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Faith Schools, Community Engagement and Social Cohesion: A Rural Perspective

Abstract

Much of the debate surrounding the impact of faith schools on wider society has focused on the extent to which they promote social cohesion in urban communities. Yet, much of the faith-based sector in both England and Wales actually consists of small, rural, Anglican primary schools. This article takes a closer look at these schools to further investigate their influence on social cohesion and community relations, as well as wider questions concerning the significance of religion for contemporary rural life. With reference to an in-depth case study comparison of two Anglican primary schools in western England and southern Wales, the article draws on qualitative data from staff, pupils, parents and local villagers to explore different approaches to community engagement and their consequences for social cohesion. In so doing, the article makes important contributions to the literatures on faith-based schooling, rural education, social cohesion, and religion in rural contexts.

Key Words: community, education, faith schools, religion, rural, social cohesion

Introduction

Faith-based education has long been a controversial issue in Britain, as in many other countries¹, and over the last few decades, questions have been raised about the impact of state-funded faith schools on social cohesion. Whilst proponents view faith schools as a way to provide for the religious needs of families and involve minority groups within the wider system, opponents argue they are socially divisive, encouraging separation of religious and ethnic groups and exacerbating existing patterns of residential segregation (Jackson 2003, King 2010). In England, the relatively recent expansion of the faith-based sector to include minority faiths such as Islamic, Sikh, and Hindu schools, has further fuelled concerns about the impact of faith schools on community relations. Whilst these debates and associated research studies tend to focus primarily on urban, multicultural localities (e.g. Allen and West 2009, Butler and Hamnett 2012, Hemming 2011), much of the faith-based sector in both England and Wales² actually consists of small, rural, Anglican primary schools.

According to government figures for 2016, of the 4152 primary schools in England designated as 'rural', around 55% of them were faith schools, compared with 37% of English primary schools as a whole. In Wales, figures for 2015 show that around 12% of the 649 primary schools in rural areas are faith schools, similar to the proportion of faith-based primary schools in Wales as a whole. In both contexts, the vast majority of these schools have an Anglican character (Church of England or Church in Wales). Rural Anglican schools feature much less prominently in public and scholarly debates about faith-based education, but given the many

challenges facing contemporary rural communities, such as the closure of services and the changing nature of village demographics, the impact of rural church schools for social cohesion is a topic that warrants further investigation.

The lack of interest in rural faith-based education is perhaps reflective of a wider dearth of research on the nature and significance of religion in contemporary rural life. Jones and Heley (2016) point to the emergence of an extensive literature on 'post-secularism³' in urban contexts, which documents some of the ways that religion is playing a role in civil society, such as the shared provision of urban welfare and outreach services by public secular and voluntary faith-based organisations (e.g. Beaumont and Baker 2011). However, they argue that an equivalent body of work on rural contexts has not yet taken shape. Any investigation of rural church schools must therefore take place within a wider consideration of the changing religious character of rural communities.

This article takes a closer look at rural church schools and the role they play in their local communities. It aims to further investigate, firstly, the influence of rural faith schools on social cohesion and community relations, and secondly, the significance of religion for contemporary rural life. With reference to a case study comparison of two Anglican primary schools located in western England and southern Wales, the article draws on qualitative data from school staff, pupils, parents and local villagers. The analysis explores the dynamics of engagement between the two schools and their communities, and the varying consequences for social cohesion, particularly through the bonding and bridging of social capital. In

so doing, the article makes important contributions to the literatures on faith-based schooling, rural education, social cohesion, and religion in rural contexts.

Social Cohesion and Contemporary Rural Life

Social cohesion is a contested term but Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2129) offer a useful account of how the concept has been employed in policy debates, particularly in relation to neighbourhoods and communities. They argue that social cohesion encompasses five elements, including: 'common values and a civic culture', 'social order and social control', 'social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities', 'social networks and social capital' and 'place attachment and identity'. As such, their definition encompasses aspects such as social interaction between groups, respect for difference, absence of conflict, and civility towards others. Berger-Schmitt (2002) identifies two distinct dimensions of social cohesion. The first is the 'inequality' dimension and is concerned with promoting equal opportunities and reducing societal disparities and divisions. The second is the 'social capital' dimension and relates to the strengthening of social relations, ties and interactions between individuals and groups. Putnam (2000: 18-19) has argued that "the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value", and in both of the above definitions, social capital emerges as a significant factor in the shaping of cohesive communities through the development and maintenance of social networks within and between groups.

A distinction is often made between 'bonding social capital', which refers to the development of good community relations *within* particular social groups, and

'bridging social capital', which involves the building of networks *between* different groups (Putnam 2000). Both of these forms of social capital can be considered important for facilitating social cohesion and community wellbeing (Brown and Shaft 2011). Whilst bonding social capital can often be fostered through collective participation in community practices, events, organisations and networks, inter-group contact and encounters are typically viewed as an important way to bridge social capital (Hemming 2015, Sørensen 2016). The conditions for ensuring that such encounters are 'meaningful' are most likely to be present in the context of specific community spaces and sites of cultural exchange, such as schools and community centres (Amin 2002).

