‘Faith based schools are an important part of the suite of educational provision and as such should be funded by the state’. Discuss.

The United Kingdom is a society where a multitude of faiths are recognised and followed, therefore, naturally, educational provision reflects this. In 2017, there were 6813 state funded faith schools in England, with the majority of these being primary schools (Long and Bolton, 2017). These schools receive money from the state, meaning the Government, that allow them to continue to provide the resources needed to educate Britain’s young people. A defining part of faith based schools is that they are affiliated with a faith or religion, such as Christianity. However, this does not mean they teach faith, therefore they are often referred to as schools with religious charter (Oldfield, Hartnett and Bailey, 2013) which could be to reduce prejudices that surround religion. For the sake of this essay, the term faith schools will be used in conjunction with faith based schools and schools with religious charter, with all terms meaning a school that is affiliated with a certain faith. After first exploring the history of faith based schools, themes such as segregation, indoctrination and parental choice will be considered, in addition to issues such as non-confessional religious education, student intake and academic achievement, regarding whether faith based schools should be funded by the state.

Since the end of the sixth century, churches have been providing mass education to the general population (Gillard, 2011). As there are no records of recognised teaching before this time, although it most certainly occurred, churches could be accredited with creating the formal schooling system. Hence, considerable amounts of schooling were provided by religious groups until the Education Act of 1870 (Dufour, 2011), which was the first piece of legislation created regarding the provision of education, which consequently transformed schooling. Within the Act it was stated that religious teaching in board schools, or as the modern term may depict Local Authority schools, should be non-denominational, meaning that a specific set of beliefs should not be taught. However, schools that were voluntary could continue unchanged, thus excluding them from this clause in the Act, allowing them to continue teaching religious denominations. This lead to a recognised dual education system compromising of voluntary church schools and state schools. Due to this, conflicts arose over whether the state should/should not fund schools managed by religious groups (Parliament, no date), controversy which has resurfaced in recent years. Following this, Cush (2013) states that voluntary schools were further divided by the Education Act of 1944 into two categories: voluntary controlled and voluntary aided. Voluntary controlled schools received funding from the state and therefore had increased restrictions to adhere to, such as providing non-confessional religious education, whereby a
multitude of religions are studied. Contrasting this, the state only partially funded voluntary aided schools, allowing for increased freedom such as a confessional approach to religious education (Cush, 2008). In other words, religious education lessons could focus on studying the religion that the school was affiliated with. These two categories still exist today but alongside these, there are recent additions of foundation schools, free schools, and academies (Cush, 2013), all of which can be registered with religious charter.

Through providing generalised lessons about different religions, due to a non-confessional approach, it could be argued that voluntary controlled schools help to reduce prejudice. By increasing awareness about different religions, non-confessional education can help students to become more sympathetic to individuals of a faith different to their own (Lester and Roberts, 2006). This could be because through having an increased understanding about the norms and beliefs of different faiths, students may begin to appreciate and respect certain behaviours and views, including why an individual may wear different clothing as part of their faith, Muslim woman wearing hijabs for example. Due to this, students may feel supportive of different faiths, especially if they see parallels to their own faith such as worshipping a higher power. This could help to reduce prejudices, allowing students to see likenesses between their own and different faiths and realise that, whilst views may differ on certain aspects, in others their views are alike.

However, focusing on many religions could sacrifice feelings of security and belongingness to a community that often occur when religious teaching focuses on one faith only, commonly the faith the school is affiliated with (Gross and Rutland, 2016). By concentrating on a sole faith, students could begin to develop their sense of self and personal identity as they intensely explore topics related to their own faith, helping them to gain confidence in their own views and where they have come from. This is especially relevant in secondary school aged children where, in accordance to Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development, adolescents are battling with their identity and role confusion (Mooney, 2013). A key aspect of success in this stage is for an adolescent to stay true to their own beliefs, which could be enhanced or hindered by solely focusing on one faith. If a student believes in said faith, then confessional religious education lessons will provide the opportunity to develop their views, reducing conflict that may occur when studying other religions, thus helping them to stay true to their own beliefs. However, if a student does not accept the views of the faith, then they may feel distressed that their beliefs are not explored in lessons and that they are different from others around them, such as their teachers and parents, which could cause them to change their views, leading to the development
of a weak sense of self. Consequently, this could reduce self-esteem and confidence levels, which could lead to depression and anxiety in later life (Pu, Hou and Ma, 2017).

Therefore, a school’s approach to religious education, whether it be confessional or non-confessional, could be an important factor in the discussion as to whether the state should fund faith schools. With the multi-faith society that exists in Britain today, it could be argued that the state should fund schools that promote tolerance and understanding through non-confessional religious education, helping to reduce prejudice and thus discrimination within society. Perhaps, if faith schools were to be funded by the state, they should implement a system like Finland whereby a non-confessional approach is adopted but this is within a student’s own faith (Cush, 2014). This would allow for students to study their own faith, therefore helping to develop their confidence and sense of identity, in addition to learning about other religions, helping to reduce prejudices and thus providing a balance between the two approaches.

