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School desegregation and the politics of 'forced integration'

SHAMIM MIAH

Abstract: Using the programme for creating the controversial School Academies, local governments have attempted to force an integration of schools with majority white and ethnic minority pupil cohorts via new mergers. This has largely been as a response to analysts' fears about self-segregation and insufficient community cohesion, following riots in northern towns in 2001, and the spectre of radicalisation amongst young Muslims following 9/11 and 7/7. An examination of school mergers in Burnley, Blackburn, Leeds and Oldham reveals how they have amplified racial attacks on Muslim pupils and their feelings of insecurity whilst also fuelling a backlash against what is perceived by some members of the white working class as a form of social engineering which endangers white privilege.

Keywords: community cohesion, integration, Muslims, Prevent Programme, School Academies, white backlash

'Negro children needed neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What they need is education'

(W.E.B Du Bois 1868-1963)[1]

'Integration is not publicly debated. It is a categorical imperative, a general norm that is imposed on everyone but particularly one group: immigrants and all those gravitating around them'

(Narcira Guenif Souilmas)[2]

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Introduction

The institutionalising of racism within the British educational context began in 1965, when, because of concerns expressed by white parents in Southall (west London) that their children were being held back educationally because of the 'influx' of Asian children, a regulation was bought in to cap the number of ethnic minority pupils to one third in any one school, so as to facilitate assimilation. Asian pupils who could not get into their local schools were then bussed out of their area to schools in other areas. This policy was to be adopted by eleven local authorities with significant Black and Minority Ethnic communities.[3] The fact that BME pupils only were being bussed was not deemed to be discriminatory (despite a series of protests organised by Asian and black parents' groups) until an official review of the policy in 1975.[4] The irony is that today, two generations later, Asian children are again being blamed, but this time for the dangers of their self-segregation. So now, after decades of discrimination in housing and education, which effectively kept Asians away from better 'white' facilities, they are to be forcibly 'bussed in' as it were – through policies which force integration upon them by amalgamating schools and relocating education in predominantly white areas of cities.

To what extent does the thesis of ethnic segregation constituting a problem actually stand up? Some commentators and academics such as Ludi Simpson have argued that the 'problem' of self-segregation is a politically constructed myth which lacks detailed empirical evidence.[5] And social geographers looking at mobility in Leeds and Bradford also picked holes in the popular, slick view that Asians were forever stuck in their ghettos.[6] Despite these academic findings, the overwhelming consensus from 2001 onwards has been that segregation was an emerging threat that required urgent and radical public policy intervention.[7]

For in 2001, from April to July, northern English towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford witnessed violent confrontations between young Asians and the police, culminating in clashes in Bradford in which 200 police officers were injured. In terms of the damage caused and the shock they delivered to the nation, these were the worst 'riots' in Britain since the uprisings of 1985.[8] And what was to surprise the powers that be the most was the fact that so many of the young rioters were from Asian backgrounds – traditionally stereotyped on the state's cultural yardstick as more peaceful and law-abiding than those of Caribbean descent. A whole series of inquiries were instigated and a range of policy reports were published which racialised the public 'concerns' over segregated communities in general and of non-white mono-cultural schools in particular.

The first report to appear was *Community pride, not prejudice: making diversity work in Bradford* – the belated findings of an inquiry under Lord Ouseley which had been set up long before the riots. Although this report did note the disquieting level of segregation in parts of Bradford, it also criticised the police, schools and other agencies for fostering divisions and fears

between communities.[9] The national and local governments did not want to hear about their own failings – in terms of unemployment, bad schooling, lack of social provision, experience of racial violence – as causes for the youth rioting. The answer was to be sought, therefore within the community itself and was specifically located in its capacity to self-segregate. The most important intervention came via the inquiry led by Ted Cantle which came out with a report stressing the need for a programme of community cohesion to counteract the way that Asians were being allowed to lead 'parallel lives'.[10] 'Community cohesion' was, in the words of a key critic, 'politically identified as the prime component in building an effective response to the violence in the summer of 2001 ... the uprisings were recognised as a cultural problem to be dealt with by focusing on issues of citizenship, nationality and belonging.'[11] The theme of 'segregated' schooling developed with the publication of the Cantle report and the Ritchie report of 2001, which encouraged Oldham to adopt policies that would lead to better ethnic integration and the de-segregation of schools.[12]