Rural areas are often associated with higher levels of social cohesion than urban areas, reflecting theorists such as Tönnies (1887/1957) and his classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (close-knit rural communities with high levels of social involvement) and *Gesellschaft* (urban communities with weaker social ties and lower participation). However, recent research in Denmark has found that whilst bonding social capital can be significantly higher in rural areas, bridging social capital can be marginally higher in urban areas (Sørensen 2016). Despite these findings, the overwhelming majority of studies on social cohesion have focused on urban contexts, with the city typically construed as the principal space for meaningful contact between different social groups, particularly inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations (Laurier and Philo 2006, Phillips 2006). Yet, questions of social cohesion also need to be explored in rural contexts, including those concerned with ethnicity and religion (e.g. Chakraborti and Garland 2004), but also other

dimensions of difference such as social class (e.g. Salamon 2003), age (e.g. Panelli et al. 2002) and sexuality (e.g. Little 2003).

Social cohesion in the countryside has become an increasingly pertinent issue in light of the many challenges facing contemporary rural communities. The rise of neoliberal policies and economics that promote private enterprise and marketisation over government involvement and support have often led to reductions in rural infrastructure and the closure of services and amenities, such as shops, pubs, and post offices. In addition, village communities face other challenges such as the inwards migration of affluent families from urban areas, the outwards migration of younger people, an ageing demographic, and an increasingly mobile and commuting populace (Woods 2011). All of these processes are likely to impact on rural communities in different ways, changing the social makeup and dynamics of villages with implications for social cohesion and community relations. However, many of these changes have not gone without contestation from rural communities, with campaigns to save rural services often helping to bring community members closer together, galvanising them into a stronger sense of collective identity and purpose (Woods 2006).

Schooling in Rural Communities

Schools can be viewed as important community spaces with the potential to influence social cohesion (Amin 2002), but academic work on rural schools in general has been rather limited to date. In a review of research on small rural schools in England by Hargreaves (2009), the relationship between schools and

their wider communities was identified as a key under-researched area, although there have since been a number of more recent studies published on this theme. The topic is of considerable interest given that rural schools have long been viewed as focal points for village life, reaching far beyond their official function as educational institutions. It is suggested that rural schools may play an important role in hosting community events, bringing parents together at the school gates, forging community networks through school friendships, linking generations through decades of family attendance, and symbolising the youthful vibrancy of a village community (Woods 2006).

In the context of recent pressures on rural services and infrastructure, and associated community resistance, the status of rural schools has become highly politicised, leading to the introduction of government policies aimed at slowing the rate of their decline. Both England and Wales have introduced a 'presumption against closure' for small rural schools at different times over the last two decades (BBC News 2017, Hargreaves 2009). Attempted closures of rural schools can often produce concerted local opposition, as highlighted in research from New Zealand by Kearns et al. (2009). Participants in their research cited a range of reasons for why the schools in question were highly valued in their local communities. These included their role in promoting community spirit through running events and providing a focal point for contact between local people, their ability to bring together members of younger and older generations, and the distinctive educational experience that a small and friendly school environment could offer.

However, the relationship between rural schools and their village communities depends on much more than physical presence. Bagley and Hillyard (2011, 2014) highlight how rural schools can differ in their approaches to community engagement based on their specific circumstances and policies. One of the schools they looked at was physically located at the centre of its village, had a reputation as high-performing and possessed newly built hall facilities, but was still unable to build a productive relationship with the surrounding community. This was due to a transitory school staff that had little knowledge or understanding of the village community, a school intake that drew predominantly from families that were new to the village and had no longstanding stake in the school or community, and policies that discouraged villagers from coming in to the school and using its facilities. In contrast, another school the authors examined was located on the outskirts of its village in a new building but was much more successful in developing positive relations with the surrounding community due to its cultural and symbolic importance. The school maintained a welcoming environment with an 'open door' policy and the majority of its pupils came from families living in the village, most of whom had longstanding connections to the community. As such, despite its more peripheral physical location, the school benefitted from a much stronger and sustained relationship between well-established staff and families in the village, all of whom had a strong stake in the success of the school.

Faith Schools, Religion and the Countryside

The studies reviewed above focus on rural schools in general, rather than faith schools in particular, and religious character is not usually identified as an issue

for investigation. Yet, research in urban contexts has shown that faith schools have the potential to play distinctive roles in their local communities (e.g. Breen 2009, Hemming 2015). In addition to developing an ethos that actively promotes Christian values, all Anglican schools in England and Wales are expected to participate in the wider community and contribute to the 'common good' (Church in Wales 2017, Church of England 2017). Moreover, rural faith schools often find themselves in rather different circumstances to some of their urban counterparts, if they are the only school present in their local village or they are experiencing falling pupil numbers. Schools may need to strike a difficult balance between promoting a religious ethos and catering for a diverse pupil intake, in the context of changing village demographics and limited parental choice (Burgess et al. 2011). This might mean adopting an admissions policy⁴ that makes the school more accessible to all families from the village community, as well as those wishing to commute in from further afield.

