

# BEING OPEN TO THOSE WITH LESS: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES OF DISADVANTAGED PUPILS ATTENDING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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## Abstract

Despite there being significant numbers of state maintained Catholic schools in England, they have proved to be of interest only to a minority of empirical researchers, usually those directly involved in their promotion. Recent government initiatives encouraging further provision of schools with a religious character have proved controversial and have prompted interest in their comparative academic performance. In this paper aggregated attainment data for each of the four Key Stages of the National Curriculum during 2006-2007 are used to compare the performance of Catholic and other schools having differing proportions of socially disadvantaged pupils on roll, where disadvantage is defined as those who are eligible for free school meals (FSM). The data are for all maintained primary and secondary schools that completed the 2007 Annual Schools' Census. There are noticeable differences in the mean attainment levels achieved by pupils in the two sectors. Those comparative differences are consistent in both phases. Pupil attainment in Catholic schools tends to be higher than in other institutions, the differentials between the sectors increasing the greater the proportion of deprived pupils on roll. These findings seem to confirm previously reported performance data for the period 1996-2001. The significance and limitations of the findings are discussed and areas for further study suggested.

**Keywords:** Catholic schools, socio/economic deprivation; pupil attainment; school culture; ethos.

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## **Social Deprivation and Attainment**

Despite government initiatives in developing new types of school in recent years, the current state maintained educational system in England is both firmly rooted in, and continues to reflect, the provisions of the Education Act of 1944. In the decades immediately following its implementation, the dominating effect of home circumstances on pupil achievement in school was well documented in reports published by both government and independent researchers (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1954, 1963; Douglas, 1964; Swift, 1965, 1966; Department of Education & Science, 1967). Research indicates that little has changed in the subsequent decades though, of course, not every child from a socially deprived background will, necessarily, have lower than average attainment levels at school. Nevertheless, it is well established that social deprivation has a real and negative effect on children's cognitive development, on their academic attainment at all Key Stages of the National Curriculum and that disadvantage persists into their adult life (Goldstein & Cuttance, 1988; Paterson, 1991; Thomas & Mortimore, 1996; Mortimore & Whitty, 1997; Feinstein, 2003; Blanden et al., 2008; DCSF, 2009).

On the other hand, it has long been recognised that, even where schools may have very similar moral and educational purposes, some have few problems achieving their objectives, while others, drawing pupils from a similar background have many (Clegg, 1962; Shipman, 1968; Clegg & Megson, 1973). Nevertheless, it was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that the first significant empirical studies were published in England suggesting that the academic and social background of pupils were not the determining factors in a child's achievement at school in either the secondary (Reynolds, 1976; Rutter et al., 1979; Smith & Tomlinson, 1989) or primary phases (Mortimore et al., 1988).

A government review of more recent research affirms the strength of those early studies, arguing that "schools are independently important for deprived pupils' outcomes" (DCSF, 2009, p. 67) and points to a number of institutional factors that may contribute to alleviating some of the pervasive and long-term negative effects of social deprivation. However, it has been argued elsewhere that, together with the level of pupils' prior attainment - itself heavily influenced by socio-economic factors – the overall level of social disadvantage can account for as much as 80% of the apparent difference between schools (Goldstein & Sammons, 1997; Saunders, 1998). On the other hand, researchers in both the UK and USA have cautioned that high correlations between socio-economic status and levels of attainment do not mean they

are necessarily causal or that the interaction is straightforward and consistent for every pupil. It is a complex process (Saunders, 1999; Meegan et al., 2002).