The political rhetoric surrounding segregation, Muslim pupils and schooling reached its peak following the publication of two studies which warned of the pervasive nature of ethnic segregation in some UK schools. Simon Burgess and Deborah Wilson, in 2004 recognised residential segregation as one of the principal causes of 'substantial segregation on ethnic criteria in some schools'.[13] Whilst, Ron Johnston et al in 2006 demonstrated significant levels of ethnic segregation within primary and secondary schools, but also ominously suggested that'school segregation is very substantially (and significantly) greater than is the case with residential segregation'.[14]

Popular discourses on ethnic segregation further expressed fears of 'Muslim ghettos'[15] and 'no go areas'[16] for white people in some northern towns. 'Segregated communities', 'parallel lives', 'Asian ghettos' and insular communities have subsequently become part of a received wisdom, which continues to influence both political agendas in the UK and other EU countries with sizeable Muslim populations. An implicit assumption within the debate on ethnic segregation in general and school segregation in particular is that it is the Muslim community which maintains an illiberal ghettoised and highly traditional enclave within western societies.

Preventing extremism in schools

Of course this disquiet about a community which was seen to be cutting itself adrift from the mainstream was underscored by concerns about the potential radicalisation of its Muslim youth in the light of 9/11 and 7/7. Part of this logic extended the community cohesion thesis, that ethnic segregation leads to racial conflict, to argue that ethnic segregation would lead to radicalisation and extremism.[17] The concern about segregation affecting the nation's psyche morphed into a concern about segregation affecting the nation's safety. That Muslim equalled segregated equalled potential bomber was clear from the way in which the government's *Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund* of £5million, established in 2007 was allocated to local authorities simply on the basis of the size of their Muslim population. [18] The extension of community

cohesion to national security can be identified in the Department for Children, Schools and Families' prevention of violent extremism toolkit, titled: '*Learning Together To Be Safe,*[19] launched in response to the conviction of 16-year-old Hamand Munshi, the youngest British person to be convicted under the UK Terrorism Act. Munshi was arrested in West Yorkshire on his way home from a GCSE chemistry exam in 2006 and sentenced to two years imprisonment for 'downloading information about bomb making material from the internet and hidden notes about martyrdom under his bed'.[20] The toolkit provides 'advice' and 'guidance' to schools through a three-tiered approach aimed at countering the extremist narrative carried out in the name of Islam. The first tier is defined as '*universal actions'* which include schools 'promoting community cohesion and promoting equality and wellbeing', the second tier strengthens the *targeted* work, which includes schools using the 'curriculum to challenge extremist narratives'. Finally, and perhaps most controversially is the specialist tier which encourages schools to 'form good links with police and other partners to share information'. The Coalition government's revised Prevent Strategy of June 2011 also reinforced the partnership work between the Department for Education and the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) with support of £4.7m to work with local authorities and schools. A further £950,000 of regional funding was also allocated to embed the above toolkit within schools.[21] The revised Prevent Strategy also placed the Channel Project 'to support individuals vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists' at a strategic and central role in the fight against terror. The Channel Project is the government's multi-agency risk management initiative, but in expecting teachers to 'become the eyes and ears of counter-terrorism policing' undermines the integrity of the teaching profession.[22] The implication of this project is to blur the boundaries between security, counter-terrorism and education.