The unique position of rural faith schools owes much to the historical role of the churches⁵ in the development of mass education in England and Wales throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Bartlett and Burton 2016). Most Anglican schools were originally set up in partnership with their parish churches in order to provide education to all children of the local parish. As such, they had a very different founding mission to those faith schools later established to provide for particular minority faith communities, such as Roman Catholic and Islamic schools (Flint 2007). Church schools in England and Wales have always been quite similar in terms of their organising principles, reflecting the close links between the two education systems prior to Welsh devolution in 1999. However, there are some

contextual differences to note, including the contrasting status of the Church of England and the Church in Wales⁶, the existence of Welsh-medium schools as a key component of the educational landscape in Wales⁷, and the relatively recent introduction of faith-based Academies and Free Schools in England⁸.

The presence of faith schools in the countryside is reflective of the longstanding association between religion and rural spaces, with parish churches featuring significantly in images of the 'rural idyll' and typically characterised as the physical centrepiece of rural villages (Walker 2002). Christianity and church attendance were historically viewed as a quintessential part of traditional village life (e.g. see Rapport 1993), with the parish priest playing an important role in supporting the community and promoting social cohesion (Bowden 1994, Davies et al. 1991). However, in recent decades, religion in the countryside has experienced a change in fortunes, with a steep decline in rural church attendance, the closure of church buildings and the merging of parishes (Jones & Heley 2016). The churches now compete with alternative manifestations of spirituality and the sacred, many of which find expression through rural landscapes and environments (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead 2003, Holloway 2003).

Despite the above developments, religion continues to provide a resource for contemporary rural communities. Churches and chapels reportedly serve multiple functions such as hosting organisations, charity events, concerts and cultural activities (Cooper 2004) and the closure of church buildings can provoke significant community resistance (e.g. see Jones & Heley 2016). In the context of the various challenges facing rural communities, such as reductions in services and

changing demographics, religion may have the potential to make an important contribution to social cohesion and the development of social capital, but this issue has so far been underexplored in the literature. What role do rural church schools play in this emerging religious landscape? How do they impact upon social cohesion and community relations in rural contexts? What implications does this have for wider understandings of rural religion?

Two Villages and Two Schools

‘Woodington’⁹ is a medium sized village with a population of around 1200 people. It is located in a rural area of western England, around eight miles away from the nearest urban settlement. Features of the village include a historical monument, two community centres (hosting a range of services, groups and events), Anglican church, congregational chapel, doctor’s surgery, pub, hotel and youth hostel. The socio-economic profile of the village is predominantly white, but varies according to age and income, with younger families more likely to fall into the higher income group. The school in Woodington is a Church of England Voluntary Aided¹⁰ primary and has served the village for over 140 years, going through a number of structural changes during this time. The school could be described as ‘small’ with fewer than 150 pupils on roll, divided into five classes, and has been identified as high-performing, achieving an ‘outstanding’ grade in its last Ofsted inspection¹¹. As a voluntary aided school, the governors have chosen not to include religion on the school’s admissions criteria. The school’s pupil intake consists of local residents mainly from higher socio-economic groups (around 65%) and a proportion

commuting from villages and towns more than two miles away with a more mixed social class composition (around 35%).

'Fringefield' is a small village with a population of around 400 people. It is located in a rural area of southern Wales, around two miles from the edge of a large urban area. The village is split in two by the presence of a main road that connects Fringefield and other villages with the nearby urban area, making it attractive to commuters. Features of the village include two churches and a church hall (hosting a number of clubs and events), but otherwise it is mainly in residential use. The socio-economic profile of the village is mostly white and middle-class, consisting of older working professionals and retired people with a handful of younger families. The school in Fringefield is a Church in Wales Voluntary Controlled¹² primary and has served the village for around 160 years. It consists of two buildings – the old village school and a second more modern building housing the majority of the school's facilities. Fringefield school could also be described as 'small' with fewer than 150 pupils on roll, divided into four classes. It has been identified as high-performing, achieving a 'good' in its last Estyn inspection¹³. The school does not include religion on its admissions criteria, in accordance with the local education authority's policies. The majority of the pupil intake (around 80%) commute in from a working-class suburb of the nearby urban area by car or school minibus, although a small number come from more affluent families from the surrounding village (around 20%).

The two villages described above provided useful comparative case studies for a research study that aimed to investigate the role that rural Anglican schools play in

their local communities. Fieldwork took place during the autumn term of 2014, for approximately 12 weeks in each school and village community, for at least one day a week. The project employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with senior staff members (2 for each school) and local villagers (4-5 for each school), focus groups with parents (with 3-5 members for each school), and paired interviews with pupils conducted away from the classroom (23-24 for each school)¹⁴. Children also took part in mapping and collaging activities, although data from these methods is reported elsewhere (Hemming 2017, Hemming and Roberts 2017).

