

Educational Excellence and Societal Benefits: The Case for Supporting UK Faith Schools

You Lyu¹

¹ Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN, South Yorkshire, The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom
Correspondence: You Lyu, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN, South Yorkshire, The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom.

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Abstract

This paper explores the controversial issue of government funding for religious schools in the UK, advocating for this support by studying its comprehensive impact on society and education. Firstly, the research delineates the historical evolution of faith-based education in the UK and the debates surrounding its public financing. Subsequently, the study posits three primary arguments to substantiate government support for these institutions. The first argument underscores the educational preferences of numerous UK families who desire education for their children that is congruent with their religious beliefs, supported by statistical evidence and highlighting the government's role in ensuring religious freedom and diversity. The second argument examines how government funding for religious schools enhances social cohesion and bolsters moral values, challenging the view that such schools exacerbate social divisions. The third argument reveals that religious schools frequently achieve exemplary educational standards and outcomes. Employing a critical analysis of both proponents and critics, this paper advocates for continued government funding of religious schools to meet diverse educational needs and promote societal harmony.

Keywords: faith schools, government funding, religious education, social cohesion, academic excellence

1. Introduction

A faith school is an educational institution with a religious focus (Ameen & Hassan, 2013). According to the Government Digital Service (2011), although religious institutions are required to adhere to the national curriculum, they retain the autonomy to select content for inclusion in their own curricula.

The origins of faith schools in the UK can be traced back to the implementation of state education in 1870. At that time, England and

Wales began providing state financing for several schools that were established on Christian principles (Cush, 2005). According to UK Parliament (2023), to reduce disparities in the education system and increase the availability of free secondary education, the government offered financial support in return for more faith schools to be 'voluntary controlled', the local education authority is largely responsible for the management and maintenance of "voluntary controlled" schools, not the school's administrator or board. This

includes managing the majority of the financial expenses connected with school maintenance. As of 2007, a third of all state schools in the UK were faith schools (Walford, 2008). Nevertheless, there has been considerable debate about whether the government should provide financial assistance for the establishment and continuous functioning of faith schools. Advocates of financial assistance for faith schools argue that providing funding for these institutions demonstrates social cohesion and reverence for religious variety, and accommodates the educational requirements of religious communities, hence fostering equity and demonstrating impartiality within society. Furthermore, faith schools generally achieve better academic outcomes. However, critics express concerns over the potential for the erosion of societal unity and question whether the academic achievements of religious schools are a direct result of their faith-based policies and educational practices (Marples, 2005).

This essay supports the provision of government funding to UK faith schools, asserting that this aid is vital for their ongoing growth and achievement, through analyses and supporting arguments, as well as potential counterarguments. The essay first presents several arguments that support the use of public funds for faith schools. The arguments highlight how the funding corresponds to the educational preferences of numerous UK families who wish for their children to get an education that aligns with their religious convictions, and the societal advantages that are strengthened by government support to these organisations, which include the promotion of religious freedom, diversity, and social cohesiveness. Furthermore, that faith schools frequently have better academic outcomes and a crucial impact on pupils' development of religious and ethical principles. The essay will also put forward and refute a series of critics' arguments, thereby supporting the rationality of the government's financial support for faith schools.

2. Support for Educational Needs in Faith Schools

My first argument is that in the UK, many families' preferences are for their children to receive education in schools that align with their religious beliefs; hence, the government should support these schools to meet parents' wishes and educational needs. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021),

approximately two-thirds of the UK population self-identify as religious to some degree. As such, it is evident that religious belief is a prevalent social factor in the UK. It is important to cater to the pedagogical needs of different religious groups and make sure they are included and integrated into society. Research has indicated that parents, especially those with Christian roots, express apprehension regarding the calibre and ethical compatibility of education provided in non-religious public schools, and state that it frequently falls short of their religious and moral criteria (Stride, 2022). Ameen and Hassan (2013) argue that a range of educational options should be available in society. The government's endorsement of faith schools is primarily based on the ideals of upholding the rights of religious communities and safeguarding religious freedom. This statement recognises the crucial significance of faith in both the personal lives of individuals and the overall existence of society, therefore supporting the principles of religious freedom and diversity. Above all else, this support caters to the educational requirements of diverse faith communities, fostering an all-encompassing society. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) show their dedication to religious diversity and endorsement of different religious communities by offering financial assistance to faith schools.

