

Academic standards in Catholic schools in England: indications of causality

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In terms of absolute or ‘raw’ examination and test scores, those maintained schools in England designated as Roman Catholic by the Department of Education and Skills appear, on average, to achieve higher scores than the mean of non-Catholic schools. Similar findings have been reported about Catholic schools in other differing educational systems, most extensively in the US. A range of possible causes has been advanced to explain the findings though there is little empirical research to determine causality with any certainty. The main source of evidence derives from studies in the US. While they can offer some useful insights they relate to a different educational culture. This paper attempts to contribute to and evaluate the current debate about possible reasons for the high levels attainment of pupils attending Catholic schools in England. However, in the light of the limited available evidence it is, inevitably, somewhat speculative.

Educational provision: roots of diversity in England

Almost dormant beneath the compulsory nature of children’s education in England is the notion that, in as much as the family is accepted as a legitimate and inviolable social unit, education is a matter primarily for parents not the state. Teachers, and schools are in fact, therefore, acting *in loco parentis*, not *in loco civitas*. Consistent with that presumption, successive governments, in common with all western pluralistic societies, have both allowed private education and offered some sort of choice in the matter of schooling they directly provide or support. Nevertheless, such a commitment to choice cannot be open-ended so debate centres upon the extent to which choices are practical, acceptable and consistent with an agreed understanding of educational priorities (Cunningham, 2000; Holmes, 1992; Judge, 2001, 2002; Jackson, 2003).

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The Forster Education Act of 1870 established the 'dual system' of education in England. It ensured a plurality of school provision through local School Boards and independent organisations, mainly churches. The Education Act of 1944 confirmed that diverse system and the *Education Act 1996*, section 11(2), placed a duty on the Secretary of State to encourage diversity and increase opportunities for choice. Within a seemingly market oriented and utilitarian approach to education, the present UK Government has espoused the idea of diversity in provision as a mechanism for raising educational standards. It appears to be encouraging business leaders, entrepreneurs and different church or faith groups to establish schools as a way of achieving that objective, particularly in the secondary sector (Blunkett, 2000; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2001, 2004). The policy has a number of detractors arguing, in particular about religious based schools, that they create or sustain social disharmony (Hansard, 2002; Local Government Association, 2002; Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2004; Passmore & Barnard, 2001; Wood, 2004).

Some 35% of all primary and 16% of all secondary schools in England and Wales are defined by the UK Government as having a religious character (DfES, 2004). The vast majority have been provided by the Church of England (CE) or Roman Catholic Church (RC), but there are also a small number provided by minority Christian denominations, some Jewish, Muslim and Sikh schools, together with a few joint ventures by different Christian denominations working together in a variety of partnerships. The Catholic sector in England provides education for 0.72 million pupils representing approximately 9.6% of the pupil population (DfES, 2004). Its existence and the character and distribution of its schools at the beginning of the twenty-first century can be attributed, arguably, to two decisions of the English Bishops taken some 90 years apart. The first, taken as a collective body after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850, was to make the provision of Catholic elementary schools their highest priority (Province of Westminster, 1852). The second, in response to the political settlement of 1944, was to pursue voluntary aided status for their existing and future schools. The underlying rationale for both decisions was their concern to provide an effective mechanism for the transmission of Catholic faith and culture for the Catholic community and secure control over the style and content of religious instruction. Catholic schools were to be the places where people learned their Catholicism becoming, with the home and church, a tri-partite self-sustaining community structure.