In both schools, the focus of the research was with pupils from Years 5 and 6 (aged 9-11). The pupil sample was predominantly white in both schools, with a mix of mostly Christian and non-religious affiliations. All interview and focus group data were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using Nvivo software. Quotations from participants are identified with pseudonyms, role, self-identified religion and other relevant markers. Procedures were put in place to ensure informed consent from all participants for data collection, including children, in line with the requirements of the university ethics committee. The above methods were also supplemented by a qualitative documentary analysis of SIAMS or Gwella reports¹⁵ for other Anglican schools in the surrounding district or local education authority, encompassing approximately 20 schools in both cases, many of which shared similar rural characteristics to the case-study schools.

School-Community Engagement in Woodington

Community life in Woodington took place against a backdrop of challenges facing the village. Like in many contemporary rural settlements, village residents had experienced a decline in the availability of local amenities such as shops and pubs, many of which had recently closed down. There were also some concerns about the lack of facilities for young people. It was felt that increasing levels of property speculating could result in a weaker sense of community in Woodington due to rising house prices and a more transient population.

When I first came here there was a lot more in the village than there is now. There were shops and there were a couple of pubs and, you know, there were meeting places really. Gradually over the years that's gone - you know, dwindled to - to just the one pub now, and there are very few places, you know, that the community - you would call community meeting places really.

(Anne, Deputy Head, Female, Roman Catholic)

JOHNNY (Pupil, Male, Age 10, No Religion):

There's not much shops and stuff.

PICASSO: (Pupil, Male, Age 10, No Religion):

Yeah, we definitely need like a shop.

Despite the above challenges, there was nevertheless a strong sense of community life in the village. Participants identified a wide range of clubs and events such as yoga and salsa classes, coffee mornings, craft fairs, concerts and seasonal

festivities. Many of these were run in the two community centres - the pavilion and the assembly rooms. The success of these activities had been further facilitated by a recent collective effort to refurbish the assembly rooms. The historical monument, the annual carnival and the traditional Whitsun 'bread and cheese throwing festival' were described as important for the identity of the village and bringing the community together. The chapel and the church also provided hubs for the community.

There's the assembly rooms which is a social centre which has lots of events on. We got a garden society. [...] There are quite a lot of societies really. And – and the main social event is the carnival once a year, which is in June [...]. But there are quite a lot of social events, fundraising events, to keep the assembly rooms going. And we've also got the pavilion. So there are lots of things going on [...] There's a small community who regularly worship [at the church]. [...] It's still regarded by the community as a place that they go to for a funeral, for a wedding, things like that. (Matthew, Villager, Male, Anglican)

Because many of the children at Woodington school lived in the village or in surrounding villages, some were already involved in community events through their families. Pupils mentioned numerous activities they were engaged with outside of the school premises. These included helping at community clubs, participating in carnival activities and village fundraisers, and visiting the historical monument for sports activities.

MILLIE (Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion):

There was bread and cheese throwing.

LAUREN (Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion):

I did that. I've been – cos we're on the committee – my Mum is – I do everything down there that's done to the Pavilion. [...] I've done discos, Christmas meals, New Year's Eve, carnivals down there.

The school also took a proactive approach to engaging with the local community, mainly by contributing to existing events in the village and hence the bonding of social capital. This included supporting the annual carnival and other charity events, as well as making use of village attractions such as the historical monument. Participants reported that there were strong formal links with the local Anglican church. Festivals such as Harvest, Christingle, Easter and leavers' service would take place there. Children would attend the church with their teachers and parents, and members of the community were invited along to join in with the services.

There are other ways of linking with the community. We take part in the summer fayre, carnival, and this often means that more families come to the event. (Tom, Head Teacher, Male, Anglican)

There's always been very close ties with the village church. [...] In a sense they're a little bit synergistic because the – you know – the people from the church get involved with the school to help, and people in the school will hold, you know, the Easter service, the Christmas service, all those kind of things at the church. (Gareth, Villager, Male, Christian)

Staff members felt there was less need to use the school grounds for village events as there were already a number of existing community hubs that enabled school participation in community life. However, school facilities could be hired out for private events or classes and the parish council had previously utilised the hall for meetings. There were also examples of villagers that came into school in order to hear children read.

There've been times when the school has been used by the community. It was used by the parish council for a meeting place for quite a long time when they didn't have anywhere big enough and - you know. It's used in the evenings, sometimes people will hire it out. There's a lady who does - was doing this set of Zumba classes and she came and used the school for a while. (Anne, Deputy Head, Female, Roman Catholic)

Despite the positive contribution that the school made to the bonding of social capital in the community, there were nevertheless a few concerns about its impact on traffic, parking and the character of the village. As a consequence of the school's popularity, around 35% of its pupils were commuting in from at least two miles away. The resultant influx of traffic was sparking some irritation with village residents due to the disruption caused by parking and congestion, particularly at the beginning and end of the school day. There was also some concern that those families moving in to the village in order to gain access to the school might prove to be less involved in the community than longstanding residents.

