

# Oldham lives: still parallel or converging?

**Ten years after the Oldham race riots, *Simon Burgess* and *Rich Harris* examine whether ethnic segregation in the town's schools has changed at all – and the potential impact of initiatives to promote greater integration.**

Ten years ago, there were major civil disturbances in Oldham, a town of over 100,000 people that forms part of Greater Manchester. Shortly afterwards, similar riots took place in Bradford and nearby Burnley.

There was a strong ethnic component to the unrest, with confrontations between gangs of white and Asian, largely Pakistani, youths. While the precise triggers of the rioting remain controversial, there is general agreement that a key underlying factor was the polarised nature of schools and communities in the towns.

## Standard statistics of segregation for the largest ethnic groups in Oldham show little evidence of change over the past ten years

The phrase that has been widely used to describe the situation in Oldham is that people live 'parallel lives': physically close but never meeting. This idea was prominent in the Cantle report, which was commissioned by Oldham's council to provide an independent review of its efforts to make progress on the issues five years after the event.<sup>1</sup>

The report, which was published in 2006, characterised the problems facing Oldham as: 'communities leading parallel lives delineated by high levels of segregation in housing and schools, reinforced by differences in language, culture and religion'. Previous CMPO research has shown that Oldham has the most ethnically polarised schools in England using conventional measures of segregation.

Now, ten years on, it seems like a good time to assess changes in segregation. As part of CMPO's continuing research programme on segregation, we have set up an interactive website, 'Measuring Diversity', which publishes detailed local statistics on ethnic segregation in schools.<sup>2</sup>

Our research shows that looking at local authorities over England as a whole, there has been essentially no change in levels of ethnic segregation over the last ten years. Of course, that reflects the residential geography of England and the tendency for ethnic groups that are less prevalent nationally to be concentrated in particular urban conurbations and then within particular parts of those towns and cities.

But even within those areas where we might expect changes, there is a little evidence of any clear trend. In Leicestershire, for example,

there are some years when segregation appears to increase slightly whereas in other years it reduces. In Birmingham, very little has changed over the period 2002-09, though primary schools especially appear to be becoming more mixed. The same is true in Manchester.

The most likely explanations for the changes, where they exist, are demographic changes and because schools have consolidated, merged or opened on new sites. Where there are fewer schools in a local education authority than in the past, then that reduction will tend to create larger and more socially mixed schools.

Here we focus specifically on Oldham. The CMPO's 'Measuring Diversity' website shows that about 60% of primary school pupils in Oldham are white British (compared with 72% nationally), with 17% of Pakistani

ethnicity and 14% of Bangladeshi ethnicity (compared with 4% and 2% respectively for England as a whole).

Over 80% of primary school pupils of Pakistani or Bangladeshi ethnicity are in 'minority white' schools (defined as schools where at most 20% of the pupils are white British); and over 70% of white pupils are in 'majority white' primary schools (schools where at least 80% of the pupils are white British). These numbers are lower in secondary schools, in part because there are fewer, larger secondary schools: 60% of Pakistani pupils and 65% of Bangladeshi pupils are in 'minority white' secondary schools.

The standard measures of segregation are the Isolation Index and the Dissimilarity Index, which are defined precisely on the website. The former is designed to capture a measure of 'exposure' between two groups, in effect a statistical measure of the likelihood of meeting someone from the other group. The latter is designed to capture the degree of 'unevenness' between two groups – how much the school population reflects the wider population at the local authority level.

Schools would be perfectly integrated if each school's population reflected the population of the local authority. Both of these indices run from 0 (perfect integration) to 1 (complete segregation). In Oldham, both these levels are very high: for example, an Isolation Index for Pakistani secondary school pupils of 0.41 (and 0.42 for Bangladeshi pupils) compared with upper quartile values in England of 0.35 and 0.17.

