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# Trainee Teachers' Learning about Collective Worship in Primary Schools

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*Abstract: This article gives an account of a qualitative research project which investigated acts of collective worship (hereafter CW) in primary schools through non-participant observations undertaken by second year trainee teachers during one of their placements. The data were gathered from a range of schools across the West Midlands. The findings illustrate structural elements which show a lack of uniformity in terms of the venue and time. Religious leaders, classroom assistants and staff at all levels of responsibility deliver assemblies and CW. The focus of the content is diverse and includes religious and 'secular' material and events. Trainees learnt about the organisation, purpose, content and the involvement of children. Based on the findings, it is proposed that observations of acts of CW should be considered as part of their professional learning during their training.*

## Background

Some trainees are often perplexed to learn about the status of religious education (RE), its curriculum requirements and the legislation enacted upon it. The same applies with collective worship (CW). Recently, in an RE session, when CW was mentioned, a year one trainee startlingly remarked: "what's that?" Upon elucidation, many in the class expressed their surprise at discovering, among other matters, the fact that CW is a legislated school activity in the UK. These reactions appear to reveal a disparity between their lived schooling experiences and knowledge about what actually happens in schools. A plausible explanation might lie in the use of the words 'collective worship' by the lecturer. Had the word 'assembly' been used instead, it is highly likely that the question might not have been expressed, even though the surprise would have persisted.

Over the years, this kind of reaction has lead the author, despite time constraints, to ensure that trainees, in their university sessions, gain a more sophisticated and mature understanding of CW, its role and the potential contribution it can make to pupils and schools. There has been limited research undertaken among trainee teachers about their views of CW (Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015; Mogra, 2016; Mogra, 2017). As part of on-going research on this subject, research was undertaken to contribute to this limited amount of findings to seek evidence for the value of encouraging trainees to attend acts of CW during their placements. Anecdotal evidence based on discussions with personal tutees and trainees supervised during placements revealed that some trainees were not taking full advantage of all the learning opportunities available to them in school. For some this included CW. This research was designed to accomplish two purposes: First, the study sought to explore and identify some of the structural dimensions of the CW in schools. Second, it contributed towards the trainees' learning of CW used by schools by becoming familiar with a variety of approaches used by schools.

Whilst CW is not legislated in many other countries, this particular research has implications for teacher educators working outside of the UK by inviting them to encourage that their trainees receive a more immersed experience of school life and activities whilst they are on placement. In addition to playground duties, staff meetings and other activities, gaining insights about CW worship should also be part of their activities because these can often capture the overall ethos or the *raison d'être* of the school community. In addition to such educational benefit, these experiences were deemed valuable for these trainees as they would serve as evidence required for their Teachers' Standards portfolio. Specifically they could demonstrate that they actively support fundamental British values, including individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs (DfE, 2011). In addition, it would enable them to demonstrate that they had proper and professional regard for the ethos, policies and practices of the school in which they taught and they had an understanding of, and acted within, the statutory frameworks which sets out their professional duties and responsibilities (DfE, 2011). Thus, learning to appreciate first-hand experiences of CW during the placement would assist them in demonstrating some of these required professional standards in addition to gaining context-specific insights. It was also anticipated that following such experiences, trainees would continue to attend CW during their remaining placements in order to broaden their understanding of the potential that such a practice might have for their future appointments.

**Literature Review**

In the UK, the vast majority of schools are required by law to organise acts of CW (Northern Ireland, Wales, England) or religious observance (Scotland) on a daily basis for their pupils (Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015). In England and Wales, worship in schools without a religious character must be 'wholly, or mainly of a broadly Christian character' (DfE, 1994; Davies, 2000:22). These schools may provide some acts of CW which are not Christian, if circumstances require so. Nevertheless, over a term, the majority of CW must be mainly Christian in nature (Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015:2). However, where this is considered inappropriate, schools can apply for a disapplication from the Christian nature of worship altogether (Cheetham, 2004:111). Once a determination has been granted, schools can then offer an alternative and appropriate worship, taking account of the age, family background and aptitudes of the pupils (Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015). In all cases, parents have a right to withdraw their children from CW and teachers are also permitted to withdraw themselves from CW (Louden, 2004; McCreery, 1993).

