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Ethnic segregation in schools: a study of non-decision making

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ABSTRACT

This article examines ethnic segregation in schools as a field where policy inaction, or non-decision making, is rife. A theoretical framework rooted in historical institutionalism and combining critical junctures with path dependencies enables the study of non-decision making and policy inaction. Moving from non-decision making as a general phenomenon to the specific case of British education policies, the focus is on ethno-religious segregation between White British and South Asian Muslim students, which has become a salient issue in British politics and society. After a general discussion, the article zooms in on a North English town presenting typical constellations of ethnic segregation and mixing in neighbourhoods and schools. The subsequent policy analysis shows how, from the mid-1980s until recently, non-decision making has been predominant. Given the ongoing problematization of ethnic segregation in British politics and society, a reversal from policy inaction to formal decision-making seems possible. The article offers insight into the inner workings of non-decision making that have wider application, transcending any given locality and policy sphere.

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Introduction

In an era of migration and globalization, ethnic segregation in schools has become a focus of attention across the Global North. Yet, as we shall see, education policies to address the issue are few and far between. At first sight, this seems surprising for two reasons. First, ethnic segregation, which we may define broadly as disproportionate concentration of ethnic groups in spaces such as neighbourhoods or schools, is widely acknowledged as a problem. Second, education policies offer opportunities to counteract ethnic segregation because social mixing in schools enables contact among young people and their parents.

We may class this as a case of policy inaction where decision-makers choose to ‘do nothing’ (McConnell and Hart 2019). Often, policy inaction is not so much a result of passivity but rather of ‘non-decision making’ (Bachrach and Baratz 1970). To explain the status quo, non-decisions are often as relevant as, if not more relevant than, formal decisions. To understand deeper phenomena and effects of power, we must understand

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how challenging issues, such as ethnic segregation, are kept off the agenda and fail to become subject to decision-making (Cobb and Elder 1971; Cobb and Ross 1997).

To show how ethnic segregation in schools is a case in point, the article proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the concept of non-decision making and propose a theoretical framework, rooted in historical institutionalism and combining the analysis of critical junctures and path dependencies. Next, I present the dearth, until recently, of policies to address ethnic segregation in schools, with particular emphasis on ethnoreligious segregation between White British and British Asian Muslim students at schools in England. For further illustration, I select an English town, which, as I show, presents typical constellations of segregation and mixing. In the subsequent analysis of policy (in)action, I rely on interviews and secondary material to show how, from the 1980s until recently, non-decision making has been the norm. The conclusion considers a possible return from non-decision making to deliberate decision-making and offers reflections on wider applicability.

Theoretical framework

According to a famous dictum by Schattschneider (1960, 71), some issues are ‘organized into politics while others are organized out.’ From this, Bachrach and Baratz (1963) developed a framework to study decision and non-decision making, defining a decision as a ‘choice among alternative modes of action,’ and a non-decision as ‘a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of latent or manifest challenges to the values or interests of the decision maker’ (Peter and Baratz 1970, 39, 44). Non-decision making happens when issues that might challenge the status quo are filtered out before reaching the stage of formal decision-making, typically by branding their pursuit as incompatible with shared norms or by invoking procedural rules allowing to suppress them (ibid., p. 54). *Distinguishing between non-decision making based on normative and procedural objections is very fruitful for the study of concrete episodes, as we will see in the analysis below.*

Some authors have investigated how established elites use power and influence to determine which items may or may not enter the policy agenda, and which ones must disappear from it (Cobb and Elder 1971; Cobb and Ross 1997; Shpaizman 2020). While this certainly does happen, items can be absent from the agenda not only due to obstruction by powerful elites but also because of structural obstacles such as institutional inertia or non-written rules. What is more, periods of stagnation sometimes give way to bouts of change. Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen (2018) propose a punctuated equilibrium theory to explain how long periods of political stasis are occasionally disrupted by shorter episodes of policy innovation when extra-institutional pressures force new ideas on the policy agenda. In the absence of such pressures, e.g. from powerful external players or large-scale movements pushing alternate problem definitions, Baumgartner et al. expect stasis because ‘a successful policy monopoly systematically dampens pressure for change’ (ibid., 60).

Since entering social science in the early 1990s, punctuated equilibrium theory has engendered vibrant research on stability and change in policymaking. However, it is only one branch of historical institutionalism, a wider school that analyses stability and change (Pierson 2000). Historical institutionalists posit that power asymmetries may

enable established authorities to capitalize on their political advantage and forestall institutional change for extended periods of time; and that, once established, ‘basic outlooks on politics, ranging from ideologies to understandings of particular aspects of governments or orientations toward political groups or parties, are generally tenacious’ (ibid., 259–260).

Historical institutionalism explains change by studying critical junctures in relation to path dependencies: ‘[R]elatively long periods of path-dependent institutional stability and reproduction (...) are punctuated occasionally by brief phases of institutional flux – referred to as critical junctures – during which more dramatic change is possible’ (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341). Yet, ‘change is not a necessary element of a critical juncture. If change was possible and plausible, considered, and ultimately rejected in a situation of high uncertainty, then there is no reason to discard these cases’ (ibid., 352). Hence, *while historical institutionalists normally focus on critical junctures locking in decisions, critical junctures may also lock in patterns of non-decision making. Thus, policy inaction can be a path-dependent result of what we may call ‘no-change’ critical junctures.*

Non-decisions are non-events, which are challenging to study because they imply a counterfactual. On the one hand, one must meticulously study the factual record of what happened. On the other hand, one must carefully probe the question of what could have happened but did not happen. The former requires descriptive analysis. The latter requires soaking and poking. Therefore, in addition to establishing the facts, I follow Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 354–359) in deploying narrative process tracing to examine ‘what happened in the context of what could have happened’ (Isaiah Berlin, cited ibid., 355).