So how have things changed over the period for which we have data, 2002-09? Figure 1

Parents may prefer an integrated school but the highly segregated system means that they are forced to send their children to essentially mono-ethnic schools

<sup>1</sup><http://www.oldham.gov.uk/cantle-review-final-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.measuringdiversity.org.uk>

shows one straightforward measure of integration, the fraction of pupils of different ethnicities among primary school pupils in 'minority white' schools. Similarly, Figure 2 displays the fraction of pupils of different ethnicities among primary school pupils in 'majority white' schools. Neither chart shows much sign of greater integration. We do not see more white pupils in 'minority white' schools or more Pakistani or Bangladeshi pupils in 'majority white' schools.

Turning to the direct measures of segregation, Figure 3 shows the Isolation Index for each ethnic group and Figure 4 the Dissimilarity Index. All of these lines show only very gentle declines over this eight-year period, indicating very little substantive change. All these findings can be graphed for secondary schools on the website, and show the same pattern over time as primary schools.

Overall, these standard statistics of segregation calculated for the largest ethnic groups over the eight years since the Oldham riots show little evidence of change. Of course, because school attendance is closely tied to residential neighbourhoods, it could be argued that we should not expect dramatic change. This is true to a degree, but distances between the secondary schools are not great, and we know that pupils regularly travel that kind of distance to schools in urban areas in England. So at least in principle, it is feasible for more integration to have occurred.

Another explanation for the lack of change could be the use of geographically based admissions criteria, including a mix of

## Concern for ethnic groups' relative performance at GCSE alone would not support a strong policy interest in reducing segregation

geographical priority areas and measures of distance to home from school in Oldham, which could determine who gets into where based on where they live. But this seems unlikely in Oldham, which has taken the bold step of merging and re-opening some of its most ethnically segregated schools, and has moved others to different areas to seek a mixed intake.

A third explanation is the prevalence of faith-based schools. More than one third of primary schools and over 40% of secondary schools in Oldham are Roman Catholic or

Figure 1

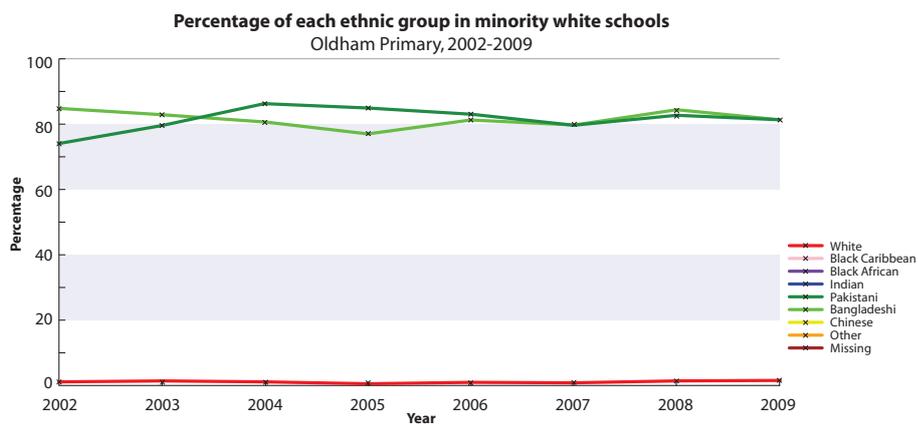
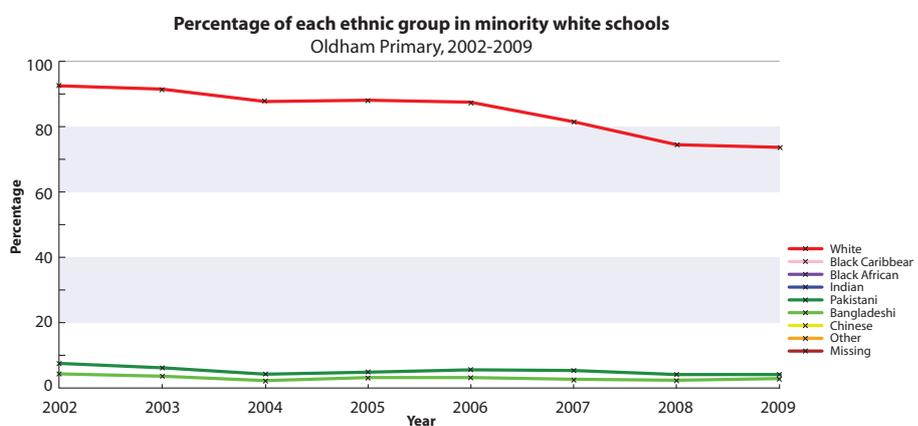