Until the 1950s, it could be argued that English Catholics formed a recognisable minority subculture with its own religious, social and moral norm of behaviour, value systems, attitudes and beliefs (Coman, 1977; Hornsby-Smith, 1972). In the mid-1960s, however, a developing Catholic middle class, arguably a result of successful Catholic schooling, was gradually dispersing from its traditional inner city locations into the suburbs. This physical fragmentation was accompanied by significant changes in patterns of belief and adherence to traditional values and practice that had been features of Catholic life for generations. At the same time there began a general and rapid decline in the pupil population. This led, for the first time since 1850 in many parts of the country, to the number of available places in Catholic

schools exceeding demand from baptised Catholics. Coupled with the rise of a market oriented educational climate, these developments have created tensions both within and for Catholic schools as they grapple with twin roles as both religious and civic institutions working within an increasingly secularised post-Christian society (Arthur, 1995; Fulton, 2000; Grace, 2002, 2003; Hornsby-Smith, 1999, 2000; O'Keefe, 1999).

Policy statements from the English Bishops have adjusted to the new circumstances of falling school rolls and an evolving multicultural, multiethnic society (see Bishops Conference, 1997a). However, the educational vision so clearly articulated some 150 years ago continues to be their prime reason for continuing to support and provide Catholic schools (Catholic Education Service, 2003a; Hume, 1994, 1995; Konstant, 1996; Nichols, 1995, 2002; Regan, 2004; Worlock, 1995).

Academic standards in Catholic schools in England

Catholic schools are popular with parents. They obtain good academic results and feature towards the top of the annual published tables of performance on the present UK Government's preferred measures of school outcomes. They compare favourably with other schools in respect of their pupils' academic attainment across both the primary (Bishops' Conference, 1999; Hornsby-Smith, 1978; Marks, 2001; Morris, 2001; Sinnott, 1992) and secondary phases (Bishops' Conference, 1997b; Kendall & Ainsworth, 1997; Marks, 2001; Morris, 2001, 2005; Nuttall, 1990; Thomas *et al.*, 1993). These findings are consistent with inspection data from the UK Government's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) indicating that, on average, Catholic schools achieve higher academic standards than those in other state maintained primary and secondary schools (Morris, 1998, 2001, 2005). Across both sectors their relative superior academic productivity seems to be more apparent the greater the level of pupil deprivation, as measured by eligibility for free school meals (Bishops' Conference, 1997b, 1999; Morris, 2005).

The evidence of high attainment seems well established. On the other hand, the findings from value added analyses designed to establish the extent of pupil progress that could be attributed to institutional rather than personal or social factors are mixed. Indications of higher academic effectiveness in Catholic compared to similar state provided schools (Everett, 1993; Jesson *et al.*, 1992; Jesson & Gray, 1993; Marks, 2001; Morris, 1966) contrast with studies that have found little or no difference (Kendall, 1996, 1997).

Recent, more statistically sophisticated studies, using national data sets and multi-level analysis, also report contrary findings. Schagen *et al.* (2002) noted that Catholic primary schools pupils made better progress only in English, one of four standard attainment tests measures, but secondary pupils did so on four of the five examination measures they used. Conversely, Benton *et al.* (2003) found evidence linking religious-based schools, including Catholic schools, with better pupil progress in the primary rather than the secondary phase. When they combined the data sets no school differences were found in pupil progress across the primary and

secondary phases from the end of Key Stage 2 (pupils aged 7) to the end of Key Stage 4 (age 16). However, they advise that their methodology for combining residuals across the Key Stages means the latter results should be treated with caution.

There has been little research of post-16 pupil performance in Catholic schools. Marks (2001) reports Catholic school students achieving slightly more points per pupil than those in local education authority provided schools, but less than those attending Church of England sixth forms. Data provided by Ofsted for the academic year 1999–2000 are somewhat contradictory. They suggest that, in the smaller school communities that are a characteristic of the majority of the Catholic sector post-16 provision, pupils' average total points score compares favourably with their counterparts attending other institutions. In larger sixth forms, the advantages that seem to accrue to Catholic schools generally disappear and their comparative academic productivity declines (Ofsted, 2001).

While there have been relatively few researchers interested in the academic performance of Catholic schools in England, there is a significant body of research published in the US over the last 20 years comparing the academic performance of students in different types of institutions. The majority, though not all, have made use of national databases. Though relating to different educational and cultural conditions, the research may provide some indications of causality for an English context.

