

## **Cover story for ATL *Report* magazine, June 2007**

### **Keeping the faith**

*The existence of faith schools arouses more passion and contention than almost any other education issue. ATL's policy adviser, Alison Ryan, explores the key questions of the debate.*

“We believe that there is an urgent need to promote community cohesion, based upon a greater knowledge of, contact between, and respect for, the various cultures that now make Great Britain such a rich and diverse nation.” So says the 2002 Cattle report, commissioned by the then home secretary, David Blunkett, to investigate the causes behind the race riots which rocked the towns of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001. This urgency has been further underlined recently with the imposition of a duty to promote cohesion on all schools in the Education and Inspections Act 2006. And yet the headlines of the past year suggest that such an understanding between communities is still a long way off. The tendency of some of the key players, including religious organisations, to defend their own position rather than engage in open debate about ways to achieve the goal of community cohesion hasn't helped.

In its recent policy position statement, ATL puts community cohesion and faith schools under the same spotlight. The paper challenges a number of assumptions and asks that a link be made between the state funding received by faith schools and evidence that their practices actively promote community cohesion.

### **Admissions**

One of the key issues that ATL is calling for a debate on relates to the right of faith schools to determine their own admissions policies. Many believe faith schools should have this right partly because this is how it's always been. The assumption is also made that the only way for a faith school to maintain its ethos is to have a school population of the faithful.

The argument goes that those outside the religion, who could attend faith schools under more open admissions arrangements, may be unsympathetic to the school's faith or ethos. This view was very clearly articulated during the debate over proposals to introduce quotas on admissions to faith schools last autumn. According to Oona

Stannard, chief executive and director of the Catholic Education Service, “If in the future a quarter of the pupils at the school may be there by a new entitlement and possibly even hostile to the religious aspects of the life of the school, this would be unfair to the pupils in question, and to the remainder at the school.” That such pupils would be hostile or unsympathetic is not supported by the evidence from faith schools with open admissions. Indeed, Stannard has stated, in defence of Roman Catholic faith schools, that 30% of their pupils, on average, come from outside the school religion, with no suggestion that the schools with the highest non-RC percentages are less ‘successful’.

If we follow through with this argument, we might ask if children of families who follow one faith should be allowed to go to their local community school, which embraces a range of beliefs but gives precedence to none. The assumption, in this case, is that these children do not dilute the ethos of the school. Why then would the reverse be true in faith schools? To attempt to answer these questions, we need to go back to the beginning and ask ‘what is a faith school for?’

Indeed, the reason we see such variation in faith schools, in terms of their admissions and employment practices, is because there are a number of answers to this question. There are many faith schools in areas of high social deprivation who consider their purpose to be service to their local community. However, there are also many faith schools whose purpose is the transmission of religious belief from one generation to the other. This kind of restrictive admissions policy is not without cost or impact on the surrounding community.

The intake in faith schools generally comes from higher socio-economic groups. We know, for example, that compared to national averages, pupils in faith and autonomous schools are much less likely to be entitled to free school meals and are more likely to have English as their first language. Potentially, therefore, other schools in the area with open admissions policies will be taking a higher proportion of those in lower socio-economic groups.

Given this likely impact of faith schools in the state sector and the fact that, for many, their primary focus is to transmit religious beliefs rather than promote social cohesion, should the government pay such a large proportion of their running costs? Voluntary-aided faith schools, which make up the bulk of faith schools in this country and which have autonomy over admissions and employment arrangements, receive 100% of

running costs (including staff salaries) and up to 90% of capital costs from the government.

### **Employment practices**

In ATL's view, the employment practices of faith schools should also be examined. Voluntary-aided faith schools currently have the freedom to operate restrictive employment practices where they can stipulate the religious belief of applicants to protect the religious character of the school. Late amendments to the Education and Inspections Act in 2006 extended this prescription even further so that it can also apply to support staff in these schools. This is based on an assumption that staff need to be of the same religion as the school in order to support its ethos.

But is this really the case? Certainly it is appropriate that schools ask successful applicants to support the school's ethos but it does not necessarily follow that they need to have the same beliefs. Once again, it is interesting to turn the argument around: would a deeply committed Christian not be considered an appropriate candidate to work in a non-faith community school? ATL believes that the right of any school to give preference candidates on the basis of their religion is discriminatory.

### **Curriculum**

ATL has also considered the extent to which faith schools should impact on the curriculum they teach. Representatives of faith groups took part in the development of the non-statutory national framework for religious education (RE). Faith groups are also welcome to be part of local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs), who determine the RE syllabus at local level for other state-maintained schools. Yet faith schools are exempt from following this externally agreed RE syllabus, despite their representatives' involvement in creating it, and their RE lessons are not subject to the same inspection arrangements as in non-faith schools. ATL does not believe this exemption is appropriate.

### **ATL's work on faith schools**

There is no doubt that this is a debate that arouses strong views and a wide range of perspectives, many of which were expressed at ATL's 2006 Conference during the presentation of a resolution on the subject. In July of the same year, ATL developed a

survey designed to raise the issues, canvass members' opinions and invite further member participation in the debate. Following a strong response from members, two specialist task groups were set up to investigate the issue, with members from a range of schools and viewpoints. The result is our policy position statement, which represents the views of ATL members who feel it important that we question the assumptions underlying many of the arguments on faith schools. You can read the full text of the position statement by looking up the 'Education' section of ATL's website at [www.atl.org.uk](http://www.atl.org.uk).

ATL continues to encourage debate about faith schools. Most recently, meetings have been set up with the Church of England and the Catholic Education Service to open dialogue on the subject. Our hope is that open and honest debate will allow all parties involved to concentrate on a way forward so that we have communities who work together rather than being divided by lack of understanding, suspicion and distrust. Then perhaps we might achieve the aims of the Cattle Report and truly celebrate the richness and diversity of our communities.

**If you would like to have your say on the subject of faith schools and debate with other members, please log on to [www.atl.org.uk](http://www.atl.org.uk).**