Applied to my case study of non-decision making in a concrete setting (Halifax in West Yorkshire, England), this means: on the one hand, I rely on statistical data, official documents, and news items; on the other hand, I follow an ethnographic approach to the study of non-events, as suggested by Anderson (1990). Descriptive analysis and narrative process tracing are both necessary because, since non-decision making is about the paths not taken, its study requires, on the one hand, factual observation; and, on the other hand, counterfactual analysis of the circumstances under which policy options were available but left aside.

Ethnic segregation, education policy, and non-decision making

Non-decision making is rife in education policy (McCalla-Chen 2000), not least regarding segregation in schools. While ethnic segregation in schools is only one form of school segregation, alongside segregation by other characteristics such as social background (Boterman et al. 2019), it has become a focus of attention across the Global North in an era of migration and globalization (Bonal and Bellei 2019). Yet, ‘there is, in general, an absence of public policies directly aimed at reducing school segregation’ (ibid., 15). For instance, Bonal (2012) shows ‘how the Catalan government has not developed an agenda to tackle school segregation despite the growing number of migrant pupils.’

While ethnic segregation in schools is an issue in many parts of the world, it became a focus of attention in the USA after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, which triggered a wave of racial desegregation policies followed by a ‘quiet reversal’ (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Owens 2020). In Europe, ethnic segregation in schools

has for a long time been observable in cities like Amsterdam (Gramberg 1998). More recently, scholars have started comparing school segregation across multiple national and urban contexts (Baysu and de Valk 2012; Boterman et al. 2019; Kroneberg, Kruse, and Wimmer 2021). Nevertheless, policies to address the issue have been few and far-between.

In this article, we focus on England, although other European countries have followed comparable trajectories. When ethnic segregation arose in English schools, authorities initially followed the US example of ‘dispersing’ minority children to majority areas. Under the policy, minority children were ‘bussed’ out of minority-segregated residential areas and school zones into majority-segregated areas and zones. However, ‘bussing’ was unpopular in minority and majority communities alike. Influential exponents of minority communities found it discriminatory, whereas majority communities often did not welcome the influx of minority children, many of whom were not only racially different but also from deprived backgrounds. In the case of children with a migrant background from South Asia, education authorities were able to argue that minority bussing had the benefit of improving their language proficiency. Yet, the policy turned out to be so unpopular that, after a number of reviews, local authorities discarded it during the 1970s and 1980s (Esteves 2019).

Minority bussing amounts to a critical juncture of the ‘no change’ type. Policy-makers and other stakeholders ‘learned’ that tackling ethnic segregation in schools is hardly appreciated and leads to controversy. Policy-makers in other European countries made similar experiences and ‘learnt’ similar lessons. Consequently, deliberate policies to address segregation came to a trickle from the 1980s (Ireland 2008, 1353). The path-dependent result was that deference to the emerging neoliberal principle of parental choice (West and Pennell 2002) seemed like the safer policy option. Even early academic scholarship on ‘Muslims in English schools’ mentioned segregation only in passing (Nielsen 1989).

Despite a vitriolic public debate in the 1980s (Taylor 1984), ethnic segregation in schools remained a non-issue for a couple of decades. This began to change only in the summer of 2001, when so-called racial disturbances occurred in the northern towns of Bradford, Oldham, and Burnley (Bagguley and Hussain 2019). The Government-commissioned Cattle Report (2001) identified ‘parallel lives’ as the problem and ‘community cohesion’ as the cure, placing heavy emphasis on segregation and mixing in schools. Similar reports appeared in Bradford and Oldham (Ritchie 2001; Ouesley 2001). A group of academics, mostly from the University of Bristol, published pioneering studies documenting and contextualizing ethnic segregation at English schools (Johnston, Wilson, and Burgess 2004; Burgess and Wilson 2005; Burgess, Wilson, and Lupton 2005; Johnston et al. 2006, see also Taylor 2009; Hamnett 2012; Croxford and Raffe 2013).

Yet, the open problematization of ethnic segregation in schools hardly translated into policy action. The most visible initiatives were a small number of school closures and mergers aiming at desegregation in Blackburn, Burnley, Oldham, and Leeds (Miah 2012). At a rhetorical level, the issue had entered the policy agenda, but implementation remained confined to a handful of northern cities associated with strained race relations.

In July 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech at a secondary school in Birmingham, framing ethnoreligious segregation as bound up with Islamist extremism

and kick-starting a fresh review, to be conducted by Dame Louise Casey (Cameron 2015). The Casey Review appeared one year later (2016), urging desegregation. The Prime Minister's call for action and the Casey Review led to a new wave of scholarship. Some continued with the task of identifying and visualizing patterns of segregation (Harris 2017; Harris, Charlton, and Brunsdon 2018; Harris and Johnston 2020), but others moved towards explanatory (Gorard 2016) and theory-driven work, mostly exploring the contact hypothesis (Ramiah et al. 2015; Hewstone et al. 2018; Birtel et al. 2020; Burgess and Platt 2021).

