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The relationship between attending a Jewish secondary school and one's beliefs and identity in adult life

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Abstract

Faith schools remain a topic of debate in contemporary Britain. In 2019, faith schools accounted for 34% of state-funded mainstream schools. Faith schools differ from other state-funded mainstream schools in many ways. For example, they have the ability to control the content taught in their Religious Education and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) syllabuses and have control over their admissions arrangements. This project explores the impact Jewish schools can have on one's adult beliefs, through a small-scale study. The study analyses online questionnaire responses from 25 participants aged 19-27. All participants in the sample attended the same Jewish secondary school in London, referred to as 'School A'. The responses show that Jewish secondary schools can have a significant effect on one's adult beliefs, due to the ways in which they teach pupils about different religions, political ideologies and sexuality. This was found to be mainly due to the perceived exclusion of other religious beliefs and opinions. Despite this, most of the participants still felt able to express themselves and their beliefs. Moreover, the study's participants felt that their adult beliefs were more significantly impacted by their family and community, rather than by their school. The study's findings highlight a need to improve the inclusivity of SRE teaching in Jewish schools. This project recommends that further research is conducted on the impact of attending a Jewish secondary school on an individual's beliefs in later life, and whether this is also representative of all UK faith schools.

Keywords

Faith schools, Jewish schools, adult beliefs, Religious Education, Sex and Relationships Education

Introduction

A significant percentage of schools in the UK are faith-based. In 2019, ‘there were 6,802 state funded faith schools in England’ making up about 34% of state-funded mainstream schools (Long and Danechi, 2019, p.17). Long and Bolton (2018) define faith-based schools as schools that are characterised by a specific faith. A defining feature of faith schools (non-academies) is that they can control what is taught in their Religious Education (RE) and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) syllabuses. However, the way they teach other subjects must follow the National Curriculum. Moreover, all children have the right to apply to a faith school, irrespective of their religious identity. Lastly, faith academies are not obligated to follow the National Curriculum and have additional freedoms over their admissions process (Gov.UK, n.d). The way certain subjects, especially RE and SRE, are taught within these schools and whether their curricula are diverse, can arguably impact an adult’s views of religion and sexuality (Thompson, 1997). Recent US guidelines for teachers on how to effectively teach these subjects were published by Ott and Stephens in 2017.

Most Jewish schools in England have been funded by the state since 1851 (Ipgrave, 2016). At present, there are 48 Jewish-based state-funded schools in England, representing 0.2% of all English schools (Long and Bolton, 2018). In addition to this, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (2016) found that 1.5% of all faith schools in England were Jewish schools. They also found an increase in the percentage of Jewish pupils attending Jewish schools between the 1970s (‘one in five’) and 2016 (around two-thirds) (Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2016, p.3). This is perhaps due to a rise in the number of Jewish schools available for Jewish pupils to attend. As a result of this, Judaism is the fourth most represented religion within faith schools in England. Most faith-based schools in England are Church of England schools (n = 4,584), Roman Catholic and other Christian faiths (Department for Education, 2018).

Given the debates about the role of, and freedoms afforded to, faith schools, this paper reports on a project devised to address the research question ‘To what extent does attending a Jewish school impact one’s adult beliefs?’

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Literature review

In order to provide context for the research findings, this literature review will address the debate around whether Jewish schools have a place within contemporary society, and how these schools teach subjects like RE and SRE.

RE and SRE in faith schools

Faith schools have some exceptions in terms of how they teach RE and SRE. According to Section 69, Schedule 19 of the School Standards and Framework Act of 1998, RE is compulsory and, thus, must be part of the basic curriculum in all maintained schools in England. This means that all students of a compulsory school age - up to and including sixth form - must be taught RE. However, as stated by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010), parents legally have the right to withdraw their child from RE, and schools must respect their decision. Schools are required to ensure that parents are well informed on the content of their RE syllabus to aid in their decision as to whether they will withdraw their child from said lessons. Parents can also withdraw their children from SRE - another compulsory subject (DfE, 2019). All schools are expected to ensure that the content included in the SRE syllabus is both age and developmentally appropriate. This means that teachers must teach in a sensitive and inclusive manner to ensure that they are respecting the religious beliefs of children and their parents (DfE, 2019). Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that the content taught in SRE lessons should be in accordance with the school's religious character rather than the country's religious alignment (Long, Loft and Danechi, 2019).