Although a non-confessional approach to religious education may help to reduce instances of prejudice, Parker-Jenkins, Glenn and Janmaat (2014, p.53) propose that faith schools themselves ‘are believed by some to promote a divided society composed of citizens with intolerant views towards other groups’. Mostly, this is believed to be because of the socialisation that occurs. Students attending a faith school tend to be of said faith, meaning that interactions between peers tend to be with those of similar religious views to their own. Further contributing to this, faith schools can set their own over-subscription criteria for when there are more applicants than places (Department for Education, 2014, p.16). Through this, faith schools could actively select students of the faith that they are affiliated with, which, if happening, reduces opportunities for students of different faiths to interact.

For some parents, this can alleviate worries about socialisation with students of a different faith leading to undesirable behaviours such as marrying outside the religious community (Bruce, 2012). This is especially important for those from a minority religious community. Due to a fear of absorption and loss of identity, parents from minority religious communities can be apprehensive about non-faith schools (Adams and Chater, 2014). This could be due to the socialisation with pupils of other faiths causing fear or due to the curriculum challenging religious views and traditions, such as learning about evolution in Science. Supporting this, Pring (2007) questions what would emerge from a vast range of history and traditions regarding beliefs and values. In other words, schools that are not faith-based may be varied in their beliefs, values, and traditions. This could be demonstrated through a diverse pupil intake naturally meaning differing views, or through the celebration and recognition of other religious festivals, Diwali...
for example. Because of this mixture, students may acquire beliefs, values and traditions that are not affiliated with a particular religion, making them seem confusing, especially if they do not match parental views. This could be more prevalent in those from minority religious communities whom may feel like their children are crucial in continuing their religious beliefs, values, and traditions. Sometimes, these worries can be so profound that parents withdraw their children from schools when a non-faith-specific child is allocated a place, as found by Ipgrave (2016) in a Jewish school.

Whilst favouring students of said faith may reduce parental anxieties, it arguably promotes a segregated society which could lead to misconceptions. This is because direct contact is thought to reduce prejudices (Allport, 1954), and with the possibility of there being fewer students with differing views at a faith school compared to school without religious charter, there could be little opportunity for interactions with students of faiths different to their own. Due to this, students may be unable to draw upon their own experiences, thus may have to rely on secondary sources of information when making judgements about different faiths. If these sources present a negative stance, this could lead to intolerant views of other groups, resulting in a divided society where individuals of different faiths seldom interact. Because of this, if all faith schools become funded by the state, it could be viewed that whilst representing religious diversity in schooling, the state could inadvertently be creating a divisive society whereby prejudices are bred due to a lack of direct contact between students of different faiths.

Although, it may not be the faith schools themselves, but rather their teachings that lead to a divided society. By asking students to accept certain religious beliefs, morals and values in their entirety, faith schools could be accused of indoctrination (Halstead and McLaughlin, 2005). Whilst this is a strong term, it could be argued that faith schools increase the likelihood of students unquestionably acquiring religious views. Students may be increasingly likely to accept religious beliefs, especially if primary influences such as teachers and parents share the same views (Marples, 2005), which they often would in a faith school. Explaining this, Bandura (1977) states that learning occurs through observations of models, which are then encoded and then later imitated by the observer. Thus, if a teacher exhibits certain religious beliefs, and if these are reinforced through imitation at home or vice versa, then the acquisition of these beliefs without question may be more probable. Further impacting on this, and based on operant conditioning, if a student imitates and expresses a religious belief which they have observed from the teacher, it may be met with praise which could increase the likelihood of the student replicating and internalising the behaviour (Hoy, Hughes and Walkup, 2013). However, if parental and teacher’s views about a religion differ, students may become critical of their teacher and their school
(Moulin, 2015). Because of this, and a lack of a positive teacher-student relationship due to differing beliefs, students may become disengaged with education (Ross, 2009) which could affect their academic achievement and wellbeing.

To reduce this, teachers could try to ensure that their practice is free from any personal beliefs or views, as these could indoctrinate or cause conflict with a student. Reflecting this is part two of the teaching standards, which all trainee teachers and teachers in maintained schools must adhere to, stating that teachers should ensure ‘that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils’ vulnerability’ (Department for Education, 2011, p.1). However, free schools, including those with religious charter, are excluded from this as the Local Authority does not maintain them. Therefore, unless a school policy excludes personal beliefs from practice, teachers can impart their personal religious views to students. Due to the teacher possibly being a student’s model, this increases the risk of a student unquestionably acquiring religious views, which could lead to a divided society whereby students are intolerant of views other than their own, as they believe their faiths morals, values, and beliefs in totality.