Though the school effect may be a relatively small factor in the level of pupils' success at school, that there is some (small) institutional effect has become a focus for central and local government sponsored school improvement programmes and strategies. A number of school-based practices have been identified in a government report that can best support and enhance the learning experience of socially deprived pupils, within individual classrooms and the school as a whole. They include, improving the quality of teaching and school leadership at all levels, the nature of teacher/pupil interaction, and developing positive school/parent involvement (DCSF, 2009). The report also notes that "the creation of a positive school culture is the key factor in the improvement of schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas" (p. 67). However, it is rather vague as to the composition of that 'positive culture' and the acceptable methods whereby it can be created. Further, while the largest section of the report is devoted to the positive effects that schools can have (DCSF, 2009, Chp. 6), it makes no reference to possible differences between the beneficial, or detrimental, effects that different types or categories of school may have on the attainment levels of socially deprived pupils. In contrast, a significant body of research which has been published in the United States of America over the last twenty-five years which indicates that Catholic schools seem particularly effective with pupils from the lower socio-economic groupings in society, for example, Coleman et al., 1982; Greeley, 1982; Hoffer et al, 1985; Bryk et al, 1993; Reese et al, 1997; Johnson, 1999; Hoffer, 2000; Jeynes, 2000, 2003. Such empirical data are not necessarily applicable in different social and national cultures, of course, and in contrast to the UK, Catholic schools in America are not financially maintained by the state.

This paper considers the position within the public state maintained educational system in England. It compares the average levels of academic performance of pupils attending Catholic and other schools having similar proportions of disadvantaged pupils on roll at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16 years, using national test and examination performance data of pupils attending schools during the academic year 2006/2007 provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

## **The Catholic Community in England and its Schools**

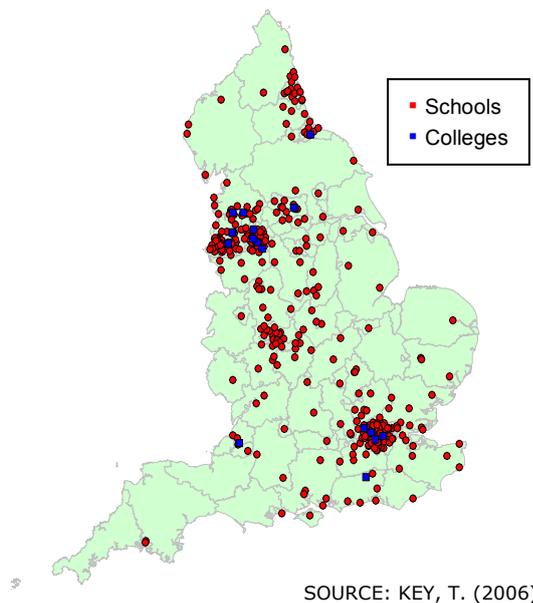
To understand the place, role and performance of Catholic schools in England today, one has to appreciate the complex history both of the Catholic community and of the state sponsored compulsory educational system that began in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though it was developed from within a predominantly Christian culture where, for the most part, a mutually supportive linkage between education and Christianity was accepted as part of the natural order, disputes about the nature and role of religious belief and instruction in state supported schools were central during the period leading up to the first statutory Education Act in 1870. Some thirty years later, the 1902 Act introduced a national and municipal 'dual system' of educational provision having, broadly, two different types of elementary school. Those provided by the newly created local authorities were maintained by government grants and local rates. Voluntary, or non-provided schools as they were designated, were funded, mainly, by Christian denominations and maintained by them with the assistance of some government grant, but not by local rates. Secular instruction in both types of school was under the directions of the local education authority. Religious instruction was in accordance with the voluntary school's trust deed but strictly non-denominational in local authority schools.

The Education Act 1944 extended the pre-war educational system, making education compulsory for pupils up to the age of fifteen (section 35) in newly created secondary schools. This triggered a vast expansion of provision by local authorities and Church groups. Today, around a third of all state maintained primary schools, and some fifteen percent of secondary schools, are designated as having a religious character, of which there are twenty different types. The vast majority belong either to the Church of England or the Catholic Church, but there are also a small number provided by minority Christian denominations, some Jewish, Muslim and Sikh schools, together with a few joint ventures by different Christian denominations working together in a variety of partnerships.