Inclusivity of Jewish schools

Faith-schools have a controversial role within society, mainly due to the potentially negative impact they can have on a child's education due to the issue of exclusion. This view focuses on the assumption that faith schools can 'segregat[e] students' and act as 'breeding grounds for prejudice, mistrust and intolerance' (Mason, 2018, p.204). This idea has been supported by cases where 'Jewish parents have withdrawn or threatened to withdraw their children from Jewish schools if non-Jewish children are accepted there' (Ipgrave, 2016, p.53). This clearly questions the inclusivity of Jewish schools and the acceptance of non-Jewish pupils within them. Ipgrave (2016) states that many parents threatened to withdraw their children as a result of fearing that, by

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having their child socialise with non-Jewish pupils, they are at risk of marrying out of the religion, and that the Jewish ethos of the school may be lessened by teachers taking into account the beliefs/values of non-Jewish pupils. In contrast with this argument, findings from a Jewish secondary school in England have shown that, during focus groups, pupils stated how they were able to experience opportunities that gave them freedom to be critical and debate about religion and different religious beliefs (Samson, 2019). These students also claimed that some of the Jewish elements of learning felt tokenistic and forced. One must acknowledge that this was a case study of a pluralist Jewish school, meaning that the findings are likely to be unrepresentative of other Jewish schools in England (Samson, 2019).

Teaching of sexuality and same-sex relationships

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014), faith schools must teach about same-sex marriage and relationships. However, this can be in accordance with their religious character, so long as what is taught is ‘based on facts and should enable pupils to develop an understanding of how the law applies to different relationships’ (p.2), although, these ‘facts’ could be open to interpretation, resulting in varied and inconsistent coverage of certain issues. Teaching about same-sex relationships, despite its importance in enabling teachers to support students to be inclusive and accepting of all forms of sexuality, may be one topic that is affected by such interpretations.

This issue has been the subject of research; for example, Hartman and Samet (2007) explored teachers’ perspectives on SRE in Orthodox (religious) schools in Israel. They found a conflict between teachers’ ‘commitment to promote traditional practices and values, and a sense of obligation to serve as caregivers to students whose lived realities often do not fit neatly within the framework of religious norms’ (Hartman and Samet, 2007, p.71). This clearly shows an element of confusion and ‘frustration’ over the role a teacher has in these schools, as the school’s religious mandate is perhaps preventing them from supporting their pupils to understand gender and sexuality (Hartman and Samet, 2007, p.72). Hartman and Samet (2007, p.90) also state the importance of addressing sexual concerns in schools in order to prevent ‘an atmosphere of denial’ being created. Therefore, there may be a conflict between a religion’s teachings and the necessity to address the topic of sex and sexuality within

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religious schools, which could negatively impact a pupil's understandings of what is right and safe.

On the other hand, Sinai and Shehade (2019) explored different sex education programmes in Israel, some of which the Department for School Counselling at the Ministry of Education have adapted for Orthodox Jewish education. These programmes explore topics like self-awareness, understanding changes during adolescence and sexuality, including homosexuality. Each topic explored has detailed lesson plans to help guide teachers on how to teach such topics. This shows that there are some current programmes in place to help Orthodox Jewish schools in Israel to teach about same-sex relationships and homosexuality. However, these findings may not be as applicable to Jewish schools in England, yet they could act as a framework for English Orthodox Jewish schools when teaching such topics.

This review clearly shows that attending a Jewish school can have an impact on a child's access to SRE that promotes inclusion and acceptance. However, the extent to which this is true is likely to be determined by the school's level of Orthodoxy. As stated above, a school's admissions policy and Orthodox status can play a significant role in determining the school's exclusiveness (Samson, 2019). In the light of these debates, the potential consequences and experiences of attending a Jewish school is further explored in this research paper.

Methodology

This section outlines the different stages of the research conducted for this project which aims to explore 'The relationship between attending a Jewish secondary school and one's beliefs and identity in adult life'.