The US data indicate that pupils attending Catholic elementary and secondary schools tend to obtain, on average, higher levels of academic achievement than those attending their state run counterparts and have better learning habits. In addition, Catholic schools seem particularly effective with pupils from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic groups. They tend to have lower drop-out rates and send more of their students to college (Bryk *et al.*, 1993; Cibulka *et al.*, 1982; Coleman *et al.*, 1982; Greeley, 1982; Hill *et al.*, 1990; Hoffer, 2000; Hoffer *et al.*, 1985; Jeynes, 2000, 2003; Johnson, 1999; Reese *et al.*, 1997; Teachman *et al.*, 1996).

The early research findings were challenged by several authors (see Alexander & Pallas, 1983, 1984, 1985; Willms, 1985). Their arguments, though, were more concerned with the extent of the perceived 'Catholic school effect' rather than the phenomenon itself and it seems the weight of evidence suggesting a higher average academic achievement level for pupils in Catholic schools was generally accepted (Jencks, 1985). However, at the time, possible reasons were not subject to empirical research. Approximately a decade later in the US, Bryk *et al.* (1993) linked a fresh analysis of national data with original fieldwork research in seven very different Catholic high schools. Their conclusions highlighted four major factors, which they identified as characteristic of a specific Catholic ideology, that contributed significantly to the high academic standards of Catholic schools. They were:

- a common academic, spiritual and moral curriculum rooted in a Catholic understanding of humanity and its capacity to search for truth and which views education and knowledge, primarily, as an end in itself;

- a communal structure based round three core Catholic features; shared activities such as liturgies, retreats and (what in England would be called) out-of-school activities; established religious rituals which anchor the school within the larger, worldwide Catholic tradition; and the extended role of teachers beyond the classroom into the religious community of which the pupils are also a part;
- a high degree of school autonomy which enables virtually all important decisions to be made at the school level;
- an ‘inspirational ideology’ centred on the person of Christ which underpins the organisational concept of subsidiarity, a set of shared beliefs about what students should learn, agreed norms of instruction, agreed views of how people should relate to one another and a set of agreed moral commitments. (Bryk *et al.*, 1993, pp. 298–304)

Possible alternative non-religious explanations had exercised other American researchers. Chubb and Moe (1988, 1990) for example argued that the differences between sectors were anchored in the logic of politics and market philosophy which, in turn, produced more or less effective teaching and learning institutions. Their conclusions were strongly challenged (Riley, 1990; Tweedie, 1990). The most telling critique argued that their conclusions were not supported by empirical evidence, depending rather upon an ideologically fixated interpretation of data (Bryk & Lee, 1992; Goldstein, 1993).

Generally, contemporary criticisms of the main body of research about Catholic schools in the US did not attack the underlying claim that they were more successful in pursuing academic achievement than state schools. It is possible, therefore, that Bryk’s analysis may suggest causal factors for the performance of Catholic schools in England even though they operate in a very different educational system. On the other hand, it is important to heed the conclusion that, despite the various American studies controlling for family background and other socio-economic factors known to influence levels of attainment, ‘... there still exists no definitive data to conclude that Catholic schools, in and of themselves, are the major reason yielding these favourable outcomes for youth, particularly disadvantaged youth’ (Meegan *et al.*, 2002).

The remainder of this paper considers the range of explanations that have been suggested to account for the findings in England. Though taking into account the research from the US outlined above, it concentrates upon data and insights relating to the English educational context as it attempts to evaluate possible reasons for the generally high level of academic attainment of pupils attending English Catholic schools.

Factors associated with pupil attainment

Although the family background, levels of individual intelligence and prior attainment are accepted as the major factors associated with pupils’ attainment at school, there is an independent institutional effect. However, it is relatively small. Typically, pupils’ prior attainment, closely associated with the background factors outlined above, plus

the overall level of social disadvantage in the school can account for as much as 80% of the apparent difference between schools (Saunders, 1998). Socio-economic status seems to be a particularly important correlate of attainment, more important than pupil ability, and the socio-economic mix of the school has an effect on attainment over and above individual or family socio-economic characteristics (Paterson, 1991).

