‘community’ or ‘open’ places.

An analysis of admissions procedures set out in local authority brochures, indicated that nine out of the 44 Roman Catholic and Church of England schools adopted the model highlighted in the Code and divided their available places between foundation and open places. Of these, seven were Church of England and two Roman Catholic schools.

Schools A to D divide their admissions criteria into foundation and open places. The numbers set aside for this purpose and the composition in terms of the percentage of pupils on roll from non-Christian faiths and no faith, is shown below. However, it is important to bear in mind that alongside this allocation a number of these schools also use admissions criteria that can be considered to be selective or potentially selective (see above). It is also interesting to note that the school with the highest proportion of pupils from non-Christian faiths was a Church of England school without foundation or open places (School E).

School A Church of England Secondary School

Composition: 31% non-Christian, 6% no faith

Fifty places will be reserved for Foundation place applicants and forty places for Open place applicants. An Open place applicant is one who may not worship regularly in the Church of England but may be a member of another world faith or indeed no faith at all.

School B Church of England Secondary School

Composition: 28% non-Christian, 4% no faith

The school aims to admit 120 girls
Up to 12 pupils meeting the performing arts criteria
Up to 4 pupils meeting the special considerations criteria
60% of the remainder being pupils meeting the Foundation criteria
40% of the remainder being pupils who meet the Open criteria

Open places

These are offered to applicants who reside in the Diocese of London, come from a family which is a member of any other Christian denomination affiliated to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, or which is a member of any other major faith; have attended their place of worship, where appropriate, at least monthly over at least the year preceding the date of application to the school demonstrated by a completed clergy form.

School C Roman Catholic Secondary School

Composition: 20% non-Christian, 1% no faith

If the number of applicants exceeds 90, it is the governors' intention that admissions will be as follows:

1. 75 Roman Catholics
2. 15 Non-Catholics

School D Church of England Secondary School

Composition: 19% non-Christian, 1% no faith

150 foundation places

30 foundation places

Open places

The Governors have designated 30 places as open places to be offered to students who with their parent(s)/carer(s) are practising members of a non-Christian major world faith (defined as Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish) and where the application is accompanied by a supportive religious reference from their public place of worship. Parent(s)/carer(s) should note that the school aims to provide an education based on Christian principles as outlined in the prospectus and that applicants would not wish to withdraw their children from worship and attend religious education lessons.

School E Church of England Secondary School

Composition: 40% non-Christian, 3% no faith

No places set aside for 'other faiths' or none

Criteria 1 to 6

Concern attendance at a Church of England or other Christian denomination place of worship.

Criteria 7 to 8

Relate to attendance at Church of England primary schools;

Criterion 9

Relates to siblings

Criterion 10

Children of families of good standing in other faiths (authenticated by an appropriate religious leader) who would value the education and ethos of a church school and be prepared to fully accept the involvement of the church in the life of the school.

5 Conclusions

The research reported here examined the religious composition of secondary schools with a religious character in London. It was found that the student mix varied. However, Church of England schools were, overall, more inclusive of other faiths than Roman Catholic schools. Schools that set aside a proportion of places for those of other faiths/no faith tended to be more inclusive of other faiths than those that did not adopt this practice. However, the most religiously inclusive school did not set aside any places for those of other faiths.

It is also important to note that schools that were inclusive of other religions were not necessarily inclusive in other respects. An analysis of the admissions criteria and supplementary forms used by schools with a religious character suggested that, in some cases, they allowed schools the opportunity for social selection.

These opportunities should be reduced by Education and Inspections Act 2006, which prohibits interviewing children or parents prior to the offer of a place, and also by the School Admissions Code (DfES, 2007), which applies to admissions from September 2008. This provides stronger guidance than previous Codes of Practice (DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2003) in that admission authorities (local authorities in the case of community and voluntary-controlled schools and schools in the case of voluntary-aided and foundation schools) are required to act in accordance with its mandatory provisions; these must be complied with, or the body concerned will be in breach of its statutory duty to act in accordance with the provisions of the Code. The Code also prohibits the use of supplementary forms or information forms that ask:

for any personal details about parents, such as criminal convictions or marital, occupational or financial status; for details about parents' achievements, educational background or whether their first language is English; for details about parents' or children's disabilities, special educational needs or medical conditions, unless this is in support of positive action...; about parents' or children's interests, hobbies or membership of societies (this does not apply to membership or participation in activities as part of religious observance or practice at schools designated as having a religious character) (DfES, 2007, section 1.71) .

Interestingly, the 2007 Code (DfES, 2007) has not retained the suggestion, in the earlier Code (DfES, 2003), that faith schools could contribute to community cohesion by designating a proportion of places as open places. However, the Church of England Board of Education (2006) has provided guidance for dioceses in determining their advice to schools on 'local priority places' (non-faith places). Guidelines for Church of England schools on the admissions criteria for faith-based places ('faith priority places') have also been provided based on 'simple objective criteria' (p. 4). A three-tier stratification is proposed: 'known to the church', 'attached to the church' and 'at the heart of the church'. Further research will be required to ascertain the impact of the new Code to gauge its overall effect and its effect on different types of schools.

In the meantime, if community cohesion is to be fostered, schools with a religious character should be inclusive of all religions (or no faith). At present this is not the case. Major tensions arise in balancing policies that aim to increase the number of faith schools and promote religious inclusion. These are not easily resolved in a pluralist society, but given that public money is used to fund schools with a religious character there is a strong case to be made for such schools to be open to the wider community in the interests of enhancing social cohesion.

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Annex

Table A1 London ‘comprehensive’ secondary school admissions criteria (September 2005) by type of school

Criterion	London secondary schools N=374	Community & voluntary controlled N=201 (a)	Voluntary aided N=108	Foundation N=65
Siblings	96%	100%	85%	100%
Distance	96%	100%	86%	99%
Child in public care	85%	95%	74%	72%
Medical/social need	70%	81%	56%	59%
Special educational needs	47%	64%	25%	28%
Religion	25%	0%	88%	0%
Child attends feeder school	19%	15%	25%	20%
Banding	16%	13%	24%	9%
Child from ‘other faith’	13%	0%	46%	0%
School is ‘first preference’	10%	1%	28%	9%
Catchment area	8%	8%	9%	5%
Child has ability/aptitude in subject	7%	3%	13%	12%
Child of employee/governor	6%	5%	5%	9%
Pastoral factors	4%	0%	14%	0%
General ability	3%	2%	3%	9%
Compassionate factors	3%	0%	11%	0%
Difficult journey to another school	3%	4%	2%	0%
Interview/pre-admission meeting (b)	2%	0%	8%	0%
Child of former pupil	2%	0%	4%	5%
Child has strong family connection to school	1%	0%	3%	0%
Pupil’s primary school report	1%	0%	3%	0%
Other discretionary criteria (c)	1%	0%	3%	3%

Notes

(a) There were only four voluntary controlled schools and admissions to these are the responsibility of the local authority; for this reason they have been grouped with community schools.

(b) With pupils and/or parents.

(c) Sibling’s record; the pupil’s participation in organisations associated with school; community involvement by parents/children.

Statistically significant differences (0.05 level or beyond) between different school types are emboldened.

Source: Pennell et al. (2006)