In this section, I explore my choice of data collection – an online questionnaire – and the rationale for using it. There is then a section on the sample used in the study. Following this is a discussion of the methods used to analyse the data. Finally, I analyse how my project aligns with the ethical guidelines of the University of Warwick and the British Educational Research Association (2018).

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Method of data collection

I used online questionnaires for my data collection. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected as I included open and closed questions. The structure of these questions included multiple choice, Likert scales and text boxes as these were felt to be the most appropriate for collecting a wide range of responses on this topic. There were multiple reasons for choosing a questionnaire. Arguably, the main advantage of questionnaires over other methods of data collection is that they are economical, meaning that, with 'relatively low cost in terms of materials, money and time', a large amount of data can be collected (Denscombe, 2017, p.199).

However, one weakness of online questionnaires is their likelihood to have lower response rates and more restricted answers than face-to-face interviews (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). This is likely due to there being no one available to clarify any queries that respondents may have (Bryman, 2012). It may be the reason for my questionnaire having an 88% completion rate – only 88% of the questions were answered. Yet, conducting a face-to-face interview would have been very difficult as most of my participants currently attend universities across the UK and may have also found it harder to discuss such sensitive topics in person. Thus, Blaxter, Hughes and Tight's statement may not be fully relevant to my study.

Another disadvantage of online questionnaires is that they can be affected by researcher bias because the way questions are structured – wording and order – can bias the findings by 'shap[ing] the nature of the responses in a way that reflects the researcher's thinking' (Denscombe, 2017, p.200). However, conducting a pilot study should have decreased the impact of such biases on the responses and ensured that the wording and ordering of the questions are clear for participants.

Sample

The study had a sample size of 25 participants, aged between 19 and 27. All the participants involved in the study had attended the same Orthodox Jewish secondary school in London, referred to as School A. I know each participant personally as I also attended School A, making it easier for me to select appropriate participants. However, using a convenience sample, although appropriate for a small-scale project, 'undermines the representativeness of' the sample (Raune, 2016, p.247). Knowing the

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participants personally may have made them feel more comfortable in discussing these sensitive topics in an open and honest manner. In order to guarantee the anonymity of each participant, I ensured that no personally identifying questions were asked in the questionnaire. Each participant was asked if they wanted to take part in this study. I initially invited 28 people to participate; however, three did not respond. After they agreed to participate, they were individually sent a link to the questionnaire.

Method of analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the qualitative data collected from each participant. Braun and Clarke (2012) define thematic analysis as a method for finding different themes and codes from a data set, enabling the researcher to identify any commonalities and make sense of different patterns from the data in order to see what is relevant to the research question. I used an inductive approach for my data analysis, meaning that the 'codes and themes [used in my analysis] derive from the content of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.58).

Ethics

Before conducting this study, I sought and received research ethics approval from the Department of Education Studies at the University of Warwick. In accordance with the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018), I made sure that the introductory page of the questionnaire clearly stated that I would be obtaining the consent of each participant through their voluntary completion of the questionnaire. This page also stated: the participant's role within the study, how their data would be stored, their ability to withdraw from the study at any time, and that their identity as well as their school's identity would remain anonymous, as recommended by BERA (2018). By being open and honest with participants about their role within the study, I was able to ensure that the project met the required ethical standards (Hammond and Wellington, 2021). Ensuring the anonymity of each participant was essential as the questionnaire explored topics of a sensitive nature.

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Findings and discussion

This section will outline the findings from my study. The focus will mainly be on the qualitative responses, which will be complemented by the quantitative data. Results from my study confirmed that all participants attended School A. However, only 52% (13) of the participants stated that it was their choice to attend a faith school.

Influence of peers on religious observance

One theme that emerged from the responses was the influence of peers on one's level of religious observance. Three responses to whether attending a faith school impacted one's level of faith/observance, stated that being "surrounded with people that all had the same beliefs" impacted their perspective on faith. Some participants mentioned that their community outside of school and/or their family impacted their level of observance, not their peers or school. This argument is furthered by one response saying how the "people you are surrounded by… affect your beliefs, not an institution such as school. I believe it just instilled a sense of community". This idea of a "community" may relate to how, in faith schools, children tend to only to socialise with children of the same faith. This, as argued by Ipgrave (2016), may be to prevent parents from withdrawing their children - in fear of them marrying out of the religion and/or having the mono-religious ethos of the school disrupted.