Research in the last two decades has identified a number of institutional characteristics that are associated with effective schools in England (Reynolds, 1993). They can be grouped in two main categories: those pertaining to the organisation and management of schools and those concerned with the nature of the educational processes they adopt. The main organisational factors seem to be strong, knowledgeable and clear-sighted leadership; teachers who devote their time to the task of pupil learning; an emphasis on academic achievement; and some measure of school autonomy. Schools which are well looked after and cared for create an environment in which effective teaching and learning can take place. However, it is not an essential requirement and the age or style of school building does not seem to be important.

The process or cultural characteristics most strongly associated with school effectiveness include a shared sense of the purpose or mission of the school, where the underlying values are congruent with both the stated mission and the officially agreed ways of dealing with people and doing things; a disciplinary system that emphasises appropriate praise and rewards rather than punishment and creates a sense of order and security; high expectations in academic and social behaviour which are shared by staff; and parental support for the school's cultural values, attitudes and practices.

Exactly how and to what extent these may impact upon a school's effectiveness has not been empirically established. In her critical review Saunders (1999) notes the complexity of interrelationships and influences between individuals, their families, neighbourhoods, communities and schools that impact upon levels of academic achievement. She cautions that an observed empirical association with pupil attainment does not necessarily imply an *a priori* association still less a causative one. Reasons for the seeming success of Catholic schools remain, therefore, a matter of conjecture and speculation.

Explaining high attainment

Institutional-based hypotheses range from the multifaceted (for example, it may be easier for schools serving a specific faith community to generate a supportive learning ethos) to the simple (for example, pupils in Catholic schools take more examinations). Pedagogical hypotheses suggest that teachers in Catholic schools may be more committed and/or more effective practitioners and that the leadership is more focused than in other schools. Psychological/social hypotheses are equally varied. Complex anthropological explanations are offered (the nature of Catholic education and its relationship with a religious worldview generates more positive behaviour towards schooling) together with more simple ideas suggesting, for example, that pupils in Catholic schools may, on average, have more informed parents, are more likely to have middle-class social backgrounds and aspirations, less likely to be

members of ethnic minority groups or have English as an additional or second language. At this point most hypotheses remain untested at the school level.

Institutional cohesion, order and control

Just as different communities have their own culture, so do organisations. Organisational theory suggests, for example, that the effectiveness of an institution will increase if there is congruence between the forms of worker involvement, the means used to ensure worker compliance and the reward systems that are provided (Etzioni, 1964). The impact of workers' personal culture on that of the institution is noted by Becker and Greer (1960), who make the point that workers' personal or *latent culture* need not necessarily be in sympathy with the *manifest culture* of the institution. If a particular latent culture is strong and widespread, organisational aims are less likely to be effectively realised. If the two are closely allied, it is suggested the potential for success is enhanced.

A decade of research findings, reports and school inspections have reinforced the common sense view that schools, in order to evoke the commitment of their pupils, must have a level of internal cohesion and consistency to generate a well ordered environment in which teaching and learning might flourish (Ofsted, 2000; Reynolds, 1992). Where a school serves a relatively cohesive community, such as a single faith group, it is possible that the ability of teachers to establish optimum levels of control and stability for effective learning may be enhanced. Whatever mechanisms a school chooses for its pupil behaviour management policy, the ability of teachers to obtain favourable responses from pupils is likely to be greater where values and attitudes are held in common, especially if it is the case that children's acquiescence to the school authority has more to do with a tacit acceptance of group social norms than the pupils' explicit intellectual understanding of, and willing assent to, its ethical basis.