People who drive from another village into the school - I don't know if you've seen the parking issues that we've got outside school - I think that causes some problems within the community. (Patricia, Parent, Female, Anglican)

While village life in Woodington was relatively healthy in terms of community events, there nevertheless existed a certain degree of tension amongst village residents. According to interviewees, there were social divisions present based on home location, social class, age and length of time living in the village. Different groups tended to cluster around different community buildings, with the assembly rooms perceived as more middle-class than the pavilion. Another divide existed between the Anglican parish church, which was associated with middle-class newcomers, and the congregational chapel, which catered for the older, more established members of the village with more working-class backgrounds¹⁶. Historically, there had been some disagreements between the two congregations, especially before the current vicar and minister had arrived.

LINDSAY (Parent, Female, Anglican):

Well there's this side of the crossroads and there's that side of the crossroads. There's a chapel and a church. There's one village hall and another village hall.

PATRICIA (Parent, Female, Anglican):

There are divisions I would say – divisions within.

You do get that kind of fragmentation whereby there's a slight perception that perhaps the chapel is for villagers and the – the parish church is for

incomers. [...] And probably a kind of – a class social division as well that this would be – parish church more middle-class and the chapel more working-class, perhaps. (Simon, Chapel Minister, Male, Christian)

One of the ways that the school had the opportunity to help overcome some of these divides was through its admissions policy. The governors had decided to continue prioritising local village membership rather than adherence to the Christian faith, enabling it to cater for a variety of pupils, including those from different segments of the community, and those from families with no religion.

Because our trustees says it's for the – to educate the children of the village, we felt we couldn't say priority is given to people because of [their faith].

(Matthew, Villager, Male, Anglican)

Another way the school helped to bridge social capital was through the mere presence of children and the vibrancy that this was said to bring to the village. Participants reported that that the sound of schools bells and children playing nearby was particularly appreciated amongst many elderly residents. The popularity of the school helped to ensure a mixed demographic profile in an otherwise ageing community, including through its ability to attract new families to Woodington in order to gain access to the school. As such, it was felt that the school helped to promote positive intergenerational relations in the village.

This is the sort of community where grandparents often don't live that far away, and will come up and collect children and be – and be part of it.

(Charlie, Male, Vicar, Christian)

A few of the interviewees believed that the church benefitted from the school holding services and events there, through increasing the number of church attendees. Participants noted that their associated congregations were overwhelmingly elderly and so the additional presence of children and parents could foster good relations between the old and the young. The head teacher felt that the school's involvement in wider village events could have a similar effect in helping to facilitate inter-generational involvement.

At the Easter service at – at the church there'll be a lot of parents in there, you know, with - for the service, who wouldn't normally be there. So – so I think it is – there's probably a big help there just in terms of fostering community across these different groups. (Gareth, Villager, Male, Christian)

The school had also been developing a relationship with the congregational chapel, following the head teacher's appointment around the same time as a new minister at the chapel and a new vicar at the parish church. The chapel congregation had been permitted to use the school hall for a short time following a fire in their own building and this had led to a stronger relationship between the chapel, the school and the parish church, despite their previously fraught relationship. Members of the two congregations now co-organised events at the school, such as weekly 'Open the Book' assemblies where pupils acted out Bible stories (see Bible Society

2017), as well as occasional ecumenical services aimed at engaging with parents and villagers who did not usually attend church or chapel. These joint projects had improved relations between the two Christian communities, again illustrating the school's role in bridging social capital in the village.

When I arrived at the school, there had been quite a lot of division between the church and the chapel, but a change in personnel at the church, chapel and the school gave the opportunity to start again with a clean sheet. [...]
There has now been a move towards joint worship taking place in the school hall. Basically it's seen as neutral territory for two communities that didn't used to get on very well. (Tom, Head Teacher, Male, Anglican)

School-Community Engagement in Fringefield

In Fringefield, there were again concerns expressed about the dwindling number of services available in the village. The churches, village hall and school were the only community buildings remaining, as all the shops and other amenities had closed but there were questions about the long-term viability of the village hall despite efforts to keep it open. There was a perception that the village character and identity had changed over time and was in danger of being lost. This was partly attributed to its small size and its location on a main road into the nearby urban area, encouraging a view of Fringefield as a commuter village.

The village is quite unusual in that you've got – you've got the [main road] running through the middle of it. And years ago it was very much a village community. It's moved more – it's more of a commuter village now. (Luke, Vicar, Male, Anglican)

Despite the above concerns, there were nevertheless a small number of activities or events taking place in the village. Fringefield's village hall provided a home for music events, a book club, a supper club, a ladies club and an investors club. Villagers also occasionally organised coach trips, in addition to events such as summer garden parties. However, attendance at these events had tended to dwindle over time. Many of the activities were associated with the parish church, such as Christmas and summer fairs and even an annual produce event. However, these had also suffered from a reduction in numbers and some had been discontinued as a consequence. The church played a traditional role in the village in terms of hosting weddings, funerals and christenings.