One of the leading government figures to champion this combining of national security and educational policy was Sir Cyril Taylor who has influenced both Conservative and New Labour educational thinking. He served as an adviser to ten successive secretaries of education, starting in the Thatcher era and ending in 2007, and was chairman, until his retirement of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust from 1987 to 2007. Taylor's policy drive, expressed in his 2009 book *A good school for every child* makes the link between schooling, integration, de-radicalisation and the Muslim problematic. He argues that, unlike other migrant communities, the Muslim one has yet to be assimilated. Taylor believes that the failure to 'assimilate' (which he uses interchangeably with 'integrate') can allow:

> Extremist views and ideologies to be propagated resulting in radicalisation of individuals and leading to increased racial and religious tensions, criminal and anti-social behaviour, and ultimately a breakdown of cohesion within the community. What, therefore can be done to better integrate our ethnic minorities into their communities and to resolve these problems? The most important way is to avoid racial and religious discrimination of all kinds, but a particularly effective way is to better integrate children at school age.[23]

It was Taylor who was to argue most overtly that Muslims should be integrated into mainstream society through publicly funded ethnically integrated schools - predicated upon a de-radicalisation imperative, which extended the right to free education to counter terrorism agendas and security policies. '[O]ur Muslim communities are much more likely to help the police over atrocities such as the July 7 tube bombings if they are better integrated. It is a radical step but I believe a multi-faith community academy initiative can create new schools in socially deprived areas with a far more balanced intake of pupils'.[24]

School mergers and the politics of 'forced integration'

This model of forced integration, which has been aptly described by progressive educationalists as 'aggressive majoritarianism'[25] or the way 'majority dislike and prejudice towards Muslims are enforced in the name of commonsense, integration and even security', is assessed below in four local authority wards in the North of England where the School Academies or the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, were used to tackle the issue of school segregation by merging schools with different ethnic cohorts. In local authorities such as Oldham, the School Academies and the BSF programme were administered together as one overarching programme. The BSF programme was a New Labour capital investment initiative introduced in 2007 and abandoned by the secretary of state for education, Michael Gove in 2010.[26]

School Academies were introduced by the New Labour government in 2000 and later extended by the Conservative-led coalition government through the Academies Act of 2010. It allows schools to become independent of local authority control by opening the sector to the free market and letting business, charities and faith groups run schools while retaining public funding – thus privatising provision. This particular model of schooling has been seen as replacing a 'stakeholder approach', consisting of community groups, schools, parents and local authorities as key partners, with 'corporate governance', which includes businesses and charities as key partners.[27]The introduction of School Academies -with their concomitant connection to the private sector - is now used by some local authorities to tackle the question of ethnic school segregation - although there is no proof that such institutions either raise educational standards or promote social integration.[28] This particular approach to school de-segregation typically involves a school with a mainly Muslim cohort merging with a school with a predominantly white intake. Table 1 provides examples of four local authorities in the North of England that have adopted such an approach.

Whilst the schools highlighted in this study are not in the only local authorities to have adopted such a policy to address the problem of racial and ethnic segregation in UK schools, the four local authorities nevertheless provide an excellent insight into the impact of this approach. For all four areas have witnessed excessive media coverage of their Muslim communities, Oldham and Burnley were faced with the 2001 summer riots. Blackburn was thrust into the

media spotlight following former home and foreign secretary Jack Straw's 2006 column for the local *Lancashire Telegraph* in which he said he felt uneasy talking to someone he could not see i.e. because she was a woman in a niqab, and that he urged those constituents who came to his surgery fully covered, to unveil so as to facilitate the conversation.[29] Leeds attracted international media attention after it was identified that three of the four 7/7 bombers were from that city; in fact two of these bombers, Hasib Hussain and Mohammad Siddique Khan, were ex-pupils of Mathew Murray High School in Holbeck, Leeds - which was one of the schools involved in the school merger (see table 1).

An evaluation of the school mergers adopted by local authorities under the School Academies programme highlights the following key trends. Firstly, schools with a predominant or growing Muslim cohort are either closed down and merged with schools with mainly white intakes, or closed down so that the pupils are dispersed throughout the borough. Second, the school merger changes the school boundaries and therefore limits the problem previously caused by the existence of mono-cultural primary feeder schools, opening up the new school to a broader geographic boundary. Third, the physical location of the new buildings, which arise from the school merger is most often in mainly white residential areas. Finally, all of the newly-created schools highlighted below have been strongly opposed by local communities and, in the case of two of the schools there has been an increase in racial conflict.