Be that as it may, in most schools, pupils and staff use the word assembly to refer to that event where the class or whole school gathers for a 'special' purpose which is distinct from the rest of the activities. This means that some use CW and assembly interchangeably, whereas others may prefer the traditional term assembly which could include CW. However in law, these are two distinct activities. Assemblies are gatherings where the whole school, class or a Key Stage gathers for the purpose of giving information, celebrating achievements, performing plays, saying goodbyes and other such activities, whereas CW is that specific part of the gathering from which parents can withdraw their children (Davies, 2000:21). Due to the anomalies within the law, some researchers find the notion of CW of little value and so refrain from using it in research (Smith & Smith, 2013:9-10). In view of this, it was deemed significant for trainees to be introduced to a nuanced understanding of this activity. Moreover, it was anticipated that the retention of CW might assist them to approach the research task with some import. Despite this, some trainees still used the word assembly in

their responses; for example, "there [were] assemblies, but no collective worship", possibly because, as noted above, they may have heard their schools use this term.

There seems much less controversy about the role and potential benefits that CW may offer to the multifaceted development of pupils. School leaders recognise that CW is an important means for the formation and nurture of a school ethos (Davies, 2000:33). Smith and Smith (2013:13-14) observed that some schools communicated virtue ethics such as courage, friendship, responsibility and generosity. McCreery (1993) felt that worship in primary schools is a unifier; can be a preparation for corporate worship; can provide an opportunity to reflect on important issues and contribute to children's spiritual development. However, the main argument against it is that it makes worship compulsory when by its very nature it is meant to be voluntary. Thus, some teachers have reservations on leading it (Smith & Smith, 2013:16) and of maintaining neutrality (Cheetham, 2000). For such and other reasons, recently, there have been calls for reforming and abolishing the statute for acts of CW (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015; Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015). Nevertheless, head teachers reacted negatively to comments which suggested that worship should not be conducted in schools (Davies, 2000:33).

The law stipulates that children, who have not been withdrawn, take part in a daily act of worship at any time of the day (Long, 2015). The law also requires that worship should be collective, which can take on different meanings depending on individual schools. Ideally, the whole school, pupils and staff, should be involved, except those who have been withdrawn. However, it is frequently impractical to gather everyone at once, therefore, there could be variations in numbers, location, class and year groups (McCreery, 1993:13). Moreover, it is a requirement that participating in CW should not merely involve passive attendance. The content of the CW should be such that it elicits responses from the children (DfE, 1994:21).

Besides the above discussion, this research is relevant as it identifies the need to further support trainees in developing an appreciation for the educative potential of CW and assemblies. One way of moving towards this in the face of some possible student apprehension is to encourage them to 'sit-in' rather than participate during CW whilst on placements. Since some trainees may be uncomfortable participating in CW, such 'sit-ins' for learning purposes are more appropriate so that professional development can take place. In the context of preparing them for their future roles in school, observing CW and other whole school activities will minimise potential difficulties experienced by new teachers which sometimes result from a disconnection between teacher preparation and professional practice.

There is educational value to be gained from first-hand experiences through these 'sit-ins' for the trainees. For example, they were enabled to gain critical insights regarding the potential role of CW in terms of education for democracy, inclusion and justice because they explicitly noted that pupils were being prepared for their life beyond school as socially conscious members of the community in a holistic sense. This included independence; self-control and collaboration and involving pupils in opportunities to contribute to their community on a local, national or international level and to take on leadership roles (Mogra, 2017). Character development is of educational interest for the national curriculum. There is evidence suggesting that character of citizens has greater significance than content knowledge of the curriculum for societal life in general. It can also assist in improving educational attainment and motivation to learn among young people (Birdwell, Scott, & Reynolds, 2015) as the virtue of character is often synonymous with intellectual virtue. One of the ways of initiating teachers towards character education in schools is to ensure that they gain first-hand experience of CW and to critically evaluate how it supports the ethos and school curriculum, if at all. This research makes a contribution to that end by showing how this could take place with trainees.