Figure 2



Church of England faith schools including demonstrable practice of a faith among their admissions criteria. If such practices have cultural and ethnic underpinnings – which they do – then including them among the admissions criteria is unlikely to aid mixing within schools.

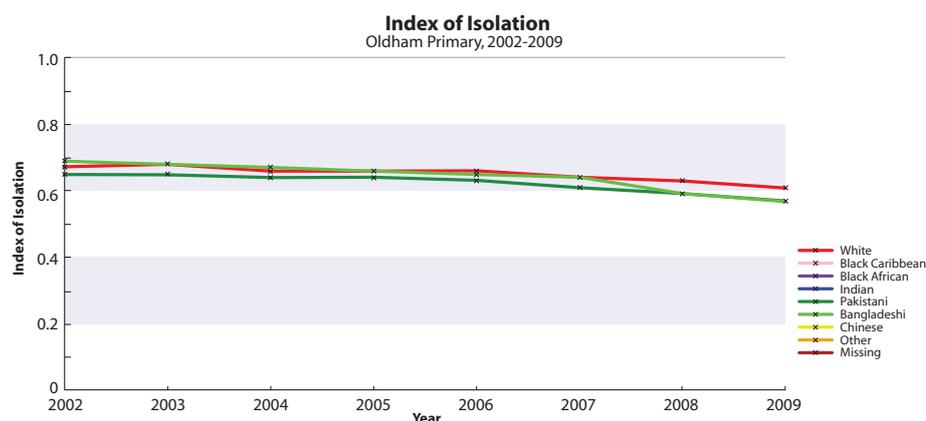
Should we care about ethnic segregation in schools? After all, it is hard to prove that this truly was associated with the Oldham riots; or that segregation, as opposed to, say, inequality or the restructuring of the industrial/manufacturing sectors are the root causes. In fact, segregation might influence a number of outcomes, some easier to quantify than others.

One easy to measure outcome is educational attainment, typically captured by test scores. US research has shown that racial segregation between schools is strongly linked to differential test scores. Highly segregated cities are associated with black pupils scoring further below white pupils than in more integrated cities.

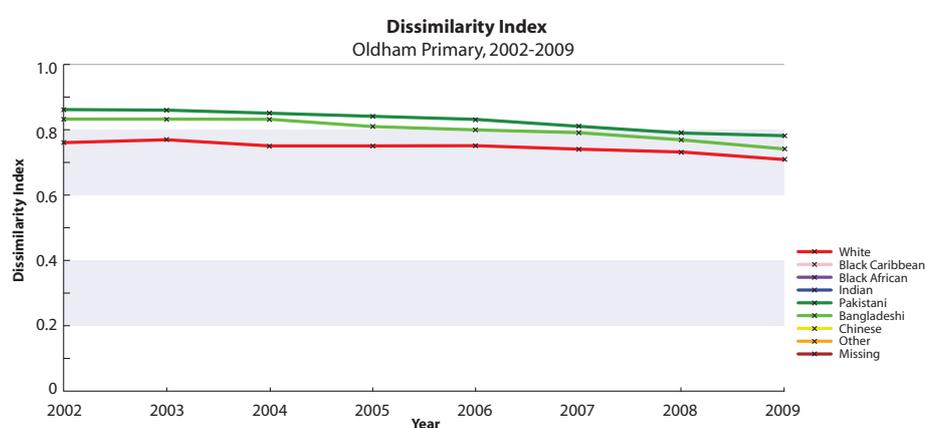
While similar research in England is hampered by far fewer substantial cities to run the same cross-city research design, our tentative results have shown that the same story does not hold true here. So concern for relative performance at GCSE alone would not support a strong policy interest in reducing segregation.