Particular factors that might help contribute towards the exercise of effective and supportive control in Catholic schools centre upon the belief of the Church in ethical absolutism rooted in divine authority, its concepts of sin and forgiveness and the shared values often associated with a hierarchically organised faith community claiming the existence of, and subscribing to, a discernible and objective moral code. Further, as members of the same faith community, there is the potential for a high degree of shared values between staff and parents, good home-school relationships and parental support for the school. This might almost be described as a form of tribalistic solidarity. It could also be argued that the financial support required from local Catholic communities to provide and maintain the school's physical structure may contribute to a sense of community ownership and solidarity that is not so easily generated in schools provided entirely out of general taxation.

School leadership and teaching

It is a truism that high levels of pupil attainment are more likely to be generated by good leadership and teaching than if both are of a poor standard. Given the

comparatively high levels of attainment in Catholic schools described above, it would be reasonable to assume they would be accompanied by evident differences in the quality of teaching that pupils receive. Aggregated data from Ofsted inspection reports for the period 1993–1998 did not show this to be the case in either the primary or secondary sector. Nor were they better led (Morris, 2001). In contrast, an analysis of those schools inspected in 2000 showed that the quality of teaching in Catholic primary and secondary schools was slightly better than in other state maintained schools (Ofsted, 2001). In a separate analysis of judgements of post-16 teaching during 1996–2001, Ofsted inspectors deemed the quality of teaching in Catholic sixth forms to be better than in other schools for four of the six years surveyed (Ofsted, 2002a). Clearly, there is scope for further investigation, though, at first glance, there seems no obvious reason to support an assumption that staff working in Catholic sector schools should be any more, or less, technically proficient. It is more likely that the internal dynamics of Catholic schools provide the potential for a more conducive learning environment.

Transmitting values and attitudes

Schools are communities in themselves, albeit serving a wider constituency. To be effective socialising agents they must practise the values they seek to promote. Unless teachers have, at least, a sympathetic attitude to the values, attitudes and practices of the school, they are unlikely to be successfully assimilated by pupils. Teachers cannot simply be neutral facilitators. They are in the grip of some educational theory whether they recognise it or not (Moore, 1978). In practice they promote a particular set of values—their own (Pring, 1978).

The transmission of a specific school culture, or ethos, may present difficulties for individual teachers particularly in the pluralistic and relativistic society of today (Grace, 2002). The work of the most brilliant can be nullified if the school's ethos is alien to their own values. In a similar way, the school's effectiveness in achieving its purposes will be influenced by the extent to which they are understood, accepted and supported by its members.

Catholic teachers who choose to teach in Catholic schools serving mainly Catholic pupils are more likely to hold attitudes and values consistent with the school's stated mission and parental aspirations because of their shared faith and the clear expectations their Church has of them. Such expectations will be made evident, for example, at interview and in their contract of employment, and implicitly through shared liturgy, and other school activities having a confessional religious theme.

Teacher commitment

Teachers are likely to be more effective if they have a positive self-image and belief that their work is valued. Contributing to such well-being are, what have been termed, positive reference groups, located both within and outside school. Outside reference groups may be the family background and upbringing, a religious faith, or

strong political beliefs (Nias, 1981, 1985). It is possible that Catholic teachers, who have deliberately chosen to work in Catholic schools, will have a strong religious commitment. Their personal faith and the institutional church might serve as a particular support, especially when reinforced by the school strongly articulating its religio-cultural mission.

My own, very limited, investigation of the reasons for newly qualified teachers obtaining posts in Catholic schools gives some credence to this possibility, at least in primary schools in the Archdiocese of Birmingham in England (Morris & Marsh, 2002). More reliable evidence suggests that Catholic head teachers (Johnson *et al.*, 2000) and teachers of religious education (Astley *et al.*, 2000) in particular see themselves as religious role models and that primary school teachers are particularly supportive of the confessional aims of their Catholic schools even when they identify themselves as not being religious (Altena *et al.*, 2000). In contrast, across the maintained sector, generally, the prime motivational factors for young people choosing teaching as a career tend not to be vocational in any religious sense. They feel teaching is worthwhile in that it benefits society, they enjoy imparting knowledge, applying their degree subject, working with children and, to a lesser extent, find the long holidays attractive (Spear *et al.*, 2000).