While the Prime Minister had struck a dramatic note, Dame Louise Casey expressed frustration at the lack of actual policies. 'I think absolutely nothing has happened since I published that report a year ago' (cited in Weaver 2017). The UK Government has stated a vision for children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds to 'mix and form lasting relationships' (HM Government 2018, 26), but a recent report on race and ethnic disparities hardly even mentions the word 'segregation' (CRED 2021).

A townscape of segregation and mixing

Halifax in West Yorkshire, North England, presents a microcosm of residential and school segregation, mainly between White British and British Pakistani communities but also including East European and other minorities. The town has ca. 80,000 inhabitants. The evidence suggests that ethnic segregation is more intense among working-class than among middle-class residents. Helpfully for this study, Halifax presents typical constellations of segregation and mixing in schools and neighbourhoods – as we shall see.

The last available population census of 2011 shows a high degree of residential segregation in Halifax. While most areas, including the town centre, were almost entirely White British, the area west of the centre was predominantly British Pakistani. All mosques were (and are) located in Park Ward, a Pakistani-majority neighbourhood in West Central Halifax. In Calderdale, the region around Halifax, 94% of Pakistanis were Muslim and 88% of Muslims were Pakistani. The next largest Muslim group were Bangladeshi, with 4%. In Halifax, 'Pakistani,' 'Asian,' and 'Muslim' are largely congruent categorizations.

The neighbourhoods to the west and southwest of Park Ward were predominantly White British, but with Pakistani minorities in the order of 10–15%. Apart from White British and Pakistani residents, there were small minorities of East Europeans. Since 2011, mainly due to higher birth rates among a youthful population, the Pakistani community has spread further into areas west and southwest of Park Ward. At the same time, migrants and refugees have arrived from other parts of the world (Migration Yorkshire 2019).

Ever since the 1950s and 1960s, when Pakistani labour migrants from the Mirpur area of Kashmir were invited to England's northern industrial heartland, segregation between the White British majority and Pakistani-heritage minorities in former 'textile towns' like Halifax has arisen due to cultural rather than socioeconomic differences (Swift 2021). Today, Halifax is part of a corridor of post-industrial north English cities and towns sharing similar issues of 'race, space and multiculturalism' (Miah, Sanderson, and Thomas 2020).

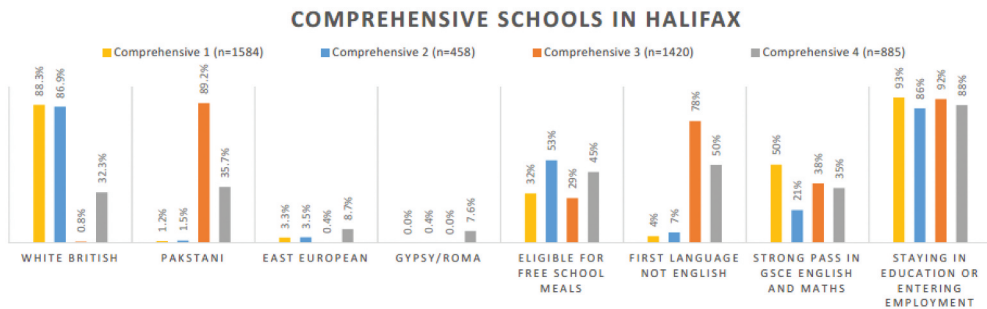


Figure 1. Source: school census, 2021–22.

Moving from residential segregation to segregation in schools, the 2021–22 school census shows that a majority of primary school children in Halifax are White British (59%). The remainder are Pakistani (26%), East European (4%), Indian (2%), Bangladeshi (2%), and African (1%). No other ethnic group amounts to more than 1%.

Halifax has four non-selective secondary schools, which in the UK are called comprehensive schools (Figure 1); two selective secondary schools, which in the UK are called grammar schools; an equally selective Sixth Form academy (Figure 2, below); 29 primary schools; and a higher education college serving the entire borough. Halifax does not have any private or independent schools, except for a small preparatory school for entry to grammar schools and, since 2020, a small Islamic school.

In principle, there are four possible constellations, or scenarios, of segregation and mixing in residential areas on the one hand, and schools on the other: a ‘normal’ scenario where school segregation reflects residential segregation, which many people find natural; a ‘problematic’ scenario where school segregation occurs despite residential cohabitation; a ‘perplexing’ scenario where an area is segregated but, surprisingly, schools are mixed; and a genuinely ‘diverse’ scenario where school mixing occurs in a mixed area (Table 1).

As Figure 1 shows, we find the first three scenarios at comprehensive schools in Halifax. Each scenario unfolds in a catchment area (in the UK, ‘catchment area’ refers to a defined geographical zone from which schools accept applications preferentially). We find the first scenario in North Halifax, a predominantly White British working-class area with a predominantly White British school (Comprehensive 1). We find the second scenario in Central Halifax, where one school is overwhelmingly White British (Comprehensive 2) and the other British Pakistani (Comprehensive 3), despite the fact that residential cohabitation would offer opportunities for mixing at schools. The third scenario refers to school mixing despite residential segregation. This happens in Sowerby Bridge, a White-British segregated residential area where there is so much ethnic mixing

Table 1. Four scenarios.

	Residential segregation	Residential mixing
School segregation	1. ‘Normal’	2. ‘Problematic’
School mixing	3. ‘Perplexing’	4. ‘Diverse’

at the secondary school that the school does not have a majority but only minorities (Comprehensive 4).