According to Arthur (2009), regarding support for religious schools, government actions must give priority to the perspectives and needs of parents and children and acknowledge the equal rights of all minority groups, especially religious communities, in the realm of education. Pecenka and Anthias (2015) contend that all religious organisations should be granted equitable political and legal entitlements to create and provide financial backing to religious schools. The allocation of government funds to religious schools demonstrates a dedication to upholding religious freedoms and advancing humanistic values. This support not only strengthens the social identities of religious groups but also addresses their educational requirements, thereby promoting their integration into wider society and cultivating social harmony.

However, there are still individuals who maintain a sceptical stance. Faith schools' detractors contend that even though numerous families' preferences are for their children to receive an education aligned with their religious convictions, the government should not

necessarily provide financial assistance to religious schools. For example, Ammerman (2003) argues that religious acts are not confined solely to religious organisations but can also occur elsewhere within communities or other cultural contexts, which demonstrates religion's flexibility. As such, other establishments can offer religious services, therefore, faith schools are not the sole location in which students can participate in religious activities. In addition, faith schools allocate most of their pupil-interaction time to academic education, not religious practice. Thus, satisfying students' desire for religious fulfilment does not require them to attend faith schools. Considering the circumstances, that providing public funds to religious schools may be perceived as redundant because similar services are already available elsewhere, the justification for government funding to facilitate the expansion of religious schools becomes less persuasive and warrants re-evaluation. As such, it could be argued that funding for faith schools is an inefficient allocation of resources that could be better utilised for secular educational projects which benefit a wider range of people. Furthermore, is it thus advisable for government policy to give priority to educational funding in a manner that promotes inclusivity and caters to the varied requirements of all students, rather than providing direct financial assistance exclusively to certain religious educations?

However, the above argument neglects to acknowledge the fact that religious belief is an everyday practice, with many ceremonies, rules and rituals to observe. Although students can indeed participate in religious activities elsewhere, such as with their families outside of schooltime, this does not mean that they do not need a religious environment that caters to their needs during schooltime – especially considering that this constitutes a significant proportion of the day. Faith schools have a distinct function in fostering students' religious consciousness and encouraging religious observance. This is because faith formation activities are integral to children's holistic faith development, rather than being merely supplementary religious experiences (Kristeno et al., 2023). As such, faith schools offer a distinctive setting which combines academic and religious education to foster the development of views in a structured manner and facilitate the integration of religious

convictions into daily life. Furthermore, religious schools offer a consistent and everyday religious education that surpasses the sporadic religious services provided by other institutions. Arguments opposing government sponsorship of religious schools also fail to acknowledge the significance and distinctiveness of religious education across different households. It has been acknowledged that religious schools offer pupils a unique educational setting that integrates both religious and academic instruction (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007). Hence, the government must consider the particularity of this requirement while deliberating educational funding to guarantee the fulfilment of the demands of every student.

3. Societal Benefits and Challenges of Faith School Funding

My second argument in favour of the allocation of government funds towards the advancement of faith schools is based on societal benefits. Jackson (2003) argues that providing government support to faith schools can enhance social cohesiveness and facilitate the integration of religious communities into society. Faith schools frequently endeavour to establish an atmosphere that values various religious affiliations, thus promoting social unity and reciprocal comprehension among students from a range of backgrounds (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007). From this standpoint, the impact of government assistance in augmenting the contribution of religious schools to society is considerable. Through providing financial support to these institutions, the government acknowledges and benefits from the distinct principles and teachings that religious education can instil, which potentially promotes a society that is more inclusive and morally conscious. This assistance might be interpreted as an embodiment of humanism in that it advocates for the holistic growth of individuals in a spiritually abundant setting (Conroy & Gallagher, 2009).

