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Comparing the attitudes of Muslim and Christian year 5 and 6 students within four Anglican primary schools in Wales

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ABSTRACT

This paper set out to explore and to compare the experiences and attitudes of self-identified Muslim students (N = 84) and self-identified Christian students (N = 87) attending the same Anglican primary schools in Wales within the context of the Student Voice Project. The data identified two distinct attitudinal trajectories, one assessed by the Scale of Attitude toward my School and the other assessed by the Scale of Attitude toward Religion in my School. No significant differences were found between Muslim and Christian students in terms of attitude toward their school. However, Muslim students recorded a significantly less positive attitude than Christian students toward religion in their school. These findings are interrogated against Anglican visions for their church primary schools within the state-maintained sector in England and Wales.

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Introduction

The Church of England played a formative role in the establishment of what has become the state-maintained system of education in England and Wales. The National Society, established by the Church of England in 1811 developed a programme for building schools and was quickly joined by other church-related initiatives, including the British and Foreign School Society in 1814, largely supported by the Free Churches, and the Catholic Poor Schools Committee in 1847. From 1833 these voluntary initiatives received government grant aid to supplement voluntary contributions and it was not until the Education Act 1870 that the government established the mechanism to build schools independently of such voluntary initiatives (Rich 1970). The history has been well rehearsed by Cruickshank (1963), Murphy (1971), Francis (1986), and Chadwick (1997). The Churches' interest within the state-maintained sector of education was protected by the 1944 Education Act (Dent 1947) with the consequence that the Anglican Church (Church of England in England and Church in Wales in Wales) currently still provides 26.1% of primary schools and 18.4% of primary school places in England, and 9.1% of primary schools and 7.8% of primary school places in Wales.

The way in which the Anglican Church conceptualises its rationale for ongoing commitment to the provision of schools within the state-maintained sector of education in England and Wales was significantly clarified by the Durham Report (1970). The Durham Report distinguished between two historic objectives that it termed the general objective and the domestic objective. The general objective was to serve the nation through the provision of schools. The domestic objective was to serve the Church through a distinctively Anglican presence in education. The Durham Report acknowledges that, while in an earlier age these two objectives could be met in the same way, in contemporary society this was no longer the case. As a consequence the Durham Report

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commended emphasising the general objective over the domestic objective. Precisely what this means in practice, however, remains problematic.

Various attempts to nuance the Anglican Church's perception of its role within the state-maintained sector of education have taken place since the Durham Report was published in 1970. Within this context one of the most significant influences arose from the Education (Schools) Act 1992 that provided for the regular inspection of every state-maintained school in England and Wales. Alongside the state organised inspection, the governors of church schools were required to arrange for the 'denominational inspection' of these schools related to the areas of school life they were mandated to oversee. These denominational inspection requirements led to the Church of England training and accrediting a body of inspectors and designing a handbook to inform such inspections (see Lankshear 1993; Brown and Lankshear 1995). This inspection system drew on the work of Lankshear (1992a, 1992b, 1992c) and Duncan and Lankshear (1995). The inspection process began to press questions about the distinctiveness of Anglican schools within the state-maintained sector.

The Church of England's *Vision for education* published in the Autumn of 2016 (Church of England 2016) carried the subtitle, *Deeply Christian, serving the common good*, a subtitle that neatly captured and succinctly re-expressed the classic affirmation of the Anglican Church's twin objective within the state-maintained sector of education as voiced by the Durham Report (1970). In one sense, the notion of serving the common good can be conceptualised as 'deeply Christian', as a deeply Christian commitment to the education of all. In another sense, however, a 'deeply Christian' school may wish to share the good news of the Christian gospel in an explicit way (the domestic aim) as well as in an implicit way through service (the general aim). At points, the Church of England's vision for education offers some aspirations that may come quite close to sharing the good news of the Christian gospel. The executive summary of the Church of England's *Vision for education* (2016) explains that:

In Church schools the deeply Christian foundation for this vision will be seen explicitly in teaching and learning both in RE and across the curriculum and also in the authentically Christian worship and ethos of those schools. (p. 2)

The conclusion explains that:

We want pupils to leave schools with a rich experience and understanding of Christianity, and we are committed to offering them an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice in a way which enhances their lives. (p. 13)