We have a summer fair. Again that is concentrated with the church, and it's to raise money for the church. And that happens once a year. We also have events around Christmas time, which is like a Christmas Fair, or we have a community Christmas carol service. (Sion, Villager, Male, Christian)

They have a summer party for the villagers. There's a barbeque and a live band and stuff. [...] There is a book club, and so there's quite a lot of ladies involved in the book club. And the men have an investors' club. (Sophie, Villager, Female, Religion Not Given)

The social dynamics of the village were heavily influenced by its demographic profile. As outlined earlier, residents of the village were mainly elderly and middle-class with only small pockets of less affluent people. The resultant high house prices could prevent younger families and those from lower income backgrounds from moving into the village. A proposed new housing development on the edge of the village had led to concerns from some residents about the perceived negative impact this might have on the social ethos of the village, although others were more optimistic that this could help to revitalise the community by drawing in younger families.

The majority of people are either retired from well-paid jobs, or they're currently in well-paid jobs. [...] Middle-class generally. And upwards. Some sort of landowning folk still around. [...] People living in the village, they've got their gated properties [...] and they're quite happy with [...] their house prices as they are." (Luke, Vicar, Male, Anglican)

In contrast to Woodington, the school in Fringefield was much less embedded in the surrounding village and hence had fewer opportunities to contribute to the bonding of social capital in the local community. The majority of the school's pupil intake now consisted of families commuting in from a working-class suburb of the nearby urban area, rather than residents of the village, as had been the case in the past. Most children at Fringefield school therefore had limited knowledge about, and participation in, village life. The engagement that they did have tended to be focused around activities connected to the school curriculum, such as geography

surveys, or activities designed to build school-community links such as leafleting or collecting litter.

The only time that we've ever really went to the villagers, or the people who live in the village, there's only some of us go on a ramble – some sort of tour.
(Eric, Pupil, Male, Age 10, Unsure of Religion)

When it's coffee morning we go round posting letters, like, when we do something special to like people. (Nicki, Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian)

Despite this disconnect between the school and village communities, the school nevertheless made quite a lot of effort to engage with local residents. The main way it did this was through its formal association with the parish church. Participants frequently mentioned the links between the school and the church, which included monthly joint services at the church on Sundays and during events such as Remembrance Day, as well as weekly visits from the vicar to lead assemblies. The church was also able to facilitate some contact between the school and the wider community, given its central role in village life. This approach was considered reflective of shared values between the church and school and a joint mission to better engage with the village community.

ZOE (Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian):

There was a church service I think every fortnight. And if we...

AMELIA (Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian):

And - it's the first Sunday of every month.

ZOE:

The first Sunday of every month. And we go like [with school].

The church is looking at meeting community needs. The school is looking at becoming more community-orientated and more of a community school feel.

And yeah I think we can work together on that really. (Luke, Vicar, Male, Anglican)

The strong relationship between the church and school therefore acted as a springboard to organise joint events for the village. These included services at various times of the year, fundraising events for the school, charity coffee mornings, prayer events, seasonal fairs and music concerts, with many of these taking place in the school building. These events had the potential to bond social capital in a village that suffered somewhat from a lack of community life, as well as bridge social capital between members of the different school and village communities. Unfortunately, they were not always successful at attracting enough people. This was partly because villagers did not want to attend as they had little association with the school, and partly because parents would not want to commute to events outside of school time, as they did not live in the village.

Well last year we did have a – we did do a joint Christmas Fair, with the school and the church as well and the community. [...] But I think some of the other people from the community didn't think it went that particularly well, so they decided this year not to – not to do that with them. And I think they thought that – because people – people coming from outside the area fetch

their children here, they drop them off and go home, they don't have a very good link with the community. (Sion, Villager, Male, Christian)

There was certain amount of frustration and disappointment expressed that many local residents had not reciprocated the effort the school had made to improve relations between the two communities. Although the school was doing all it could to engage with the village, including going out into the streets to deliver leaflets to events and sing carols to the residents, there was a feeling that many of the villagers simply did not want contact with the school. This lack of engagement from many in the village was further exacerbated by the perceived need to support the under-used village hall rather than take advantage of the school hall. However, the school did benefit from a few helpers who came in from the village.

We strive quite hard to try and get them in. So we have a Macmillan coffee morning for example on a Friday. We send invites out for our Christmas concert – when we do our dress rehearsal we invite the community to come in. But it's the same few who come. [...] And we've done things like carol singing around the village and things. It's difficult 'cos you don't know if you're just irritating them more [laughs]. (Darren, Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

The limited success that the school experienced in its attempts to both bridge and bond social capital appeared to be rooted in wider social tensions that existed between the school and the village communities. Put simply, the middle-class residents of the village were unhappy that families from a working-class suburb of the nearby urban area were using their local school. As a consequence, middle-

class parents in Fringefield village often made the decision to avoid it and send their children to alternative institutions, such as independent and Welsh-medium schools. This further exacerbated the divisions between the two communities, resulting in a vicious cycle and hindering the school's attempts to make a positive contribution to village life.