Many would agree that the fourth scenario (school mixing in a diverse area) represents the most desirable constellation, but it does not occur in Halifax at the level of comprehensive schools. It only happens in three primary schools in a middle-class area. It is also worth noting that exam performance is highest in one and lowest in the other White-segregated school, with the Asian-segregated and the genuinely mixed schools falling somewhere in-between (Figure 1; regarding selective schools, see Figure 2, below).

Scenario 1: school segregation reflecting residential segregation

School segregation may reflect residential segregation, as in North Halifax. The area has a ‘White working class’ character, with high deprivation and many social housing estates (Thomas et al. 2018). In the 2011 census, North Halifax was 90–95% White British and had extremely few Asian Muslim residents. Until not too long ago, the area repeatedly elected local politicians from the far-right British National Party (Goodwin 2011).

Children from ‘White working class’ backgrounds are the least likely to do well at school and enter university (CRED 2021, 65, 93; House of Commons 2021). Despite this impediment, North Halifax prides itself of a comprehensive school rated ‘outstanding’ by the school regulator, not least due to the exceptional progress students make from the end of primary to the end of secondary school. A large majority (88%) of students are White British. Almost all (96%) speak English as their first language. Many (32%) are eligible for free school meals, confirming the perception of deprivation (national average: 22.5%).

The composition of primary schools in North Halifax is similar: there are 2,708 primary school children, but only 10 of them are of Pakistani heritage. There are some East European children, mostly from Poland and concentrated in a Catholic school.

Scenario 2: school segregation in a mixed area

School segregation may occur in the face of residential cohabitation, as in Central Halifax. Despite residential cohabitation at the level of the catchment area, Central Halifax has two comprehensive schools serving separate constituencies. One of them is overwhelmingly British Pakistani, whereas the other is overwhelmingly White British.

At the Asian-segregated school, 89% of students are Pakistani. There are some mixed-race students, but less than 1% are White British. Despite the presence of Black, East European, and Gypsy/Roma families in the area, the school has hardly any students from such backgrounds. A majority (78%) do not speak English as their first language. A large percentage (29%) are eligible for free school meals. At the White-segregated school, 87% are White British. There are some East Europeans, but only 1% are Pakistani. Like the Asian-segregated school, the White-segregated school has few Black or Gypsy/Roma students, despite the presence of such families in the area. Interestingly, it has the highest percentage of children on free school meals (53%) of all secondary schools in Halifax.

The school regulator, Ofsted, ranks the Asian-segregated school as ‘good’ but the White-segregated school as ‘inadequate.’ Unsurprisingly, the latter is undersubscribed (Calderdale 2021, 47). Yet, White British parents hardly consider the ‘Pakistani’ school in their area, but send their children further afield. The Asian-segregated school is larger, but oversubscribed. With 1,101 secondary-school students, it can accommodate only a fraction of Halifax’s 2,271 Pakistani primary-school children. Yet, Pakistani parents hardly consider the undersubscribed ‘White’ school in their area, but send their children further afield.

Scenario 3: school mixing in a segregated area

Perplexingly, school mixing may occur in a segregated area. Thus, in Sowerby Bridge, there is a startling mismatch between the homogeneity of the area and its primary schools on the one hand, and the ethnic diversity of its secondary school on the other.

In the 2011 census, Sowerby Bridge was almost entirely White British (95%). Little has changed since then. In the 2021–22 school census, 94% of primary school children in Sowerby Bridge were White British. Yet, as [Figure 1](#) shows, the comprehensive school in Sowerby Bridge stands out as the most mixed secondary school in Halifax. Around a third of students (36%) are Pakistani. Another third (32%) are White British. In addition, there are East European (9%), Gypsy/Roma (8%), Bangladeshi (2%), and African (2%) students.

There is a similar mismatch regarding socioeconomic and performance indicators. Less than 3% of primary school children in Sowerby Bridge have a first language other than English, but 50% of secondary school students do. No primary school in Sowerby Bridge has more than 38% on free school meals, but the secondary school has 45%. There is not a single Gypsy/Roma child at a primary school in Sowerby Bridge, yet Sowerby Bridge hosts all but two Gypsy/Roma secondary school students in the whole of Halifax.

Evidently, there is an influx of students from disadvantaged families, often with migrant backgrounds, for secondary school in Sowerby Bridge. There is a parallel exodus of primary school children from Sowerby Bridge, usually White British but not necessarily from advantaged families, to secondary schools elsewhere. Only a minority of secondary school students in Sowerby Bridge are from their own catchment area, whereas 76% are from Central Halifax and some from as far as North Halifax (Vallely 2019, 13–14). There is one school bus running from Park Ward and another from North Halifax.

Why do local parents avoid Sowerby Bridge for secondary school, whereas children from elsewhere flock into the area? First, the school regulator, Ofsted, rated the school as ‘inadequate’ in 2016. Second, people do not choose Sowerby Bridge but ‘end up’ there. It serves as a repository for ‘late applicants, applicants who have not been offered a place at schools for which they have expressed a higher preference and parents who have not expressed a preference for any school’ (ibid., 3). The school has been improving significantly in recent years, but some locals still call it a ‘dumping school.’ Far from being a school of choice for local families, it is an overflow facility for students from elsewhere.

The school is ethnically mixed, but evidently for all the wrong reasons.

Table 2. Summary table.