Today the Catholic dioceses provide a network of voluntary aided primary and secondary schools. Many of the secondary schools specialise in one or more curriculum subjects, some only educate pupils aged 11-16, others from 11-18. There are a few Sixth Form Colleges and, at the time of writing, two Academies. However, the spread across the country is uneven, institutions being located mainly in urban areas, with around 30% in the North-West of England, between 10-14% in London, with smaller groups in the North-East and West Midlands (figure 1). The total number of Catholic pupils in Catholic maintained schools

peaked in 1974 at 0.94 million when a gradual decline in pupil population began. In 1980 there were approximately 0.76 million, in 1990 some 0.68 million, in 2003 there were 0.63 million and in 2007 0.57 million, with a corresponding increase in the percentage of non-Catholic pupils, from around 3% in the 1970s to nearly 30% in 2007. Today, approximately 0.71 million Catholic and non-Catholic children, representing around 9.8% of the total pupil population in England, are educated in Catholic schools (Catholic Education Service, 2008, 2009; DCSF, 2008).

Figure 1 . Catholic Secondary Schools & Colleges in England



Despite that structural and geographical diversity, the bishops identify five essential characteristics of all their schools/colleges. They include a *search for excellence* and *education of all*, with a particular duty to care for the poor and disadvantaged (Catholic Education Service, 1996, 1997). That concern for the poor and underprivileged is not new, but rather has formed a central element of the Church's understanding of its educative mission for over 150 years (Marshall, 1850).

### Measures of Social Deprivation

Appropriately accurate and reliable measures of socio-economic deprivation are not easy to establish. For educational analyses, government uses two main indicators; eligibility for free school meals (FSM) and an area based measure, the Income Deprivation Affecting Children

Index (IDACI). Both have limitations. Pupils become eligible for free school meals if their parents are in receipt of certain state benefits and have made an appropriate claim for them from the local authority. Though a seemingly clear and straightforward indicator, it does not necessarily give a complete picture since not all eligible parents take up their entitlement. Further, at least one local authority provides free school meals for all its primary school pupils, completely negating FSM as a differentiating measure of deprivation in that area (Ray, 2006). The IDACI is a measure of the overall level of deprivation of the area in which the family resides. While it takes many factors into account and has a broader basis than FSM, it is not an indication of individual parental deprivation.

This paper uses the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) as a surrogate measure of social disadvantage. It is the measure adopted by school inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) when attempting to contextualise school pupil intake and performance. The information is readily available, has the advantage of being easy to measure and has a high correlation with pupil performance. However, using proxy measures, such as FSM, for comparing schools can lead to distorted or misleading comparisons. On the other hand, provided one appreciates the nature of the measure and its limitations, some useful insights can be made (Goldstein et al, 2000; Ray, 2006). However, it must be borne in mind that the proportion of FSM pupils varies across the primary and secondary phases; 16.9% and 14.4% respectively in the January 2007 school census returns. Further, eligible pupils do not necessarily remain so throughout their school life. Consequently, though the overall percentages may be fairly constant, the individuals that make up those numbers can vary, by up to 7% in any one year (DCSF, 2009).

### **Pupil Performance Data**

Pupils in maintained schools study a National Curriculum. It is divided into four Key Stages (KS) based on age, and sets standards of achievement expected of pupils at each stage (table1). Pupils take national tests at the end of each Key Stage, their results providing a snapshot of individual academic attainment compared with national standards.

Table 1

## The National Curriculum Key Stages

Year Group	Reception	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Normal Age of Pupils	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Key Stage	Key Stage 1			Key Stage 2				Key Stage 3			Key Stage 4	

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION &amp; SKILLS 2004

Those individual results, when aggregated, can provide a measure of the performance of their school, which can, in turn, be used as a measure of comparative school effectiveness.