Research question

It is against this background that it becomes interesting to explore the experiences of Muslim students attending Anglican primary schools. There are two good reasons why Muslim students may be attending Anglican primary schools. The first reason concerns the catchment area of these schools. When Anglican schools are operating as neighbourhood schools and the neighbourhood has changed to welcome a number of Muslim families, their children may naturally gravitate to those schools. The second reason concerns the claim that some Muslim parents would prefer to choose an Anglican school over a school with no religious character, on the grounds that religion is taken seriously in such schools. For example, as long ago as the early 1990s Brown (1992), in his booklet, *The multi-faith church school*, made the claim that

people of other faiths often send their children to church schools because they *trust* these schools to respect the culture and traditions of which the child is heir. (Brown 1992, 11)

The opportunity to explore the experiences of Muslim students attending Anglican primary schools is offered through secondary analysis of data gathered by the Student Voice Project conducted among year 5 and year 6 students attending Anglican primary schools in Wales. Broadly speaking,

the Student Voice Project explored student attitudes towards areas of school experience relevant to the scope of the denominational inspection regime (see further Lankshear, Francis, and Eccles 2017; Francis, Lankshear, and Eccles 2018).

Scrutiny of the responses of the 3,382 students from the 88 Church in Wales primary schools involved in the Student Voice Project during the school year 2016–2017 identified among the participants 113 students who attended mosques. Of these 113 mosque-attending students, 84 were concentrated in four schools in the Diocese of Llandaff. It is these four schools that provide a case study that may illuminate the experience of Muslim students attending Anglican primary schools.

Method

Procedure

Within the Diocese of Llandaff there are four Church in Wales primary schools in which in year 5 and year 6 there are almost equal numbers of Muslim students (who attended mosques) and Christian students (who attended churches). As part of a wider survey conducted among Church in Wales primary schools, year 5 and year 6 students in these four schools were invited to complete a questionnaire. Participation by the students was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Instrument

Student attitude toward attending their primary school was assessed by a battery of 57 items. Each item was rated on the conventional five-point scale: disagree strongly (1), disagree (2), not certain (3), agree (4), and agree strongly (5).

Religious affiliation was assessed by the question, 'What sort of place of worship do you go to?' followed by the check list: None, Baptist, Church in Wales, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Mosque, Synagogue, Gurdwara, Other (please specify).

Participants

Within the four schools a total of 198 completed surveys were returned by year 5 and year 6 students. Among these participants 84 were identified as Muslim and 87 were identified as Christian by defining the place of worship that they attended; 4 were identified as Hindu or Sikh, and the remaining 23 were identified as religiously unaffiliated.

Analysis

The following analyses were conducted among those students who were identified as either Muslim or Christian. The data were analysed by the SPSS statistical package, employing the frequency, reliability, and t-test routines.

Results

Drawing just on the responses of the 171 year 5 and year 6 students within the four schools who identified as Christian or as Muslim, exploratory factor analysis and correlation analyses identified two sets of items from the pool of 57 Likert-type statements within the Student Voice Survey that behaved in different ways. One set of nine items focused on affective responses to the school and the other set of nine items focused on affective responses to religion within the school. The scaling properties of these two sets of items were explored by reliability analysis.

Table 1. Scale of attitude towards my school: scale properties.

	r
My school is a really good school	.58
My school is a really caring school	.57
In my school I can be myself	.54
My school is a really friendly school	.59
My school is a safe place	.55
In my school we take pride in our school looking tidy	.63
My school treats every child kindly	.63
I like coming to my school	.56
In my school I can go to the grown-ups when I am unhappy	.58
Alpha	.86

Table 1 presents the nine items selected to comprise the Scale of Attitude toward my School, together with the correlations between the individual items and the sum of the other eight items and the alpha coefficient (Cronbach 1951). The alpha coefficient of .86 shows a good level of internal consistency reliability and the individual correlations show that each of the nine items cohere to produce a consistent scale.

Table 2 presents the nine items selected to comprise the Scale of Attitude toward Religion in my School, together with the correlations between the individual items and the sum of the other eight items and the alpha coefficient (Cronbach 1951). The alpha coefficient of .81 shows a satisfactory level of internal consistency reliability and the individual correlations show that each of the nine items cohere to produce a consistent scale.

Having proposed two measures, the Scale of Attitude toward my School, and the Scale of Attitude toward Religion in my School, Table 3 tests whether there is a difference in the mean scale scores recorded in these two measures by the 84 Muslim students and the 87 Christian students. The data show that there is no statistically significant difference between the scores recorded by Muslim students and by Christian students on the Scale of Attitude toward my School, but that the Muslim students recorded a significantly lower mean score on the Scale of Attitude toward Religion in my school. In other words, these data suggest that Muslim students are as content as Christian students with their Anglican primary school, but (unsurprisingly) the Muslim students feel less positively than the Christian students about the explicitly religious aspects of their school.