Table: Details of schools surrounding the controversy of 'forced integration'

Local Authority	Predominantly Muslim school cohort	School merger with mainly white school cohort	New school created from merger	Status(As of March 2012)
Blackburn with Darwen	Beardwood High School	Pupils dispersed throughout borough	-	School Closure August 2012
Burnley	Ivy Bank School	Habergham School	Hameldon Community College (Academy)	Operational
Leeds	Mathew Murray High School	Merlyn Rees Community High	South Leeds Academy	Operational
Oldham	Grange School	-	EACT- Academy Oldham	New Build 2013
Oldham	Kaskenmoor Secondary School	South Chadderton School	Oasis Academy	New Build 2013
Oldham	Breeze Hill School	Counthill School	Waterhead Academy	New Build 2013

Schools, proximity and racial conflict

The Academies, following school mergers in Leeds and Burnley (both currently operational – see table), generated intense racial tensions and what could be described as riots on both of the new campuses. This, for many, was clear evidence of a very blunt instrument being applied to the complex racialised concept of 'segregation'. Pupils attending the Leeds Academy, which was formed from the merger of two ethnically diverse schools in South Leeds, were described in the local paper as 'guinea pigs of poorly thought-out ideas'.[30] Leeds was one of the first authorities to adopt the school merger approach to desegregation by closing down a secondary school in the predominantly Muslim area of Holbeck and merging it with a school whose makeup was from the mainly white working-class estate in Belle Isle, South Leeds which reopened in September 2004. In order to attend school in Belle Isle, the Muslim students had to travel regularly from Holbeck ward, thus making them potential targets for racial violence. Their vulnerability intensified with 'bitter warfare'[31] and 'rising levels of racial tensions'[32] which culminated in 'full-scale riots' on a number of occasions,[33] within and outside the school premises. The intense racial conflict in 2005 followed a police response, which included the use of the police helicopter, after youths from the local community pelted the class rooms and broke onto the school grounds to provoke and verbally abuse the Asian students. Fears of racialised turf war accelerated in an intense altercation involving dozens of school pupils, with injuries to both teachers and students.[34]

A similar pattern of racial violence occurred in Burnley, following the school merger in September 2006. Racial violence principally directed against the 'outsiders' was orchestrated both by school pupils and ex-pupils living near the school neighbourhood.[35] The school merger was also capitalised on by the British National Party (BNP), through a BNP TV documentary titled 'forced integration comes to Burnley'.[36] The increase in racist incidents together with declining student numbers has added to the fear, insecurity and animosity towards the Hameldon Community College (Academy) in Burnley. The increase in racial tension, on December 2007, revolved around a group of intruders entering the school premises and attacking two Muslim pupils. The first pupil received hospital treatment for head injuries whilst the second pupil suffered a seizure after being punched.[37] The Burnley ward was a particular electoral stronghold for the BNP which became the official opposition party on Burnley Council during the run-up to the May 2003 local elections. The BNP also won the first ever county council seat in 2009 by ending twenty years of Labour control. Currently the BNP has just one council seat; but this does not reflect the extent of far-right activity, given the rise of the popular street activism of the English Defence League (EDL), as seen through a number of high profile public demonstrations by the EDL Burnley division.

One of the only studies of the impact of such mergers, conducted by PeaceMaker[38] in Oldham, found that fears over proximity and racist attacks were major themes. PeaceMaker, a voluntary organisation established following the riots of 2001 to tackle racism, interviewed over 1,000 young people in Years 7, 8 and 9 across the seven secondary schools involved in the

merger. The study confirmed how ethnic and religious prejudices were dominant discursive narratives used by pupils to make sense of the pending changes. Pupils expressed concerns over racism and clashes over religion leading to 'riots' and 'wars' between the dominant ethnic groups in Oldham. Perhaps the most striking revelation was that some students felt that segregation between schools should be replaced by segregation within schools. PeaceMaker noted how a number of students argued that parts of the new Academies should be segregated by a 'wall down the playground' or 'different lunch and break times' for the safety of different ethnic groups.[39]