For most subjects, national standards range from Levels 1-8 and pupils are expected to progress through those levels during their eleven years of formal schooling, though not all will necessarily achieve the highest levels in all, some or any of the Key Stages. At the end of the first Key Stage of the National Curriculum, pupils take tests in three subjects, reading, mathematics and writing. Most 7 year olds are expected to achieve at least Level 2 in each subject. At the end of Key Stage 2, when pupils are aged 11, tests are taken in English, mathematics and science, regarded by government as the core of the curriculum, with most expected to achieve Level 4. The same three subjects are tested at the end of Key Stage 3, when the average 14 year old is expected to achieve Levels 5 or 6. At the end of Key Stage 4, when pupils are aged 16, they will be expected to take General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations in a variety of named subjects (see [www.dcsf.gov.uk/performance/tables](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/performance/tables) for more details of the levels most pupils are expected to attain in subjects at the four different Key Stages). On average, pupils will follow ten such courses and take examinations in most, if not all, of them. Pass grades are awarded from A\*, the highest standard of attainment, to G, the lowest.

**Comparative Attainment Levels** –This study reports the attainment data taken from school tests and examinations during the academic year 2006/07. It compares the aggregated performance of pupils in differing ‘deprivation bands’ (based on the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in January each year) in Catholic and other schools. The data are taken from both the primary and secondary phases and, therefore, record the aggregated

performance of different cohorts of pupils. They represent a ‘snapshot’ of the performance of a particular cohort at a particular time in their total school career. Consequently, they do not provide a comparison of overall pupil progress from one Key Stage to the next.

### Primary Phase - Key Stages 1 and 2

For the purposes of comparison in the primary phase, schools are divided into five ‘deprivation bands’ as measured by the percentage of FSM on roll, derived from the statistical returns made by schools in January of each academic year; 50% or more, 35-49%, 21-34%, 8-20%, below 8%. The measure of attainment used for comparison is the percentage of the cohort that attain the standard expected of an ‘average’ pupil aged 7 and 11 at the end of the relevant Key Stage.

Table 2

Catholic & Other Schools – Key Stage 1 Pupil Attainment by FSM 2006/07

Proportion of FSM band	All Other			Catholic				
	No. of schools in band	% pupils attaining L2+ reading	% pupils attaining L2+ writing	% pupils attaining L2+ maths	No. of schools in band	*% attaining L2+ reading	*% attaining L2+ writing	*% attaining L2+ maths
50%+	598	70	66	81	46	+9	+9	+7
35%-49%	1251	73	69	83	131	+8	+6	+4
21%-34%	2343	78	75	87	269	+5	+4	+2
8%-20%	3538	85	82	91	511	+3	+2	+1
Below 8%	6203	91	89	95	674	+2	+1	+1

SOURCE: DCSF/Ofsted 2008

The depressive effect of social deprivation on levels of pupil attainment is evident at the age of 7, the earliest point at which national testing takes place (table 2). The higher the proportion of pupils on roll who are eligible for free school meals, the lower the proportion obtaining the expected standards in all three subjects. However, in each ‘deprivation band’ there is a performance differential in all three subjects tested in favour of the Catholic sector. Moreover, that differential increases the greater the overall level of deprivation in the school, again in all three subjects but most noticeably in English.

A similar, though not identical, pattern can be seen in the comparative levels of attainment at age 11, at the end of a child's primary education, where most pupils are expected to achieve level 4 in the three core subjects of English, mathematics and science (table 3). Again, in all three subjects tested there is a 'performance differential' in favour of the Catholic sector that increases as levels of deprivation increase in four of the five 'bands'. In schools having more than 50% of FSM pupils on roll, however, the differential, though still evident, does not continue the incremental pattern. Nevertheless, with that exception, the differentials in pupil attainment in each of the subjects tend to be greater at age 11 than at age 7, though since the comparisons are with different cohorts it would be unwise to read too much into that observation.

Table 3

Catholic & Other Schools – Key Stage 2 Pupil Attainment by FSM 2006/07

Proportion of FSM band	All Other			Catholic				
	No. of schools in band	% pupils attaining L4+ English	% pupils attaining L4+ maths	% pupils attaining L4+ science	No. of schools in band	% attaining L4+ English	% attaining L4+ maths	% attaining L4+ science
50% +	600	67	66	78	50	+5	+8	+5
35%-49%	1225	67	66	78	129	+10	+9	+8
21%-34%	2225	73	70	82	271	+8	+7	+5
8%-20%	3320	80	77	88	494	+5	+4	+2
Below 8%	5508	88	85	93	665	+3	+2	+1