However, some individuals still hold the view that not only do faith schools fail to foster social cohesion, but they also actually contribute to societal division (Conroy & Gallagher, 2009). Critics maintain that the admissions policies of faith schools, which place a higher priority on religious identity than geographic proximity, inherently foster division and impede social integration (Dwyer & Parutis, 2012). Hence,

critics contend that admissions policies, such as those found in faith schools, hinder sufficient interaction among students from diverse backgrounds. They argue that these policies, along with the teaching methods employed, strengthen individual religious beliefs, potentially fostering ignorance and animosity towards other cultures, thereby undermining community cohesion (Ameen & Hassan, 2013).

Nevertheless, a critical analysis is necessary to evaluate the idea that faith schools, through their emphasis on religious identity in their admissions processes, might contribute to social differences, this statement somewhat disregards the involvement of religious organisations in society. Religious communities are not homogenous and isolated from broader social contacts, and religious groupings have significant relationships with the social structure (Schnabel & Hjerm, 2014). Faith schools often strive to foster community cohesiveness and develop cross-cultural understanding. They achieve this by actively engaging in activities such as honouring festivals from many cultures and educating students about different religions (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007). Hence, faith schools serve as a medium for the exchange and engagement between religious communities and the broader society. While religious identity may receive greater emphasis during enrollment, this will not diminish the bond between religious groups and society. The government offers financial assistance to faith schools, which facilitates the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural exchange activities inside these schools, thereby fostering societal cohesion.

4. Quality Education at Religious Schools and the Legitimacy of Government Support

My third argument in support of the government's endorsement of religious schools is that they offer a higher standard of education and achieve better academic results. Based on reported data, faith schools, specifically Roman Catholic and Church of England schools, demonstrate superior performance in fostering students' academic advancement compared to non-faith schools (Democratic Audit, 2016). Additionally, faith schools exhibit higher average scores than non-faith schools, students with special educational needs (SEN) who attend faith schools demonstrate higher academic performance in Key Stage 2 compared to SEN students in non-faith schools (Yeshanew

et al., 2008). It is also worth noting that most faith schools have been evaluated as having commendable quality in teaching and learning, with the inspections conducted in 1999 and 2000, almost 66% of Church of England school programmes, nearly 66% of Roman Catholic school programmes, and over 60% of other school programmes were assessed as being of good quality (Jackson, 2003). Hence, the government's provision of financial assistance to faith schools serves as a recognition and endorsement of these institutions' commendable educational standards, thereby fostering an environment conducive to their ongoing and robust growth.

Nevertheless, critics argue that because faith schools have typically existed for a longer time than non-religious institutions, they have accumulated additional funding and donations, notoriety, and are often situated in prosperous regions. Consequently, they are able to attract students of superior academic quality and this benefit is not inherently associated with students' religious orientation. Hence, faith schools' detractors recommended that the government display greater dedication to enhancing the overall quality of state schools and fund only their academic, not religious, components. However, it is important to note that faith schools recruit high-achieving students not only because of their historical, cultural, or regional factors but also their religious nature as well, as described by Burnford (2018). Furthermore, faith schools' religious ethos, which emphasises moral and ethical teachings, creates an environment conducive to fostering personal discipline and drive. Such an environment is likely to improve academic outcomes because students are often more focused and engaged in their studies within structured settings that align with their values and beliefs. Hence, it is justifiable to provide public financing to support schools affiliated with religious beliefs. Government assistance not only aids in the preservation and enhancement of the educational standards of these schools but also guarantees the peaceful coexistence of religious convictions and academic endeavours, thereby attracting a greater number of exceptional students and elevating overall educational benchmarks.

5. Conclusion

Government support for faith schools is justified. They fulfil government educational criteria and

improve education by meeting the needs of the religious community. Faith schools foster social cohesion and cooperation by promoting religious diversity and religious liberty in education. Their curriculum, established according to government requirements, fosters academic excellence and meets varied educational demands. Faith schools also help religious communities form social identities, which emphasises their value in pluralistic societies. Thus, funding religious schools is crucial to creating a varied and inclusive society, increasing social cohesion, and improving academic performance. This strategic investment benefits religious communities, education and society.

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