Tables 4 and 5 give added texture to the conclusions derived by analysing the scale scores. These tables present the item endorsement separately for Muslim students and for Christian students as the sum of the agree strongly and agree responses. Chi square was then employed to test the statistical significance of the differences in the levels of item endorsement by Muslims and by Christians. Chi square was calculated by combing the disagree strongly, disagree, and not certain responses into a single category in contrast with those who had agreed or agreed strongly with the statement. These statistics show that none of the nine items in the Scale of Attitude toward my School distinguished between Christian and Muslim students, while each of the nine items in the

Table 2. Scale of attitude towards religion in my school: scale properties.

	r
In assemblies I enjoy being with the whole school	.51
In assemblies I enjoy visits from the vicar	.50
In assemblies singing is important to me	.60
In assemblies listening to the Bible is important to me	.60
In assemblies I enjoy the songs we sing	.55
Jesus is very important in my school	.42
Church is very important in my school	.49
The Bible is very important in my school	.48
Church Festivals are very important in my school	.46
Alpha	.81

Table 3. Mean scale scores by religion.

	Christian		Muslim		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Attitude towards my school	36.5	8.7	35.9	9.6	0.44	NS
Attitude towards religion in my school	39.1	6.2	30.6	8.5	7.52	.001

Note: N = 171; n (Christian) = 87; n (Muslim) = 84

Table 4. Scale of attitude towards my school: item endorsement.

	Chri %	Musl %	<i>p</i> <
My school is a really good school	83	76	NS
My school is a really caring school	72	74	NS
In my school I can be myself	60	57	NS
My school is a really friendly school	60	51	NS
My school is a safe place	66	76	NS
In my school we take pride in our school looking tidy	76	73	NS
My school treats every child kindly	63	62	NS
I like coming to my school	61	63	NS
In my school I can go to the grown-ups when I am unhappy	70	68	NS

Note: Chri = Christian; Musl = Muslim; % = sum of agree strongly and agree response

Scale of Attitude toward Religion in my School distinguished between Christian and Muslim students.

The percentage endorsements presented in Tables 4 and 5 can also be employed to profile the feelings of Muslim students to their experience of attending an Anglican primary school. In terms of attitude toward their school, around three quarters of the Muslim students felt that their school was a really good school (76%), and that their school is a safe place (76%). The proportion fell, however, to half of the Muslim students who felt that their school is a really friendly place (51%). In terms of attitude toward religion in their school, around three quarters of the Muslim students agreed that Jesus is very important in their school (75%) and that Church is very important in their school (73%). The proportion fell, however, to fewer than one quarter of Muslim students who felt that in assemblies singing is important to them (24%) or that in assemblies listening to the Bible is important to them (20%).

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the experience of year 5 and year 6 students attending Anglican primary schools. The study was contextualised within four schools in the Diocese of Llandaff that had participated in the Student Voice Project and in which there were roughly equal numbers of Muslim and Christian students. The data demonstrated that Muslim and Christian students shared a similar response to the school overall (as assessed by the Scale of Attitude toward School), but that Muslim students had a less positive response than the Christian students to the specifically Christian ethos of the school (as assessed by the Scale of Attitude toward Religion in my School).

These data invite further reflection on the vision of Anglican schools as 'deeply Christian, serving the common good'. The data suggest that, as seen through the eyes of Muslim students, these schools are achieving their deeply Christian aim of serving the common good in the sense of delivering the general aim for Anglican schools for serving the diverse nation. At the same time, however, the domestic aim of promoting 'the authentically Christian worship and ethos of those schools' and of offering 'an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice' may be failing to win the favour of Muslim students.

The limitation with the present study is clearly the case-study approach of concentrating on just four schools in the Diocese of Llandaff. The findings, nonetheless, do invite replication in other

Table 5. Scale of attitude towards religion in my school: item endorsement.

	Chri %	Musl %	<i>p</i> <
In assemblies I enjoy being with the whole school	66	46	.05
In assemblies I enjoy visits from the vicar	68	38	.001
In assemblies singing is important to me	56	24	.001
In assemblies listening to the Bible is important to me	75	20	.001
In assemblies I enjoy the songs we sing	64	41	.001
Jesus is very important to my school	95	75	.001
Church is very important in my school	97	73	.001
The Bible is very important in my school	89	70	.01
Church Festivals are very important in my school	85	64	.01

Note: Chri = Christian; Musl = Muslim; % = sum of agree strongly and agree response

dioceses in which there may be a larger presence of Muslim students in Anglican primary schools and where the Muslim students may report a positive attitude not only to their school itself but to what they observe of the religious ethos of their school.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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