In this article a study conducted within one English initial teacher training institute in the West Midlands is reported. The research explored the observations of CW undertaken by second year Bachelor of Arts primary trainees during their placement. Before their placement, all trainees were invited to voluntarily download a questionnaire, designed to facilitate a non-participant observation of an act of CW (Bryman, 2016). They were requested to use this questionnaire, consisting of open and closed questions, to record various details of CW. On return to the faculty, they were asked to retain a copy as evidence for their Teachers' Standards portfolio and to deposit a copy with the researcher or the partnership office (Bryman, 2016). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee and trainees were required not to state their own name and that of their respective schools to maintain anonymity and confidentiality (Punch & Oancea, 2014:69). To minimise their workload, only one observation was requested for the research.

This method enabled data to be gathered from random schools throughout and beyond the West Midlands. Some have suggested that preference should be given to face-to-face administration of questionnaires for better results (Punch & Oancea, 2014:301). However, for this research, it is unlikely that this would have materialised since, even after a reminder at mid-point, a sample of 27 was yielded. The returns may have been affected by some trainees being unable to observe, as reflected in the following comment: "Due to staffing levels and Ofsted I didn't get to see any collective worship." Others may have observed CW but did not complete the questionnaire or, even if they did, they failed to submit their forms as their de-brief day has considerable administrative demands on them. In analysing the data, responses to each question were analysed separately. These were read more than once, thereafter, key ideas relevant to the research focus, which were repeated, were then used to elaborate the themes (Bryman, 2016:586).

## Findings

Of the 27 schools, students declared that there were six faith, 11 maintained schools; one of which was a special school for SEN, and 10 were unidentified. A maintained school is funded, controlled and is overseen by the Local Authority, also known as state schools. A special school is one which specifically caters for children with special educational needs who have several learning challenges. A faith school is one which teaches the national curriculum and chooses what they teach in religious education. They may have different admissions criteria and staffing policies to state schools, although anyone can apply for a place.

A closer examination of their details suggests these were likely to have been maintained schools, two of which appear to have been given determination to offer worship appropriate to the faith background of the pupils. The findings about the value and benefits of CW for children, the place for CW in primary schools, its relevance, and the extent to which the observation had been useful in developing trainees' knowledge and understanding of CW are reported elsewhere (Mogra, 2017). The findings below cover structural matters, content, trainees' learning and the involvement of pupils.

### Organisation and Delivery

The data revealed that CW was delivered in the morning in 15 schools and in the afternoon in 9 schools. Those organising their CW in the morning included it as the first

activity after registration, others held it at 10:00 and 11:00 whereas some preferred to have it in the afternoon, for which no specific time was recorded.

In one school the Foundation Stage had their own time for assemblies. In another school, a trainee recorded that she was in 'Reception and so they did not participate', which made her question, 'Should they have at least sat in and watched?' Otherwise, there were separate assemblies for Key Stage 1 (KS1), a legal term of schooling in maintained schools in England and Wales catering for children aged between 5 and 7, and Key Stage Two (KS2) which caters for 8 to 11 year-olds. In some cases, KS1 had theirs in the afternoon and KS2 in the morning.  In some schools, on Friday mornings, 'a longer CW took place, attended by the whole school and taken by the head teacher'.