	Residential segregation	Residential mixing
School segregation	North Halifax (Comprehensive N. 1)	Central Halifax (Comprehensives N. 2 and 3)
School mixing	Sowerby Bridge (Comprehensive N. 4)	

Decision and non-decision making

The townscape of segregation and mixing in Halifax (Table 2) is revealing in and of itself, but how has it come about? Is it the result of deliberate decision-making? To the extent that we cannot identify policy decisions, is it a result of non-decision making? The challenge in answering these questions is that, being non-events, non-decisions are difficult to track. Yet, it is possible to surmount this obstacle with an ethnographic approach (Anderson 1990).

In a long conversation, I asked a seasoned local politician (N. 1) about the salience of school segregation and mixing in education policy. The Councillor responded ‘It was discussed in private, but you wouldn’t find anything much on the record or in writing.’ Another local politician (N. 2) told me that, from the end of minority bussing until recently, there was no policy to factor community relations into school planning.

As we shall see, during the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a degree of decision-making deliberately or inadvertently addressing school segregation. From the mid-1980s to the 2010s, the prevailing pattern was non-decision making based on procedural and normative objections. Only in recent years has Halifax seen a return to decision-making, with the opening of an inclusive Sixth Form academy as a shining example (‘Sixth Form’ is the final stage of academic education for secondary-school students in England).

Note on fieldwork

The material cited in this section is a by-product of research on majority-Muslim relations in English inner cities, for which I have interviewed 27 participants in Halifax between April 2019 and January 2020, with some following-up during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (for the wider study, which includes Birmingham and Tower Hamlets, I have interviewed 65 participants). My approach was to travel to the field multiple times and patiently network myself into communities and neighbourhoods, sometimes approaching people on the street, rather than relying on local organizations and community gatekeepers.

In Halifax, 13 participants were British Pakistani, 12 White British, and 2 mixed-race. Seventeen were male and 10 female, including 4 British Pakistani women. Apart from residents, the sample includes five local politicians from both major parties, two school governors, and one public official. I was transparent about my positionality as a White male researcher interested in majority-Muslim relations and, whenever possible, relied on repeat interviews to build trust. To mitigate the effects of male positionality, I undertook a particular effort to reach female participants. My analysis benefits from

direct observation during countless field visits, as well as the secondary analysis of media and official documents.

Early in my fieldwork, it struck me that residents from either community would talk about schools, and particularly ethnoreligious segregation in schools, more than about any other topic. I therefore decided to interview local politicians and school governors specifically about school segregation. Some were willing to discuss the topic, whereas others found it too sensitive – as one might expect in a situation of non-decision making. For example, a Halifax councillor gave me two long interviews but ultimately did not sign the consent form; therefore, what he told me only informs my background. An education official initially offered an interview, but pulled out when she heard that I was interested in school segregation. Despite these setbacks, I was able to collect rich material.

Decision-making (1970s–1980s)

As discussed previously, some local education authorities in England followed the US example of ‘bussing’ minority children into majority areas to counteract school segregation (Esteves 2019). In 1975–76, when bussing was already being phased out in other parts of the country, Halifax decided to teach Pakistani children English as a second language at special facilities, before incorporating them into mainstream schools (ibid., 129–131). According to a local councillor (N. 1), ‘The motivation was to teach them English so that they could go to normal classes in normal schools.’ In other words, the goal was desegregation by the paradoxical means of segregation – what authorities in nearby Huddersfield were calling ‘segregate in order to integrate’ (Miah, Sanderson, and Thomas 2020, 218).

After a series of complaints, the Commission for Racial Equality (1986, 15) declared minority bussing in Halifax discriminatory. Noting that ‘white children in the primary age range who live in the area can receive all their education in a neighbourhood school whereas many primary age Asian children cannot,’ the Commission demanded an end to bussing and an additional primary school in the Asian area of residence (ibid., 16). Dispersal and bussing in Halifax duly ended in 1986–7, necessitating more primary school places in Park Ward.

Offering more places in the area where the minority was already concentrated must have led to more segregation, rather than the declared objective of more mixing and integration in schools – presumably an unintended effect. Another effect is that, today, all it takes to dismiss a desegregation initiative is to claim that it means ‘going back to bussing’ (Councillor N. 3; see above, on bussing as a ‘no-change’ critical juncture).

During the same period, there was another critical juncture with an unintended but *positive* effect on ethnic mixing. Halifax is one of the few jurisdictions in North England that kept their grammar schools during the education reforms of the 1970s. Due to selectivity and in the absence of catchment areas, there is more ethnic mixing at grammar schools than at all but one comprehensive school in Halifax (Figure 2; compare Figure 1).