SOURCE: DCSF/Ofsted 2008

### Secondary Phase - Key Stage 3

When pupils are aged 11 years old, at the end of Key Stage 2, they transfer from their primary schools into the secondary phase of compulsory education. In this instance, because of the greater variety of secondary schools and the differing patterns of pupil numbers eligible for free school meals in the two phases (see above), schools are divided into eight categories, seven 'deprivation bands' linked directly to the percentage of FSM eligible pupils on roll in the particular cohort in January and a separate, eighth, 'grammar school' band. The seven non-selective school bands comprise those having 50% or more, 35-49%, 21-34%, 13-20%, 9-12%, 5-8% and below 5% of the cohort eligible for free school meals. Schools in the 'grammar' band have negligible FSM numbers, on average 2.2% (DCSF, 2008).

There are very few Catholic grammar schools (seven only, none of which are diocesan owned, but run by religious orders), and even fewer Catholic secondary schools in the two highest deprivation bands (six and fifteen, schools respectively). Consequently, making meaningful comparisons across the sectors for these three particular bands is somewhat problematical.

Table 4

## Catholic &amp; Other Schools – Key Stage 3 Pupil Attainment by FSM 2006/07

Proportion of FSM band	All Other				Catholic			
	No. of schools in band	% pupils attaining L5+ English	% pupils attaining L5+ maths	% pupils attaining L5+ science	No. of schools in band	+/. % attaining L5+ English	+/. % attaining L5+ maths	+/. % attaining L5+ science
50% +	68	57	60	52	6	+2	+2	+4
35%-49%	197	57	59	53	15	+11	+7	+5
21%-34%	446	63	66	61	50	+11	+8	+8
13%-20%	492	68	71	67	57	+9	+7	+6
9%-12%	418	75	76	74	60	+6	+5	+4
5%-8%	607	79	81	79	87	+7	+4	+4
Below 5%	440	86	87	86	50	+5	+3	+4
Grammar	152	99	99	99	7	=	=	-4

SOURCE: DCSF/Ofsted 2008

The comparative measures of attainment at the end of Key Stage 3, when pupils are aged 14, are based on national tests in three subjects, English, mathematics and science, as is the case at the end of their primary schooling. Leaving aside for one moment the comparative performance of grammar schools, the differential pattern is consistent in each subject, and at each level of deprivation.

There are clear similarities with the primary phase findings. Again, a greater proportion of pupils attending Catholic schools achieve the levels expected of them at the end of the Key Stage and, it seems that the greater the level of overall deprivation within schools, the greater the difference in overall levels of attainment in the two sectors, though this trend is not maintained in the two highest deprivation bands. Whether this change in the pattern observed so far is a result of the small number of Catholic schools in these categories or is indicative of some other phenomenon is not possible to ascertain from this data set.

Comparisons of the pattern of performance in the three core subjects, albeit from a different cohort, are similar for pupils aged 11 and 14. The English test results show the greatest differential in favour of the Catholic sector schools; science (marginally) the least. It is, perhaps, a little surprising that differentials are not the same, or very similar, in all three subjects. However, it is consistent with research using a multilevel modelling technique suggesting that while pupils attending Catholic schools clearly outperform those in non-religious schools in English at Key Stage 3 across the whole of the ability range, there is less of a difference in mathematics and science (Schagen et al, 2002).

### Secondary Phase - Key Stage 4

At the end of each of the first three key stages, although pupils have been taught all subjects that comprise the National Curriculum, the tests are limited to three core subjects. Consequently, the measures of comparison are limited. At the end of Key Stage 4, the vast majority of secondary school pupils will take examinations in various General Certificate of Secondary Education (or equivalent) examinations (for more details see [www.dcsf/performanceables](http://www.dcsf/performanceables)). Government has used various measures means of comparing school performance since the first league tables of raw examination scores were first published in 1992.