Fourth, it may be that other attitudes have prevented a greater mixing across schools. It is undoubtedly very hard to be the first mover and as a parent to lead a movement for integration by applying to a school numerically dominated by another ethnic group. This is a form of co-ordination problem well known in economics: that while there may be a majority of parents who would prefer integrated schools, there is no mechanism to co-ordinate such an outcome without the intervention of an outside agency. We report on an initiative that might perform such a role at the end of this article.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



## It could be that there are few mixed schools in Oldham because no one really wants a mixed school

An important issue is whether the segregation is voluntary or not. If it is, then the same libertarian arguments that promote school choice can be used to say, 'well, if people choose, so be it.' Indeed, though segregation is often treated pejoratively, it may well be that the identity and security of children from less dominant ethnic groups is strengthened within their own peer groups.

Moreover, any policies seeking more ethnically mixed schools need to recognise that they affect some ethnic groups more than others. The bottom line is that across England the overwhelming majority of white pupils attend 'majority white' schools. Whether this is socially desirable is an important issue, but some caution is required in advocating policies that, in effect, would force some groups to mix more than others.

The key question is hard to answer: what is

the impact of a school's ethnic composition on pupils' attitudes to other ethnic groups? Robert Putnam's results suggest that ethnically diverse communities are associated with 'hunkering down', that is, individuals keeping themselves to themselves, neither having much contact with other ethnic groups in their city nor fraternising much with their own.

Some examples of attitudes arising in highly segregated settings can be gleaned from simply listening to teachers involved in school twinning programmes in the area. School links projects (which have been running in six primary schools in Oldham since 2000) typically start with pupils from two essentially mono-ethnic schools spending time playing together.

A head teacher from Huddersfield, who runs a primary school where 92% of pupils are

Pakistani heritage, said of her pupils: 'Some of our children could live their lives without meeting someone from another culture until they go to high school or even the workplace'.<sup>3</sup> More dramatically, she added: 'Our pupils think it's amazing that they like pizza too'.

Growing up thinking that pupils of another ethnicity are so different that they might not like pizza or don't watch the same TV programmes is a very powerful demonstration of the influence of separation, of simply never talking to people from other ethnic groups. This is perhaps the single most important reason to have major concerns over pupils living their school lives in parallel universes.

What of the future? The Oldham Academy North opened in September 2010 as part of a broader plan for three new academies in the town. The school's ambition is to 'create an academy that promotes integration and social cohesion. We want pupils from different backgrounds to learn, work and play together – creating greater understanding that can be shared beyond the school community'.<sup>4</sup>

It is obviously too soon to tell whether these high hopes can be achieved. It could be that there is a strong but latent demand for a mixed, integrated school. Parents may prefer such a school, but the fact that the school system is so highly segregated means that they are forced to send their children to essentially mono-ethnic schools.

If this is the case, the new academy will attract parents from all ethnicities seeking an integrated education for their children. More pessimistically, it could be that there are few mixed schools because no one really wants a mixed school. We will need to revisit Oldham in another five years time to tell.

**Simon Burgess is CMPO's director and a professor of economics at the University of Bristol; Rich Harris is a senior lecturer in the University of Bristol's School of Geographical Sciences and a member of CMPO**

<sup>3</sup>Reported in the Times Educational Supplement, 27 June 2008

<sup>4</sup>[www.iroyton.com/academy/EACT\\_Oldham\\_Leaflet.pdf](http://www.iroyton.com/academy/EACT_Oldham_Leaflet.pdf)