While the degree of mixing at grammar schools is high, it could be a sign of social mobility. Minority students from upwardly mobile families may be mixing with White British students from saturated middle-class backgrounds, leaving behind their working-class peers (the same may be happening at the recently founded Sixth Form academy). Yet, whatever the reasons for the high levels of mixing, they do not result from planning

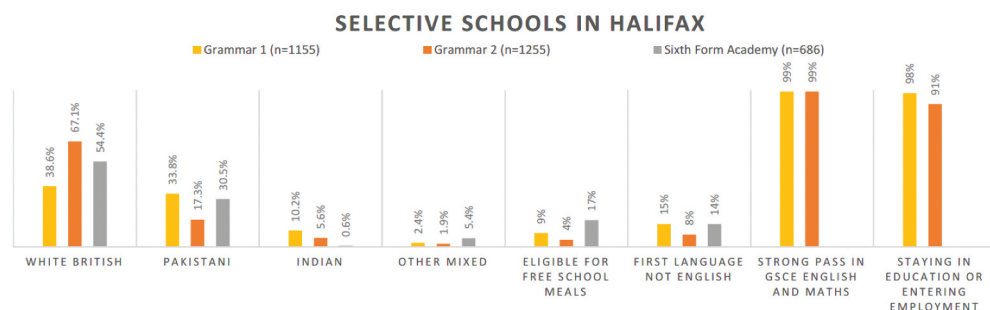


Figure 2. Source: school census, 2021–22.

but are a side effect of policies pursued for other reasons. According to a councillor (N. 1): ‘Mixing and integration at grammar schools are not through any directive of anybody. It just evolved that way.’

Non-decision making (1980s–2010s)

Once failed experiments with bussing had set education policy on a path of non-decision making, attempts to raise the issue ran against spoken or unspoken objections of a normative or procedural nature (Peter and Baratz 1970, 54). Under such circumstances, decision-makers became non-decision makers relying on normative and procedural objections to keep school segregation off the agenda. Therefore, as elsewhere in Europe, deliberate policies to address segregation came to a trickle from the 1980s (Ireland 2008, 1353).

As a case in point, consider catchment areas in Halifax. Catchments have inevitable effects for the ethnic composition of schools. Especially when schools and catchment areas merge, it may happen in ways that either solidify or transcend ethnic divisions. In principle, this offers opportunities for policymakers to influence levels of segregation and mixing in schools. Yet, such deliberate decision-making has hardly occurred. What emerges from detailed discussions with two local politicians and a school governor is that the North Halifax catchment area is the result of amalgamations of failing secondary schools in a White working-class area. In the words of one former councillor (N. 1), there was ‘no discussion’ of how catchment areas might affect segregation and mixing. In the words of another (N. 2), ‘At no point during the entire process was the question of integration ever raised.’

Similarly, the ethnic composition of the secondary school in Sowerby Bridge (discussed as ‘Scenario 3’) is the by-product of attempts to rescue a failing school. In the words of a local politician (N. 1), the implications this might have for community relations were ‘never discussed.’ What would have happened if residents had protested about the secondary school in their area turning into a repository for minority students whom Council is unable to accommodate elsewhere? ‘That would have been difficult’ (id.).

As a further case in point, take the move of the Pakistani-majority secondary school in Central Halifax to its current site in the Pakistani-segregated area. Until the mid-2000s, the school was located in a Victorian building in the town centre. Back then, Pakistani-

heritage students on their daily school runs were a common sight in the old town. In 2005, however, the school moved to its current premises in what is now part of the Pakistani-majority part of Halifax but, at the time, was part of its expanding frontier. According to a former councillor (N. 2), this was ‘a prime example of a Council increasing segregation.’

As another local politician (N. 1) recalls, local residents were expressing concerns related to community relations. However, decision-makers prevented these concerns from influencing the decision-making process by resorting to their control over procedures. ‘There were petitions and other things against it. People objected to the Secretary of State, which is perfectly within their right. But he overruled them.’ Another local politician (N. 4) confirms that Council were unwilling to engage with local opposition.

‘Over 7,000 people had signed a petition against the school moving into [its new premises in West Central Halifax]. The ignorance and racism of these people were just terrible. I made a vow that, if the school was not built, I would leave Halifax because I wouldn’t want to live in a town that was so racist, in a town with that level of prejudice. It typified everything that was wrong with the attitude of a minority of White indigenous people in Halifax.’

In the event, Council dismissed local concerns by mainly White British residents, some of whom may have been motivated by racial prejudice, whereas others may have been concerned that the school move might contribute to their neighbourhood turning into an Asian-segregated rather than an ethnically mixed residential area. As if to confirm this, a British Pakistani resident states in an interview that ‘the area is all occupied by Asians now; back then, there were not many Asian families in the area.’

Segregation in the area became more intense in 2014, when Council allowed the school to become an all-through school for children aged 4–16 years. A local politician (N. 1) notes that ‘there was no open discussion of the ethnic implications of this,’ but suggests that it helped to take pressure off primary schools in middle-class areas where more and more British Pakistani families were sending their children to White-British majority schools.

With hindsight, a British Pakistani resident sees it as ‘the biggest failure of education authorities’ to have created such a large Pakistani-segregated school. He finds that parents from Park Ward should have to send their children to secondary schools elsewhere so that ‘you have got no choice; you mix with them, full stop. They have made it too easy to stay in the bubble.’ According to another British Pakistani resident, teachers at the school ‘would slide into Kashmiri or Urdu, or a mix, because it is quicker and easier.’

In the cases discussed so far, procedural mechanisms were sufficient to keep any challenges off the agenda. When this is not enough, non-decision makers may invoke established values such as secularism, or even antiracism, to defeat challenges to the status quo before they might enter the stage of formal decision-making.

Thus, in 2013, an experienced British Pakistani educator ‘found a certain lack of imagination in Halifax when it came to integration; at least passively, there was a policy of segregation.’ To remedy this, the educator wanted to ‘engineer’ an unconventional experiment, namely a ‘multi-community, multi-and-no faith’ secondary school. The proposed school would have been diverse in terms of ethnicity and faith, moving ‘away from the bizarre system at [the Pakistani-segregated secondary school] where the

teachers were the only White people and students would not learn to see common humanity.’