Such fear of racial violence and harassment in schools is not new. The prevalence of racial and religious intolerance in and around schools was highlighted in the Macdonald Inquiry into racial violence in Manchester schools, following the murder of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah on a Burnage school playground; but harassment and attacks were in fact being reported at Dormers Wells secondary school in Southall as far back as the 1960s.[40] Then it was the children of the first generation of post-war Punjabi Sikh workers who were at risk to attack. But as recent, empirical research has confirmed, today, with the climate created by the 'war on terror', it is Muslim pupils, the children and grand-children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi mill workers who now routinely experience racism and racist abuse as part of their schooling.[41] These incidents are not only perpetrated by fellow school pupils but also by staff members within a school.

Racial violence against Muslim pupils was just the starkest reaction to this forced integration. An analysis of letters published in the local press reveals how the policy of school mergers managed to engender a generalised white backlash against what was quickly seen as 'integration by stealth', and 'social engineering'. An excerpt from a letter to the local paper encapsulates the way school desegregation, an idea believed to be imposed by political elites on to white working-class neighbourhoods, was seen as a belligerent force with the potential to foster racial divisions.

> Forcing integration (which is exactly what is happening) will only deepen divisions within those areas affected. It's a splendid moot point that all the people who tell us how to mix all seem to live in splendid isolation among their own kind.[42]

Integration policies aimed at racial integration were seen to compromise the principle of parental choice. The 'social engineering' feature of these policies undermined individual rights and the autonomy of in-group solidarity based upon racial and ethnic difference. The collective discourse was based upon a political awareness of the role of government in shaping local policy. Another disgruntled letter-writer put it:

> I have voiced and written objections to Schools for the Future on a number of occasions, ever since the idiotic idea was mooted. The entire concept was nothing but an effort in social engineering, aimed at racial integration in secondary education. This was engineered by the report on racial disturbances in Burnley.[43]

This backlash reveals a multi-faceted resistance and counter-narrative by the mainly white community to the policy of integration and School Academies.[44] White communities tended to view these programmes as weakening white working-class identity and marginalising its residents. The presence of Muslim pupils in 'their' schools was seen as rupturing 'whiteness'.[45] The above views also demonstrate how schools play a crucial role in the ways in which communities are imagined. The compromising of whiteness in schools via an influx of Muslim pupils was associated with the decline of community and nation.

The politics of white flight

The letters published in local papers expressed fears and anxiety about the increased ethnic minority populations in areas considered to be 'white'. The notion of racially segregated communities as expressed in these letters demonstrated how segregated schools served a social-political objective of whiteness. The counterintuitive nature of merging schools, so that more Muslim pupils are taught within mixed school environments, is deeply problematic because of white flight. The following letter excerpt highlights how relocating Grange School (Oldham), with an over 95 per cent Bangladeshi Muslim cohort, to the neighbouring white neighbourhood of Royton could eventually lead to white communities relocating. The letter implies that within the context of schooling, some white parents, faced with the prospect increasing number of ethnic minority children, would either send their children to white or whiter schools within the borough, or the entire family or even the community may overtime uproot.[46]

> Moving students from Grange to a new school on Our Lady's site [Royton] is part of a plan for '*integration via the back door*?' If this goes ahead a time will come when future generations of the ethnic minority families will move to Royton ... in time the indigenous population could well move out.[47]

Despite the government's intention of creating mixed schools, in the local public discourse of school mergers, the Muslim presence was considered deeply problematic. Muslim communities are essentialised, not just as culturally inferior but also as holding fundamentally *different* views from western enlightened mores. The sentiments expressed in the letter below highlight the importance of placing anti-Muslim prejudice in the West within a broader historical context to understand contemporary prejudice.[48]