Academic orientation

Differences in pupils average total points score on the national General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations taken at age 16 might, as some have argued, simply indicate that those attending Catholic schools are being entered for more examinations than students in other schools, with religious studies, intuitively, being the most likely additional subject entry. The supposition is supported, in part, by Ofsted data showing a slightly higher average entry profile in 2001 in Catholic secondary schools taking pupils aged from 11–16 years and also in those for pupils aged 11–18. On the other hand, the slight difference in the average number of entries does not explain the superiority in their average total points score for that year, especially in respect of 11–16 schools (Ofsted, 2002b), nor does it explain the higher attainment in primary schools where, because of the nature of the nationally organised testing regime, the possibility of additional entries does not occur.

Pupil intake: a case of social selection?

By catering for a specific faith community, it is argued, Catholic schools are both monocultural and selective (Ball & Troyna, 1993). Related hypotheses advanced to account for the observed superiority in pupil attainment at Catholic schools include ‘religious self-selection’, ‘pupils having more informed parents’, ‘fewer children from groups having English as a second language’, ‘a lower percentage of children with special educational needs’ and ‘fewer children with deprived home backgrounds’ (Schagen *et al.*, 2002).

Table 1. Percentage of pupils in maintained schools in England 2003–2004: free school meals and special needs

	Catholic	All schools
Percentage taking free school meals	11.81	12.6
Percentage eligible for free school meals	14.67	16.0
Percentage special needs with statement	1.50	3.0
Percentage special needs without statement	13.03	14.4

Source: DFES/CES

Comparisons of the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (see Table 1) gives some support for the view that Catholic schools may, on average, have a slightly less deprived pupil population. On the other hand, Ofsted data suggest that pupils with similar levels of deprivation obtain higher GCSE scores at Catholic than at non-Catholic schools (Morris, 2005).

While it is not surprising that pupils of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi background, largely adhering to the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim religions, are under represented in Catholic schools, they are by no means monocultural (see Table 2). They have higher percentages of Caribbean and African pupils and strikingly fewer pupils claiming to be 'White British'. This last finding may be a statistical quirk caused by the high numbers of 'Unclassified', many of whom, given the history of the rise in the Catholic population in England outlined above, may be of Irish descent though unprepared to classify themselves as either Irish or British.

There is, clearly, a measure of self-selection on the basis of religious adherence in some Catholic schools but there are also stark differences in the level of Catholic intake between English dioceses. For example, in Westminster and Liverpool around 90% of pupils are classified as Catholics; in the East Anglia and Plymouth dioceses it is just over 50% (Catholic Education Service, 2003b). Some support for the 'more informed parents' or 'selection by commitment' hypotheses may come from findings indicating that 10% of all voluntary aided schools, including but not exclusively Catholic, use parental interviews as part of their admission arrangements (West & Hind, 2003). On the other hand, the practice applies to very few Catholic schools. It also seems to be predominantly a London based phenomenon (West *et al.*, 2003) where, in the case of a number of Catholic schools, governing bodies must discriminate between Catholics because of a shortage of places. The transferability of any such effect where there are more places than Catholic applicants is problematical.

Positive school attitudes and religion

Despite the reality of declining religious practise in England (Bruce, 1995; Fulton, 2000) self-assigned religious affiliation remains a key component of social identity in a similar way to age, gender, class and ethnicity (Francis, 2001). A number of

Table 2. Percentage of pupils of compulsory school age in England 2003–2004 by ethnicity