In at least five schools, vicars and reverends were involved in leading CW with the whole school. Sometimes a teacher played the piano for a vicar. A trainee observed that in one school 'the vicar based the CW on the religious story for Pentecost' and in a Catholic school, 'the head teacher and a Sister led the service with readings and hymns read by the children'. In another school, 'a head teacher began the CW', thereafter 'a visiting Bishop blessed the new building'.

In two schools head teachers conducted the CW on their own and in four schools, deputies led the CW, sometimes because 'the head teacher had to attend a meeting'. Trainees reported that in 11 schools, class teachers delivered the CW in school halls or classrooms. A rota system is used in most of these schools. Interestingly, in one class based CW, a Teaching Assistant also lead it because 'they ha[d] planned the lesson' and, in another, 'children conducted the assembly', thereafter, 'the head took over to reward them'.

### Focus of Content

Trainees noted the focus of CW in addition to recording the structural and organisational matters such as the person leading the CW, time and venue. In some schools the focus of CW seems to have been current events. This was the case in two schools where class productions were on Father's Day. In another school a new classroom was blessed which was the main 'ceremony to combine the buildings under the blessing of the Church of England'.

In five instances, trainees observed that the emphasis was faith related matters such as Pentecost, stories that Jesus told, the Easter story, celebrating the life of The Virgin Mary and 'a Reverend used a story with the message of being non-judgemental and to think before acting'. In a school with determination, meaning that the requirement for worship to be wholly, or mainly of a broadly Christian character had been lifted, 'Islamic worship' was central.

The third focus seemed to appear more secular but still maintained a broadly Christian focus by relating to moral and social relationships as exemplified in a school where CW was about 'how to behave when feeling jealous towards others', 'doing things that might make others unhappy', 'sharing', 'friendship' and 'relationships', 'thinking about and thanking people who help us' and 'working together and helping others'. Moreover, one trainee noted that prayers do not have to be religious, as exemplified in: 'today's prayer was "Please help us to give up any bad habit we have and to help others give up bad habits. Amen".'

The fourth focus was considered to be a general one. In these, the CW was about 'inspirational people', 'healthy eating', 'seasons', 'the environment' and 'animals to emphasise everyone is different'.

## Trainees and Learning

Trainees were asked to reveal their own learning as a result of their first-hand observations. Overall, they acknowledged the usefulness of observing children's everyday religious practices and learning about their faith. Based on an analysis of 23 responses, three main areas of learning emerged.

### Organisation

Most of the trainees ascertained the routines of CW. They observed 'the way assemblies are delivered', 'who leads them', 'how children enter the hall', 'the type of issues raised' and the 'activities used in assemblies'. It is interesting to note that others became aware of 'the use of themes for CW', which they thought created 'the focus for children to think about during that week [which] is explored and discussed during collective worship'.

### Purpose

The importance of CW as a potentially valuable experience for developing children holistically was underscored by some who recorded that it gave children opportunities to 'socialise and practise their skills' and, as such, children 'need to have a range of experiences in school'.

Some trainees strongly believed that it was essential for children to learn about their own emotions and to come together as a school so that pupils are 'able to form [their] own and group ideas'. Trainees also discovered that CW encouraged children to collaborate to implement the messages. According to a participant, during CW, schools 'feel quite "community like" as they share their practice'.

Some trainees, based on this experience, stressed that CW allows the whole school to come together in unison for one moment during the day and, therefore, it was 'important to bring schools together to learn how to worship' because it is part of the everyday religious activities of some people. However, some also discovered that the 'CW does not need to focus on any specific religion and can focus on matters such as equality'. For some trainees, their learning was more profound:

> I have learnt, although the assembly was not based around "religious" worship, it highlighted important life skills that we aspire to teach children. This kind of reflection, in my opinion, can be of equal value and promotes the development of young children into empathetic and considerate citizens. The children, regardless of religious belief, seemed to understand the meaning of the prayer that were spoken at the end of the assembly.

## Content

Trainees found these observations beneficial to better appreciate how CW events are able to bring children together to reflect and discuss various issues that are relevant to their lives and communities.