Table 5

#### Catholic & Other Schools – Key Stage 4 Pupil Attainment by FSM 2006/07

Proportion of FSM band	All Other			Catholic				
	No. schools in band	% pupils attaining any GCSE qualific'n	% pupils attaining 5+ A*-G GCSE (any subjects)	% pupils attaining 5+ A*-C GCSE (inc English & maths)	No. schools in band	% attaining any GCSE qualific'n	% attaining 5+ A*-G GCSE (any subjects)	% attaining 5+ A*-C GCSE (inc English & maths)
50% +	69	97	87	49	6	-4	-3	+4
35%-49%	198	96	84	45	15	+1	+5	+11
21%-34%	442	97	88	49	50	=	+3	+10
13%-20%	483	97	90	51	58	+1	+3	+10
9%-12%	409	98	92	57	59	+1	+2	+8
5%-8%	591	99	94	63	87	=	+2	+8
Below 5%	4740	99	96	72	49	=	+1	+7
Grammar	152	100	100	98	7	=	-1	-1

SOURCE: DCSF/Ofsted 2008

While it is generally recognised that such measures do not take into account all the factors known to affect pupils' academic attainment, and do not, therefore, give a full picture of the comparative effectiveness of a school, they are, nevertheless, used by parents and government as measures of school effectiveness. Indeed, at the time of writing, should the percentage of pupils attaining 5+ A\*-C grades at GCSE fall below 30%, the school may well be subject to government intervention or even closure. Consequently, despite the limitations of the measures, they can be, and sometimes are, used as institutional comparators, and those comparisons when made can have significant implications.

As one might expect, nearly all pupils, irrespective of the type of school they attend and the level of social deprivation within the cohort, obtain at least one examination qualification at the end of eleven years of formal schooling. It is, after all, a very minimum standard. The numbers achieving the much more challenging benchmark of five or more GCSE examination passes, including English and mathematics, at Grade C or above, are considerably lower in both sectors. Nevertheless, even at the minimum level of attainment, as the proportion of socially disadvantaged pupils in a cohort (as measured by their FSM eligibility) increases, there is an adverse effect on attainment, albeit marginal. When using the more rigorous measures of academic attainment favoured by government, the depressive effect is more noticeable.

When one compares the sectors on the two more demanding measures of attainment, in all deprivation bands, other than in grammar schools, a higher proportion of pupils attending Catholic schools tend to achieve the expected standard. That differential, in favour of the Catholic sector, tends to increase the greater the proportion of FSM eligible pupils in the cohort, and is most apparent in the most demanding of the three measures. However, there are anomalies evident in the general trends noted above. Pupils attending Catholic grammar schools perform marginally less well than their counterparts in secular institutions. This finding may be a function of the very small sample of Catholic schools, or, and this may be connected to the slightly smaller cohorts in Catholic schools generally (Ofsted, 2002; Catholic Education Service, 2003), the academic entry requirements for admission to the Catholic grammar schools may be lower than for other selective schools in order to achieve viable numbers. These are, however, merely possibilities and such hypotheses need to be tested.

At the extreme end of the deprivation band, that is, schools having more than 50% of their pupils eligible for free school meals, the performance of pupils attending Catholic schools at the two lower levels of overall attainment is poorer than those in other similar institutions. Again, the explanation may lie with the size of the Catholic school sample or, perhaps, with other non-observed social factors. The available data does not allow any definitive conclusions to be drawn and further research of the phenomenon is required.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study relate to one academic year only so, taken in isolation, too much should not be read into them. Nevertheless, their general thrust confirms numerous studies showing social deprivation (however measured) to have a negative effect upon children's academic attainment, leaving them with fewer and poorer qualifications at the end of eleven years of compulsory schooling, thus diminishing their future employment potential and risking a perpetuation of that cycle of deprivation. It is no surprise, therefore, that the findings also confirm that increases in the percentage of pupils from deprived home backgrounds on a school roll increase the likelihood of lower average levels of academic attainment by that cohort of pupils. In other words, it becomes more difficult for schools to mitigate the pernicious effects that social deprivation have upon pupils' academic careers.