Some participants found celebrating Jewish festivals like "Yom Ha'azmaut and Purim" in school to be "really enjoyable", which may have encouraged some pupils to be more observant. However, over a quarter of the participants felt that attending a faith school made them feel detached from their religion. An interesting association found between this study's findings and previous research, is the effect of the way religion was taught and approached within faith schools. Samson's (2019) study of another Jewish secondary school in England found that students saw some of the school's attempts to promote Judaism in their learning as tokenistic and forced. One participant in my study described their experience at School A as being "a bit culty", due to the school's Orthodox identity. Another stated how they felt "discourage[d]… to want to learn about [Judaism] as it became a meaningless nuisance like most school lessons". These responses portray the teachings of faith within these schools in a negative light, impacting the way they perceive religion now. It would be interesting to explore any

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suggestions that faith schools and/or pupils themselves have on how to make religious aspects of schooling more meaningful and relevant.

Inclusivity of other religions

The theme of inclusivity of different levels of beliefs was apparent in some of the responses to the question on whether Jewish Studies (JS)/RE should be a compulsory GCSE subject, as is the case with School A: 15 of the 22 responses stated that JS/RE should not be a compulsory GCSE. Two participants stated that JS should only be “as compulsory as choosing between history or geography” as, not everyone feels “passionate” about or connected to religion, meaning that their grades could potentially be negatively affected. This could arguably create a conflict between seeing religion as a choice and the pressure of achieving good grades in school subjects. However, research on whether passion for a subject guarantees good grades is scarce, and so reducing the impact of the previous argument (Ruiz-Alfonso and León, 2017). Similarly, two of the participants are Atheists and felt that they were being “forced to study a subject with no application to their life”. This shows that participants perceived that the curriculum excluded other religions and that JS was not made relevant to pupils from other religions at the school.

Multiple participants referenced how the inclusion of other faiths in JS/RE would improve pupils’ religious “understanding and tolerance”. In addition to this, one participant argued the importance of teaching about a range of religions as we live in a “primarily Christian country”. Similarly, another question with 21 responses asked participants to state the extent to which they believe faith schools are inclusive of other religious beliefs. All respondents answered between ”no extent” and ”some extent”, with the majority (71%) responding with ”some extent”, complementing the previous findings. The research findings also show that a large majority (77%) of the 22 participants that responded to another question felt that faith schools do still have a role within society. This showed that these participants felt that, even though some faith schools are not inclusive, they are still valued within society.

Another influencing factor that emerged from the research was fear: more specifically, the belief that School A, as well as other faith schools, is afraid to be inclusive of other religions. One participant explored how, “instead of giving people a broad awareness

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of people's different faiths … faith schools can sometimes perpetuate external stereotypes about others". Another participant's response explored how this lack of inclusion can lead to "ignorance and even fear" of other faiths and cultures. This idea is echoed within Mason's (2018:204) study which argues that, if a faith school fails to create an inclusive environment, 'prejudice, mistrust and intolerance' can develop. The main way of improving inclusion within faith schools mentioned in the responses, was through knowledge and interactions with other cultures and religions. This would perhaps lessen the perception that the school, and the religious community more widely, was fearful of these wider interactions. From this, some participants are clearly aware of the possible negative impact that attending a faith school could have on an adult's beliefs towards people from other faiths. This supports the argument that faith schools must reflect on their attitudes towards and teaching of other religions in order to prevent the creation of such stereotypes and ignorance.

Self-expression

The final theme that emerged was the ability to comfortably express oneself. Six of the 22 respondents felt unable to fully express themselves in school. One reason for the majority of participants feeling able to express themselves is likely to be due to most of the participants identifying as not having "controversial" beliefs or having characteristics that are perceived as the "norm" among their peers: for example, being straight and cisgender. This could infer that the extent to which a faith school impacts a student's beliefs is determined by how "controversial" their beliefs are within the boundaries of the school. However, it must be said that this study only explores a small sample of pupils from one faith school. Therefore, the findings could be unrepresentative of all students who attend faith schools. Another reason as to why participants felt comfortable in expressing themselves was the perception that their peers were "like-minded" as they came from a similar background and shared similar religious beliefs. Furthermore, one participant felt that School A "encouraged debate and diversity"; perhaps arguing that faith schools are inclusive of different beliefs.