There is also snob factor that we're forgetting [...] They know [suburb name] families come to this school and some of them are snobs and they don't like their kids mixing with [suburb name] kids. (Tracy, Parent, Female, Religion Not Given).

The above tensions were reflected most vividly in attitudes to traffic and parking problems caused by the large number of families commuting in to the school. In contrast to Woodington, this involved a much larger proportion of the school's intake and was occurring in a context where there was less good will present towards the school from the village community. At times, feelings of hostility between the two communities spilled over into disputes when residents asked the commuters not to park in front of their drives.

Certainly it's a talking point a lot over the last couple of years, the increase in traffic. Parents fetching children to school or back. You know – parking sensibly I think, which is always a problem you know. There's been a few issues where people who live in the community have had to go to the school and say look you know there's an issue with blocking my driveway or whatever. (Sion, Villager, Male, Christian)

Despite all of these problems, the presence of the school in Fringefield did nevertheless bring extra youth, vibrancy and movement to an otherwise very quiet and elderly community, something that one of the villagers felt was a real benefit. The joint events organised by the church and school also had the potential to reinvigorate the small and elderly congregation of the church, again promoting intergenerational relations and bridging social capital between these different age groups.

INTERVIEWER:

In your view, do you think the presence of the school adds to the village?

ELSIE (Villager, Female, Anglican):

Oh yes I think it does, yes. Yes I do, yes. [...] I mean it's movement in the village.

I mean there would be no movement in the village otherwise, you know.

Fringefield [has] a small church with a small congregation. [...] The average age is goodness knows what but it's over retirement age I would imagine. [...]

I think they generally feel encouraged seeing children in church as well.

(Darren, Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

Discussion

The above findings have a number of implications for the debates introduced earlier in the article. Firstly, they show that rural church schools do have the potential to promote social cohesion and contribute positively to community

relations. Woodington and Fringefield schools both made efforts to engage with their surrounding villages, resulting in the bonding of social capital (e.g. by involvement in community events and practices) and the bridging of social capital (e.g. by facilitating contact and engagement between different groups in the community). However, this research has shown that rural faith schools can also erode social cohesion in certain circumstances. A good example of this is the disruption to close-knit communities and village character that can stem from commuters and newcomers coming from outside of the local area in order to take advantage of school provision. As such, this study has confirmed the general finding from previous work in urban contexts that faith schools can both promote *and* erode social cohesion, albeit in different ways (e.g. Hemming 2015).

Secondly, the findings challenge the tendency in the literature to view social cohesion solely through the lens of inter-faith and inter-ethnic relations, usually as a result of a preoccupation with urban contexts. Both Woodington and Fringefield schools were facilitating the bridging of social capital in their surrounding communities between different ages and generations, as well as different social class groups, although their success was more varied in this latter case.

Woodington school's role in bringing together two previously divided Christian communities, along with its inclusive admissions policy that enabled entry for local non-religious pupils, also highlights the importance of considering intra-faith and faith/non-faith relations (although see Hemming 2017 for a detailed discussion on the accommodation of non-religious pupils).

Thirdly, the findings offer further confirmation that “school-community relationships are forged within a particular cultural, socio-economic, historical and temporal context” (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014:76) and highlight a number of factors that can help determine how successful rural schools may be in their attempts at community engagement. These include the character of the village in which the school is located, the wider facilities already available to the village, the school’s ability to fulfil a particular community need, the views and perceptions of the school within the village community, and the nature and effect of the school’s pupil intake. Woodington school was perhaps granted an easier task than Fringefield school in this regard because it was able to organise activities and events *with* the community rather than merely *for* the community, as there was already quite an active and vibrant community life evident in Woodington village (see also Bagley and Hillyard 2014). Similarly, Woodington school was trying to bring together different groups that were mostly situated within the same village, rather than split across two different neighbourhoods as in Fringefield, contributing to its greater degree of success.

A common factor shared by both schools in their approaches to community engagement were the strong links with local parish churches, providing them with a means through which to facilitate social cohesion. In Woodington, the school’s relationship with the church (and increasingly the chapel) was part of a wider engagement with the village, helping to promote intergenerational contact. In Fringefield, the local parish church offered the only effective means to reach out to the otherwise indifferent village community, providing at least one space where members of the school and village could meet and mingle. The analysis of SIAMS

and Gwella reports indicated that the development of close links with parish churches, along with participation in local events and charity work, are very common community engagement strategies amongst rural Anglican schools in similar circumstances. Given that this study only focused on rural faith schools, and the general literature on rural schools has very little to say about religion, it is difficult to know the extent to which non-faith village schools might also pursue similar church links. It seems likely that church schools will be particularly well placed in this regard, given their existing formal association with parish churches, but the question is an open one for future research.