However, faith based schools add to the diversity of schools, helping to increase parental choice, arguably making them an essential part of educational provision. This reflects recent political beliefs, whereby choice is a key theme emerging in education (Gillie, no date). Illustrating this is the increase in the categories that schools can be recognised as, for example free schools, voluntary-aided schools, and academies, growing from previous majority of Local Authority schools. The current system allows parents to apply to three schools, often ranking them in order of preference for when their child transitions into primary and secondary school education (Government Digital Service, no date). Although faith schools provide choice, Watson (2013, p.153) argues that ‘in practical terms, it would be challenging to provide all religious parents with a right to a place for their child in a publicly-funded faith school’. Logistically, this could be incredibly difficult, especially as migration may influence the number of recognised religions in the United Kingdom. As it is incredibly hard to predict migration levels, which can be affected by government policies (Pew Research Center, 2015) and events like the UK leaving the European Union, it would be impossible to have a faith based school in every community, for each different faith, as religious demographics are likely to change. Due to this, the placement of faith schools could mean that some areas have more than one, whilst others have none. This could create a postcode lottery where the amount of choice you get regarding a faith based school depends on your location.
Although, when making school selections, only 5% of parents choose a school based on faith and tradition, compared to 77% of parents who choose based on academic standards (Woodhead, 2013). Because of this, if a faith school has high academic achievement, parents may want their child to go there even if it does not reflect their own beliefs. This is especially prevalent as the attainment in faith schools is perceived to be higher (Courtney, 2015). Though, it may not be the faith based schools themselves that increase academic achievement, more so their pupil intake. Allen and West (2011, p.707) show that ‘secondary schools with a religious character (or faith schools) have fewer FSM students and more top ability students and that, in general, they are more affluent in their intake than the neighbourhoods they are located in’. Therefore, as the number of students eligible for free school meals reaching the required level of attainment at KS4 is 26.4% lower than all other students (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015), faith schools may not be affected by this trend. This means that the percentage of students achieving a required level of attainment will be higher, promoting their place in league tables and making it appear that they have high academic achievement. Due to this, parents will be more likely to preference them when selecting schools, which could result in more application than places. Consequently, faith schools may be likely to implement their oversubscription criteria, where interviews are particularly favoured, perpetuating deliberate selection to include students that are of the same faith as the school, and of an affluent background (Allen and West, 2009).

Therefore, faith schools offer a desirable choice in schooling due to their higher academic achievement, but this may in fact be due to biased admissions criteria favouring more affluent students. This creates a cycle whereby more affluent pupils are selected to attend the school, increasing the likelihood of high academic achievement. As a direct result of this, property near a faith school could become more sought after, increasing the demand and thus price, thereby making housing surrounding the school only attainable for the wealthy. This could create an inequality to those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, due to them not being able to afford a property close to the faith school, thus reducing their choice.

However, as parents often focus on academic achievement and not the value-added score, that is the quantification of gains made by the student, parents may select faith based schools on their academic achievement without considering the progress made by the students, which is arguably more important. By considering factors such as ability and parental income, a school’s value-added score indicates the effect that a teacher has on progress, whether this be positive or negative, in comparison to expected test scores (Saunders, 1998). For example, a student may be predicted a C at A level, but due to the
teacher’s effectiveness, achieves a grade B, resulting in a positive value-added score. By looking at attainment alone, the most motivated students from the most affluent backgrounds are likely to achieve higher test scores, although the progression they have made may be lower than those who have achieved lower. Therefore, it is crucial that if all schools are viewed as an important part of the education provision, thus should be funded by the state, the misconceptions surrounding the academic achievement of faith schools should be addressed through league tables that focus on the value-added scores and not achievement alone, decreasing the trend that results in the favourable intake of more affluent students in faith schools.

Considering all of this, faith based schools are a historical part of the education provision in the United Kingdom, with debates about their funding being a continuous theme since the first Education Act of 1870. Whilst faith based schools remain an important part of education provision by providing a sense of community, reducing parental anxieties, and promoting parental choice, it must be questioned as to whether this is beneficial to the whole of society or just to the wealthy with religious beliefs. It is important to consider the impact of faith schools on those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including the limitation surrounding their schooling choices through the creation a postcode lottery that they are unable to play in. In addition, due to a more affluent intake that is attracted through high academic achievement, segregation could occur not only on religious beliefs, but also social class which could lead to intolerant views, perpetuated by a confessional approach to religious education that can occur in free schools with religious charter. Therefore, state funding of faith schools should not occur unless changes are made that address key concerns such as segregation, indoctrination, and the favouring of more affluent students. To do this, faith based schools should adopt a non-confessional approach to religious education as well as encouraging applicants from different faiths and social classes. Through doing this, interactions between those of different faiths and classes can increase, thus promoting acceptance and respect, which is crucial in producing a multi-faith society, whereby differences are celebrated and not rejected.

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References