Despite the fact that it is illegal for schools to select on ethnicity, the educator obtained funding from the New Schools Network in London to develop a proposal. In Halifax, however, there was opposition, especially to the faith element and the idea of setting up a free school (in the UK, a free school is a school that is funded by the government but not run by a local authority). At surface, the opponents were invoking secularism, but this happened in a climate where locals were starting to mobilize against more ethnic mixing. A British Pakistani woman living in the area remembers: ‘There were residents saying, “We don’t want this school in the area because it would change the street view,” that is, brown people will devalue our properties.’ Whatever the true reasons, the school initiative died a silent death before even entering the stage of formal decision-making.

In October 2015, Halifax Councillor Andrew Tagg tabled a motion, noting that ‘it is not in the interest of racial harmony for some of our students to have very little contact with other ethnic or racial groups from primary school through to year 12’ and demanding a ‘working group to look at ways in which better social and ethnic integration can be achieved.’ The motion stalled and ushered in acrimony. ‘They basically tried to smear me by pointing to the language in the motion, especially the use of the word “segregation,” that it was not in the interest of community cohesion, and amended the motion, basically watering down the issue’ (Tagg 2017). In 2019, Tagg said in an interview: ‘It is pathetic! Everywhere else, there is promotion of diversity. Except for what? School catchments. Everybody else, including recruitment in companies, is expected to increase diversity. Except for what? School admissions.’ I asked how people react when he expresses views like that. ‘Others go quiet. Nobody wants to talk about integration. It is classed as too sensitive an issue.’

Glimpses of decision-making

From the end of minority bussing to the early 2010s, I could not find any deliberate decision-making to address ethnic segregation at schools in Halifax. In more recent years, decision-making has become more common, although not necessarily in ways to promote mixing.

The first case involved defeating a local initiative to set up a religious school. In February 2012, an Islamic group applied to the Department for Education for opening a faith-based primary school in the Muslim-majority area of Halifax. The project received the initial go-ahead, but then fell over allegations of religious extremism. In November 2012, parents received a leaflet asserting that schools were forcing children ‘to do things against Islam’ and warning that missing a meeting in support of the initiative was ‘more serious than death.’ This gave rise to concerns and, in April 2013, with the new school due to open in September, Halifax MP Linda Riordan sounded the alarm. In the summer, the Department for Education withdrew its approval and any funding for the project (Douglas 2013). This was a case of decision-making rather than non-decision making, but the goal was prevention of further segregation rather than promotion of mixing among students. (Seven years later, in September 2020, a similar school opened without any further public controversy.)

In another case, residents defeated an initiative that would have led to more school mixing in a middle-class area. In 2014, the headteacher of a White-British majority primary school declared an interest in opening a second site in an area where well-to-do British Pakistani families were moving in. White British residents mobilized against the proposal. A British Pakistani resident suspects that this was racially motivated. She remembers ‘several meetings where 75–80% of parents were present,’ with some protesting and distributing leaflets outside the venue. ‘The fear was that brown children would start coming in through the new site.’ Well-informed sources from both communities confirm, anonymously and not for attribution, that there was local mobilization along the lines suggested. This contrasts with the recollection or, perhaps, lack of recollection, of a local politician (N. 1) who was involved with education at the time but does not remember any controversy.

Eventually, another primary school took the site. This time, instead of trying to integrate the sites, the school opted to run them separately. The old site is located in a deprived area with many British Pakistani residents. The new site is in a more affluent area, and reputedly has fewer Pakistani children. According to a British Pakistani resident, ‘parents are upset, but the issue does not get coverage, so few people are aware.’ Another Pakistani resident compares the new site with the upmarket London borough of Kensington and wonders why poor Pakistani children from the old site cannot also go to ‘Kensington.’ When I asked a councillor (N. 3) what might happen if the school were to amalgamate the sites, he became pensive: ‘This is a tricky one. You would get some parents protesting.’ (Incidentally, the case confirms that school segregation in Halifax intersects with social class, with children from middle-class backgrounds more likely to mix than their working-class peers).

In a third case, Council invoked ethnicity and religion to prevent a secondary school from becoming more rooted in the local community. This happened in 2019, when Trinity Multi Academy Trust (a charitable company operating several academy schools) had taken over the secondary school in Sowerby Bridge. The school wanted to move away from the status quo, discussed above, whereby it served as a repository for students Council was unable to accommodate elsewhere. The school was improving, but it was uncertain when, if ever, it would become oversubscribed. Therefore, it was largely an aspirational move when the school designated a number of primary schools, most of them located in and around Sowerby Bridge, as ‘feeder schools.’ The intention was to give preferential admission to applicants from these schools, evidently in a desire to become more rooted in the area.

Initially, officials from the local authority took a wait-and-see approach. They met with the school and indicated that, until further notice, they would abstain from opposing the proposal. However, this changed when elected local politicians entered the fray. After their intervention, the local authority had to object to the proposed admission policy with the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, an independent body (Valley 2019).