Ethnic groupings*	Catholic	All schools [#]
White British	69.42	80.29
Irish	2.04	0.39
Traveller of Irish Heritage	0.13	0.06
Gypsy/Roma	0.05	0.10
Other White background	3.19	0.02
Total White	74.83	80.86
White and Black Caribbean	2.87	0.96
White and Black African	0.33	0.25
White and Asian	0.63	0.54
Other mixed background	1.22	0.94
Total mixed	5.05	2.69
Indian	0.94	2.28
Pakistani	0.57	2.67
Bangladeshi	0.11	1.09
Other Asian background	0.71	0.68
Total Asian	2.33	4.72
Black Caribbean	1.74	1.42
Black African	3.11	1.79
Other Black background	0.57	0.41
Total Black	5.42	3.62
Chinese	0.25	0.35
Other Ethnic Group	1.01	0.86
Unclassified	11.1	2.85

Source: DFES/CES

*As defined in the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000*

[#]Totals do not equal 100% due to DFES rounding raw numbers in each category to nearest 10

studies have reported higher levels of religious experience and adherence among Catholic children than their non-Catholic counterparts (Francis, 1979, 1983, 1986a, 1987). Empirical research has also found that religiosity, indicated in frequency of church attendance and personal prayer, is a significant predictor of positive attitudes towards school in general, individual lessons and overall academic achievement (Flynn, 1993; Francis, 1992). Francis gives three possible explanations for the observed connection between religiosity and favourable attitudes to school. He suggests that the relationship can be conceptualised ‘as part of a wider positive view of the social dimensions of life supported by a religious temperament ... as part of a wider conformist life style ... or as part of the wider projection of individual differences in personality on to the social environment’ (Francis, 1992, p. 345).

Social capital

The ability to succeed at school may have much to do with what has been termed 'social capital' (Coleman, 1988). The theory refers to the human interactions that help develop social networks and coordination of effort to improve the efficiency of a whole society, a community or institution. In an educational context it suggests that where the family's style of life, attitudes, manner of speaking and thinking is consonant with the culture of institutional learning, pupils are more likely to flourish in school and a process of mutual reinforcement is generated. Where Catholic schools serve a coherent and practising Catholic community having a clear and specific Catholic culture, the Catholic teachers working in them, who are likely to be steeped in that same culture, may well have an easier task than their colleagues in non-religious schools. If that is the case, Catholic schools are more likely to be able to function effectively and their Catholic pupils to profit from their experiences while attending them. Evidence suggesting that non-Catholic pupils develop less favourable attitudes to their Catholic school than their Catholic counterparts lends support to the hypothesis (Egan, 1986; Francis, 1986b).

Caveats and difficulties

Throughout, I have referred to Catholic schools as a sector, implying a degree of uniformity of purpose and character. However, while there may be many similarities that justify my doing so, it must be recognised that there will be significant variations between schools, both in their understanding of their mission and the pupil population they serve; perhaps more so today than in previous decades (Fulton, 2000; Hornsby-Smith 2000; McLaughlin, 1999; Price, 1999).

The degree of religious understanding and adherence to the Catholic faith shown by parents will vary. School governors, appointed by the Church to secure and develop the religious character of the school, will have varying levels of personal adherence and may differ in their understanding of, and commitment to, the religious dimension of Catholic education as defined by the Ordinary of the diocese. Catholic teachers are also likely to have different levels of faith commitment. While such differences may not impinge upon their pedagogical competence, their ability to contribute towards developing and sustaining the Catholicity of the school may be affected. In addition, not all teachers in Catholic schools are themselves baptised Catholics. This is particularly the case in the secondary sector where some 46% of the teaching staff are not Catholics; in the primary phase it is much lower, approximately 19% (Catholic Education Service, 2003b). The same will be true of the pupil population where numbers of non-Catholics pupils has risen when places became available because of the drop in the birth rate. Significant numbers of non-Catholic pupils may have an influence on the nature of the school and the education it can provide (Arthur, 1995; Konstant, 1996) though implications for pupil attainment, if any, have not been empirically tested.