The above findings highlight a fourth implication for the literature, specifically concerning the role of religion in contemporary rural life. The churches were continuing to play an important role in both villages through the provision of community space and events, often in partnership with the schools. This was particularly true in Fringefield where the parish church was one of the only remaining community facilities left. Furthermore, the relationships that existed between the two schools and their parish churches had the potential to reinvigorate church congregations to a certain degree, particularly during seasonal religious services when pupils and parents would attend. The churches and chapel also made the most of their school links to create new spaces of evangelism, through involvement in weekly school assemblies, and in the case of Woodington, the development of occasional ecumenical services for non-churchgoers. Whilst these processes do not mirror the formalised provision of shared welfare services in the 'post-secular' city (Beaumont and Baker 2011), they nevertheless demonstrate a continued appreciation of religion as a public utility (Davie 2000),

as well as evidence of both old and new manifestations of religion in rural educational contexts.

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate the role that rural church schools play in their local communities, through an in-depth case study comparison of two Anglican primary schools in western England and southern Wales. The study aimed to make contributions to two main debates, the first of which queries the influence of faith schools on social cohesion. The findings underline the ability of rural faith schools to influence social cohesion and community relations in both positive and negative ways, depending on the school's particular circumstances and policies, and its degree of success at bonding and bridging social capital. They also show the importance of viewing social cohesion as broader than merely inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations to include other dimensions such as age, social class, intra-faith and faith/non-faith relations.

The article also aimed to contribute to a second body of work concerning the wider significance of religion for contemporary rural life. Here, the findings highlight the importance of partnerships between schools and their local churches for community engagement and social cohesion, as well as religious evangelism and renewal. As such, this study heeds the call from Jones and Heley (2016) for more research on religion in the countryside, by demonstrating the continued importance of religion as a public utility for village communities, as well as identifying different ways it can manifest in rural educational contexts. Much more

work is needed on the relationship between religion and the rural, including its various intersections with education. This study represents a modest contribution to this important research agenda.

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Notes

1. For example, see Bugg and Gurran (2011) on Islamic schools in Australia.
2. Education is a devolved matter in the UK, with the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all operating different systems.
3. 'Post-secularism' refers to the increasing public presence of a diversity of religious and belief positions in so-called 'secular' liberal democracies (e.g. see Habermas 2006).
4. Voluntary Aided¹⁰ faith schools (and usually Academies and Free Schools⁸) are permitted to include religion in their admissions criteria, but some do not select pupils on this basis because they are undersubscribed or because they choose not to for other reasons. The majority of Voluntary Controlled¹²

faith schools are prevented from including religion in their pupil admissions criteria by their local authority, although some may do so (Accord Coalition 2011).

5. The Church of England is most frequently cited in this regard (e.g. see Loudon 2012), but the non-conformist churches also played a significant role in the development of mass education in England and Wales. For example, Griffith Jones and his 'Welsh' Circulating Charity Schools are one example of the influence of Methodism on the teaching of literacy and the Welsh language (Pryce 2011).
6. The Church in Wales was disestablished in 1920 due to the large numbers of the Welsh population who identified with non-conformist Christian denominations. However, the Church in Wales is now reasonably similar to an established church, playing a significant role in Welsh civil society (Chambers and Thompson 2005).
7. In 2017, Welsh-medium schools made up approximately 30% of all state maintained schools in Wales. In certain areas of Wales, these schools are often viewed by parents as aspirational and, on average, cater for more affluent families than English medium schools (e.g. see Jones 2017). As such, Welsh-medium schools arguably play a similar role in the educational marketplace as faith schools do in England (e.g. see Allen and West 2011).
8. Academies are independent, state-funded schools, which are run by charitable trusts and sometimes sponsored by other groups (including faith groups). Free schools are independent, state-funded schools, which have been set up by parents, teachers or other organisations (including faith

- groups) to meet local demand. Both types of school receive their funding directly from the Government, rather than a local education authority.
9. Both villages have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.
 10. Voluntary Aided faith schools are expected to raise 10% of their own capital funding costs but enjoy greater autonomy in relation to school governance, admissions and Religious Education. In England, faith-based Foundation schools, Academies and Free schools enjoy similar privileges to Voluntary Aided schools.
 11. Ofsted is the school inspectorate in England. At the time of the fieldwork, Ofsted used a four point scale consisting of outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate.
 12. Voluntary Controlled schools are fully funded by the state, but maintain a distinctive religious ethos and character.
 13. Estyn is the school inspectorate in Wales. At the time of the fieldwork, Estyn used a four point scale consisting of excellent, good, adequate and unsatisfactory.
 14. The analysis is evidenced through reference to specific data quotes from the interviews and focus groups, but the surrounding commentary is informed through knowledge derived from the wider data set, including participant observation.
 15. SIAMS and Gwella inspections are also referred to as Section 48 (England) or Section 50 (Wales) reports respectively and deal exclusively with aspects of school life linked to the religious remit of the school, including character and ethos, collective worship, religious leadership and, in the case of Voluntary Aided schools, Religious Education.

16. This distinction between the church and the chapel is reflective of the historical association between Anglicanism and upper class authority, and non-conformism and social reformists (Bowden 1994, Rapport 1993).

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