On the other hand, while this study confirms the consistent depressive effect of social deprivation across all types of maintained school, the findings seem to show that socially deprived pupils attending Catholic sector schools are likely to achieve higher levels of academic attainment than similar pupils in other schools, and that attainment differential between the sectors increases the greater the percentage of deprived pupils on roll. These findings do seem to be consistent with results reported in earlier studies of pupil performance in primary (Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, 1997) and secondary schools (Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, 1999; Morris, 2005). All three studies used school performance data provided by Ofsted Research and Analysis and, as such, give a useful longitudinal perspective of comparative institutional effectiveness, suggesting that the findings from this study may be indications of a real phenomenon.

If that is the case, what might be the contributing factors in explaining the seemingly superior performance of Catholic sector schools with disadvantaged pupils? The report cited at the

beginning of this paper (DCSF, 2009) suggested the quality of teaching and school leadership as possible causes. There seems no obvious reason why the quality of teaching or leadership should be qualitatively better in Catholic schools, and the evidence there is from Ofsted inspections suggests that any such differences in favour of the Catholic sector are marginal and not particularly consistent over time. On the other hand, inspection data presented elsewhere suggest that Catholic schools are more able to generate an ethos supportive of effective learning and have better home/school links (Ofsted, 2001; Morris, 1998, 2010; Key, 2006; Catholic Education Service, 2006). Exactly why this should be the case is still a matter of some speculation.

### **Ability to Generate & Sustain Community**

It has been argued that causes may lie in the characteristics of the relationship between parents and children's schools. Where such relationships are poor, they can be categorised as deficiencies in ability of parents to create the necessary supportive environment at home that will enable their children to thrive at school – family deficit – or an inability of the school to develop pupils' potentialities – educational inadequacy (Cairney, 2000). Such a categorisation, of itself, does not, of course, provide an explanation for the observed sector differences. However, there may be discernible effects arising from differing socio/cultural practices of schools and parents that impact upon their ability to generate social and educational capital and the learning capabilities of pupils. It has been suggested, for example, that where families are part of a recognisable community, in the sense of them sharing, for example, specific cultural and/or religious values, and their children attend schools provided by and for that community, there is the potential for a high degree of parental support (Strike, 2003).

It has also been argued that where a school succeeds in being a community, in the sense that those involved subscribe to a set of constitutive values, or conception of human nurturing, the greater the chances that the manifest values or culture of the school will be closely matched by the latent values of all those adults involved, and this, in turn, will generate and support productive educational activity (Becker & Greer, 1960; Bruner, 1986; Schagen et al., 2002; Strike, 2003). In other words, as pupils are acculturated into formal education, the greater the congruence between the attitudes and practices of the school with that of parents, the greater the likelihood of successful pupil outcomes. The Cultural Theory of risk, which explores

holistic ways of analysing the formative activities and understandings of different group typologies contained in the work of Douglas (1992) and Wildavsky et al (1998) may, if applied to the structures and culture of education, also provide some insight into possible causal factors.

### **Conclusion**

The commitment of the Catholic bishops in England to their schools suggests that they are convinced of the academic benefits such schools provide for the more deprived pupils, both in their own faith communities and, given the increasing numbers of non-Catholic children being enrolled in Catholic schools, in the wider society. However, in his survey of published research Hyde (1990) noted a lack of empirical evidence at that time to justify their confidence or, on the other hand, to give support to groups and individuals opposed, in principle, to state support for religious based education.

While it is recognised that one must be cautious when making institutional comparisons based on non-contextualised aggregated data, the chosen methodology for this study allows us to obtain some indication as to whether the principles espoused by the Catholic bishops to support socially and academically disadvantaged youngsters in their schools are being realised in practice.

The data presented in this small-scale study, which is consistent with the findings of earlier studies, suggest that Catholic sector schools seem able to generate and sustain a positive school culture that can mitigate the effects of deprivation (of the type suggested by DCSF) more easily than the generality of other schools, and that the confidence of the bishops is reasonably well-founded. However, the probable causal reasons for the findings are still speculative and, as such, require further investigation.

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