> You can't integrate people whose cultural difference is too great, and who don't want to integrate anyway. It's that simple, and it's that obvious. Islam is a religion of domination and separatism, based upon the falsehood of superiority. No amount of education or indoctrination will bridge the divide. In fact, if schools taught about REAL Islam, instead of the sanitised Western-friendly version concocted for our kids, the gap would get even wider. Integration of Islam with Western democracy is not possible. It REALLY IS that

simple, and if these idiots in education think that by attempting to 'social engineer' the schools they can solve it, they are very wrong.[49]

School location and white backlash

Localised discussion of cultural difference is often mediated through an interpretative racial categorisation where religious difference substitute for 'race'. Within local debates, such differences become important signifiers of power and privilege which determine choice and location of school. Thus externally manufactured integration of pupils is seen as undermining the status quo and the privilege of a particular group. Any attempt to rupture the sense of prerogative is rigorously challenged. A highly controversial scheme involving the amalgamation of two secondary Catholic schools, one of which was located within a predominant Muslim community with significant number of Muslim pupils, within a Muslim neighbourhood of Oldham, provides interesting insights into the ways in racial integration is conceptualised. The following letter highlights how the prospect of non-Catholic children attending the £30m newly-built and refurbished 'Catholic super school', funded through the BSF programme is seen as undermining the educational privileges of Catholic pupils.

> It is a distinct possibility that places in our schools will be awarded to non-Catholic children at the expense of Catholic children. Catholic schools have a duty and responsibility to bring up the children in the Catholic faith. This will become increasingly difficult when Catholic schools become multi-faith schools.[50]

The backlash against the proposed location of a Catholic super school was championed by the pressure group *Oldham Catholic Schools Parents Association* (OCSPA). OCSPA campaigned vigorously to have the proposed location changed, based upon the fear of some parents that the 'area had a reputation for drug abuse, crime and young girls being groomed for prostitution'.[51] Its activities culminated in a protest march, on 30 March 2008, which attracted over 600 parents campaigning against locating the proposed Catholic School in a mainly Muslim area. OCSPA did finally manage to change the council policy, albeit under the heavy cloud of accusations of racism from the Catholic Diocese of Salford and the local paper.[52] The school is currently being built in a mainly white area of Oldham.

OCSPA's story is not an isolated campaign of preserving and maintaining 'whiteness' of schools. After all the introduction of bussing by minister Edward Boyle in 1965 followed two years of agitation and protest by the Southall Residents' Association egged on by the British National Party, complaining that local schools were being 'swamped' by immigrant children. A generation on and closer to home, a landmark case in Yorkshire in the mid-1980s involved the Parental Alliance for Choice in Education (PACE) successfully stopping Kirklees Metropolitan Council from sending children from the white neighbourhood of Thornhill to a school in the predominantly Muslim area of Savile Town, Dewsbury. In this case, protesting white parents

actually started their own makeshift school on top of a pub in Thornhill, whilst awaiting a judicial review. Interestingly, in all of the above cases, the politics of parental choice is substituted for race and ethnicity and the practice of white flight entails the desire to maintain and sustain educational privilege.

Conclusion

In recent years we have witnessed a fundamental paradigm shift in education from concerns about ethnic minority educational underachievement and anti-racism to a deeply politicised discourse on integration and counter-terrorism – both of which demonise Muslims. This analysis of school mergers shows how the Muslim community is pathologised at policy level and victimised at the grass-roots level of lived experience. It also shows how attempts to merge two ethnically distinct and mono-cultural schools, in the name of cohering communities, can lead to yet more distrust between communities.

Contemporary attempts to govern Muslim communities is often associated with the 'community relations'[53] approach to de-radicalisation, which views Muslims as a suspect community or 'the enemy within'. Integration is often portrayed as a means through which Muslims can be better citizens or become de-politicised, 'moderate' Muslims. Furthermore, the educational policy framing of Muslim communities is predicated upon the assumption that it's the Muslims who are unwilling to integrate into mainstream society. But the idea of integration has to be contextualised within the racialised contemporary public discourse, which is not only reluctant to accept Muslims as fellow citizens, but deems them antithetical to the West.

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