This study supports the findings from Hartman and Samet (2007, p.90) who claim that not addressing the pupil's sexuality concerns, can create 'an atmosphere of denial'. One participant in my study stated that they would have felt more comfortable with accepting their "bisexual[ity] sooner" if School A had been better and more open to

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teaching about sexuality in their SRE. Therefore, the findings show that there is still a resistance to teaching openly about certain topics within faith schools, affecting the adult beliefs of some students.

Furthermore, one participant noted that School A denied their pupils the right to create an LGBTQ+ society. This participant said that the school's decision potentially hindered some students' "personal expression". Additionally, some participants expressed how the main reason for not feeling able to express/accept their sexuality in school was due to School A's failure to provide pupils with adequate knowledge surrounding sexuality, for example, by not acknowledging homosexuality as "normal". Although, one participant stated that the environment they were in had no effect on their inability to "come out", they simply did not feel ready during their time at school. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014:2) says how even though faith schools have freedom over how they teach topics like same-sex marriage, they must teach 'facts'. This means that schools are not required to promote or arguably even accept same-sex marriage. As a result of this, School A may have been open to discussing pupils' sexuality within their SRE, yet outside of lessons, their religious ethos may have prevented them from supporting the inclusion of an LGBTQ+ society. Moreover, 21 participants responded to whether they felt able to access sex education. Their responses ranged from 0 (to no extent) to 100 (to a large extent), with an average of 50 (to some extent). This clearly shows that there is a plethora of opinions on this issue, as seen through the extremely divided responses.

Attitudes towards Jewish/faith schools

Only 50% (11) of the participants who responded to whether they would send their child to a Jewish/faith school, said "yes". Whereas less than 10% (two participants) stated that they would not want to send their child to such schools. This means that a significant number of participants were undecided on this issue. Whilst this may reflect a range of factors, given their other responses, it may be implied that a large amount of the participants were not fully satisfied with the educational restrictions within faith schools. Interestingly, the percentage of participants who would send their child to a Jewish/faith school approximates closely to the number of participants who actively chose to attend a faith school themselves.

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Conclusion

The research project that this paper is based on aimed to answer the question 'To what extent does attending a Jewish school impact one's adult beliefs?'.

This project's findings show that there is a perceived relationship between one's adult beliefs and attending a Jewish school, with the main reason identified as being the exclusion of other religious beliefs. Even though no one specifically mentioned developing a prejudice, mistrust and intolerance of other religions themselves, as a result of their experience, three participants stated how their RE seemed inadequate because it risked students developing a sense of fear towards people who are not Jewish (Mason, 2018:204).

Another impact of attending a Jewish school on one's adult beliefs – as addressed by participants – was their ability to express themselves, particularly their sexuality. The majority of participants identified as having characteristics and religious beliefs that fit their school's norms. Their experiences of self-expression within a faith school likely differs from those whose characteristics and religious beliefs did not align with that of their school. Moreover, some participants felt that their ability to accept their sexuality was delayed by their SRE, although 18/22 participants felt that attending a Jewish school did not significantly impact their self-expression.

One limitation of this study was that it was a small-scale research project, meaning that there was a limited amount of time and resources that could be used. Additionally, the participants were giving retrospective responses, meaning that their interpretations of memories may not be fully accurate. As a result of this, research into the impact of attending a faith school on one's adult beliefs could be developed further. For example, by collecting perspectives from current students at Jewish secondary schools as well as students from non-Jewish faith schools to see if each religion impacts pupils differently. Another area to explore could be Jewish students who do not attend a Jewish/faith school to allow a comparison of their school experience and adult beliefs. Moreover, it may be interesting to explore parents' perspectives on the teaching of RE and SRE within faith schools and whether they think they are adequate in preparing pupils for their adult lives. Nevertheless, this small-scale project has established that young adults do perceive a relationship between their experiences at a Jewish secondary school and their current beliefs, attitudes and identities.

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