The need for further research

The evidence of high attainment in Catholic schools seems well established. The present UK Government's commitment to increase the range and diversity of maintained schools under its 'Five year strategy for children and learning' (DfES, 2004) may, by encouraging greater specialisation in schools through their curriculum, or along philosophical, ideological, or religious lines, bring to a greater number of pupils the potential benefits that seem to be currently available in Catholic schools. The proposals to extend the organisational flexibility and autonomy of secondary schools would tend to replicate the voluntary aided model of the Catholic sector though there is little empirical research evidence of a causal link between the legal provisions inherent in their voluntary aided status *per se* and the higher academic productivity the Government wants from all schools.

Developing a clear distinctive and coherent mission, similar in impact to that provided by a commitment to a shared religious faith, may not be possible for many non-faith schools. In the prevailing relativist culture that champions pluralism and encourages individualism, teachers may find it difficult to commit themselves to such a corporate vision. Even if a school does establish a clear distinctive educational philosophy with its associated policies to which staff subscribe, if it serves a population which has no such agreed, shared vision or way of life, the school may still be unable fully meet the disparate needs of its parents or pupils. While seeming plausible, the assumptions underpinning the hypothesis need to be researched.

Though as yet untested in England, some of Bryk's American findings seem to resonate with the indications I have described about possible Catholic sector benefits. However, while the rhetoric of Catholic education in England seems to confirm Bryk's 'inspirational ideology', the reality needs investigation. So, too, do the speculations above concerning the academic orientation of Catholic schools, the suggestion of higher levels of teacher commitment and possible differences in the personal and professional attitudes of teachers in Catholic schools compared to their colleagues working in other institutions.

Moreover, I am well aware that, because of changing social and cultural circumstances in the wider society, the character of many Catholic schools varies, to some degree, from that traditional model. Consequently, investigation of differential pupil attainment within Catholic schools, for example by gender and religious adherence, should enable the Bishops to make evidentially based decisions on the type of school provision they support in future years. Further, if the UK Government policies are to provide the potential of the apparent 'Catholic effect' to other UK religious and secular communities in England, decisions should be based not simply on indications of causality, but on evidence.

Summary and conclusions

The findings of higher levels of academic attainment by Catholic school pupils, while not yet beyond doubt, seem to be well established. What is not at all clear are

the causal reasons for those findings. It may be that the observed differences are a function of distinctive practices within the schools. They may be linked to the personal characteristics of their intake or, as the indications I have outlined suggest, are the product of a complex interaction of the above derived, in turn, from a specific world view and understanding of the purpose of education. There are indications that the values, attitudes and practices seemingly inherent in the traditional confessional model of Catholic school can provide a particularly supportive environment for high academic attainment, especially by socially disadvantaged pupils. It is not clear whether the perceived benefits of such a model are easily transferable.

The Catholic Church proclaims that humanity has a divine origin and an eternal destiny. It asserts that education is a moral transaction that takes place in the home and in communities. It argues that knowledge is not, primarily, for the purpose of generating material prosperity or gaining power, but as a call to individuals to serve and be responsible for others (Garrone, 1977). Implementing such an educational perspective will have significant impact on the schools' policies and programmes.

However, school processes are not static. They are, in part, formed by the pupils, teachers and others engaged in them at any one time, and must relate to their behaviour and motivations that are rooted in their personal histories. Consequently, studies of pupil attainment should take into account both the totality of their personal background and the socio-historical context of the schools that they attend. This is probably especially relevant in England where schools have traditionally been regarded as communities in their own right, with implicit and explicit values, attitudes and practices that define their culture.

The majority of state supported Catholic schools serve, primarily, communities having a particular religious history and identity. Schools serving a specific cultural subgroup, or faith community, holding common attitudes and values, however consciously understood, are likely to have greater potential for achieving high levels of congruity with parental values and attitudes than schools serving more pluralistic and diverse communities whose main determining feature is physical proximity. In turn, the greater the level of social cohesion between home and school, the more likely it is that there will be a high degree of social harmony and of educational purpose within the school community, leading to high levels of academic effectiveness and productivity.

Notes on contributor

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