One objection was that most of the proposed feeder schools were Church of England schools. ‘[T]he local authority is concerned that local Muslim families will perceive that their children are unlikely to be offered a place at the school’ (ibid., 3). To support this claim, the authority submitted a complaint from a Muslim-majority school that the proposed policy amounted to ‘unfair discrimination against certain ethnic communities’ (ibid., 7). The secondary school in Sowerby Bridge wanted to become a Church of

England school itself, but the authority objected that ‘this will affect families in the Park ward which is predominantly of Muslim faith and has traditionally seen significant pupil numbers attending the school’ (ibid., 10). The Adjudicator dismissed this, noting that the authority had ‘not submitted any evidence that there were any objections from the Muslim community’ (ibid., 10). On the contrary, she cited the Diocese of Leeds pointing out that Church of England schools are very popular with British Asian Muslims (ibid.).

Another objection was that the secondary school in Sowerby Bridge ‘accounted for 63% of all late applications’ in the entire district, and that a significant number of places were offered in cases where the local authority had been ‘unable to meet parental preference elsewhere or where no application was submitted by parents at all’ (ibid., 9). In response to this objection, the Adjudicator noted, not without irony, that the school had ‘traditionally been a valuable resource for the local authority in securing places for late applicants and applicants who have been unable to obtain places elsewhere’ (ibid., 14–15). She accepted that the school was seeking to change its admissions profile in an attempt to turn this around. The Adjudicator therefore dismissed the case of the local authority.

Decision-making redux?

In none of the episodes cited, ever since the end of minority bussing, did the Council pursue an active policy to promote ethnic mixing in schools. This, however, seems to have changed with the decision to open a new Sixth Form academy in the town centre where students from all over Halifax are able to mix and mingle regardless of ethnicity.

Until recently, Halifax students attending comprehensive schools had a constrained choice set for school progression at age 16. First, they could apply for Sixth Form at the White-British segregated comprehensive school in North Halifax. Second, they could apply at a grammar school. Third, as no other school in Halifax had a Sixth Form, they might apply further afield. Fourth and finally, they might end secondary education. For minority students who did not qualify for entry at grammar school, the school in North Halifax was the only choice within Halifax. However, many perceive North Halifax as inhospitable to minorities or even ‘racist.’ Hence, many minority students may have dropped out of education.

This changed in 2020, when a Sixth Form academy opened in a shiny building in the old town. A school governor, himself White British, highlights the potential for ethnic mixing. ‘The location is a big plus. Trinity Sixth Form Academy is highly visible in the town centre. Asians go to the centre and socialize there. It will appeal to many Asian families’ (a glance at [Figure 2](#) confirms this: 31% of students are Pakistani.)

This is a rare case where school planning has reduced segregation and facilitated mixing between White British and British Pakistani students. Even so, it did not happen without difficulties. A proposal was first tabled in September 2014, suggesting that a Sixth Form centre in the town centre would improve ethnic integration and community cohesion. In the recollection of former Halifax Councillor Andrew Tagg, Council ‘decided to amend the motion and set up a working group to review the proposal,’ with the result that ‘Trinity Sixth Form Academy opened five and a half years later as a result of politicking.’ Regardless, after decades when non-decision making was the

norm, the recent comeback of decision-making may help overcome entrenched segregation and lead to more mixing among Sixth Form students in Halifax. In the words of former Councillor Tagg:

‘The new Trinity Sixth Form Academy, of which I am Chair of Governors, was classed as outstanding on everything in October 2021. In 2022, over 1,000 students have applied for a place. The school is everything I wished it to be, a centre where students from all backgrounds work and study together. The cohort is totally mixed. It is just brilliant. At last, I have seen the vision I wished for all schools.’

Conclusion

Even in the face of burning issues, policymakers often choose inaction (McConnell and Hart 2019). In England, as in other countries, the dearth of deliberate policies to address ethnic segregation in schools is a case in point. To understand the inner workings of what Peter and Baratz (1970) call non-decision making, we have considered the North English town of Halifax, where there are high levels of residential and school segregation between the White British majority, British Pakistani minority, and other minorities. Even though ethnic segregation in schools has been in evidence for several decades, non-decision making has been the norm. Only in recent years, deliberate decision-making has begun to play a greater role in addressing the issue. Otherwise, the predominant pattern has been one of relying on procedural and normative objections to forestall attempts at agenda setting and decision-making, entrenching a status quo of intense ethnic segregation in schools.

Ethnic segregation in schools is a serious matter of public concern, in England and elsewhere. Why, then, have decision-makers abstained from tackling the issue? Early attempts to address school segregation failed in the 1970s, prompting decision-makers to shift from decision-making to non-decision making. In recent decades, despite the UK Government deploring segregation, the policy environment has not been friendly to initiatives aiming to tackle the issue. In the face of widespread inaction, the new Sixth Form academy in Halifax is a rare but welcome example to show that tackling segregation is possible.

In this context, a cautionary remark seems in order. Students in desegregated schools often choose to ‘resegregate.’ Some of their parents and grandparents may have attended mixed schools, and it may not have been a happy experience. For this reason, among others, it seems that ‘an understanding of the factors driving resegregation is critical to effectively realizing the potential of desegregated settings’ (Ramiah et al. 2015, 100).

Returning to the main theme of the article: There is no doubt that dynamics of non-decision making similar to those found in Halifax are at play more widely, regardless of locality and policy sphere. Wherever this is the case, non-decision makers are likely to raise normative and procedural objections against any challenges to the status quo. There should be further investigation into how precisely this works and how a return to decision-making is possible, as seems to be happening in Halifax. While studies of non-decision making have been relatively rare to this day, there is a compelling intellectual and policy case for conducting them in a multitude of fields, in education policy and beyond.

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