Nine participants learnt that CW builds upon children's personal views and beliefs and enables them to share and learn about the beliefs of others in addition to their own. Other trainees learnt that CW aims 'to show children good and bad [character] attributes and to encourage good ones'. Therefore, according to a trainee, 'it was interesting to witness morals

being related to religious stories'. One respondent pointed out that CW was a significant part of the school community, and this experience 'helped her gain a greater understanding of their faith'.

These observations showed some trainees that 'Collective Worship is not necessarily Bible based', the focus can be upon 'morals that are intrinsic to the Church of England and the importance of being part of the community and trying hard to succeed'. Others realised that the content of CW can be 'subtle in schools [and] facilitate PSHE [Personal, Social, Health and Economic education] work'. In one school, a respondent pointed out that CW was mainly based on the teachings of Islam.

**Involvement of Children**

One of the questions asked participants to observe what involvement, if any, children had during CW.

A significant number (24) recorded children were involved in a variety of ways. A minority mentioned what could be termed as 'passive' involvement, where 'All children closed their eyes and repeated after the teacher, the prayer'; nevertheless, a large number recorded more active participation. For example, in one school, 'Each class were to demonstrate to the other years a performance based on the topic healthy eating'. In another, some children 'spoke, sang, used actions to demonstrate something or showed something they had made: Year 1 Healthy and unhealthy mobiles; Year 2 Washing hands process - sang the song; Year 3 Germ trails; Year 4 Importance of hand washing correct process; Year 5 Food and vegetables song and Year 6 How to keep our bodies healthy'.

In some schools children responded to questions regarding the moral values in a story for the whole week, volunteered ideas and gave feedback to the rest of the school. Pupils in another school had an opportunity to share their personal experiences, which included 'the ways they follow the Islamic religion i.e., going to mosque, reading the Qur'ān and so on'.

Several recorded that children were also involved in prayers. They offered their own prayers and gave thanks to those who help them. Sometimes 'children joined in by saying "ahmen" [sic] at the end of the prayer and sang the hymns' whereas in other schools, pupils lead the prayers. This, according to a trainee, helps children 'remember their faith as some of the children may not have this opportunity during their own time'. In addition, singing seems to be a feature of CW in some schools. For instance, in one school a 'welcome song was sung together'.

Involving children in some kind of performance appears to be a common feature in many of these schools. Children are given an opportunity to take an active role in different ways. This is illustrated in a reception class where children held up 'pictures at the front of the hall, all of them sang a song at the end of the CW and joined in with the actions'. In the special school, a trainee observed children acting out 'actions their Dads do, and the rest of the school had to guess what these actions were'. Sometimes 'a vicar choses [sic] volunteers to help with storytelling'. Occasionally, 'children listen and role play during CW' and, later, 'write a diary entry from the character's viewpoint'. Moreover, demonstrations seem to be popular. In one school, 'the class who produced the performance were all involved with their show. All of the children in the audience were [then] asked to join in by answering the questions and saying prayers'. The following might reflect a rare experience in some schools:

> *The children were very involved in the assembly, with many of them performing songs, hymns and prayers to the Bishop. It was a whole school approach by putting on the show with the pupils, going to rehearsals to practice [sic] their performances. The Bishop himself spoke in a manner that encouraged pupil*

*participation and also provided an interactive atmosphere with pupils coming to the front to hold and talk about different objects. The class that used the new building as a classroom, as well as representatives from each class then went to the new building where the Bishop taught the children a "Religious rap". The pupils were engaged and participated in performing it as a group as well as involving them in holding props. The Bishop then sprinkled holy water and said prayers not only [for] the new building but also [for] the children as well.*

**Discussion and Implication for Practice**

The sample size and research tool limits the representativeness and generalisability of these findings. Nevertheless, these trainees appreciated the opportunity to observe CW for many reasons, including the following comment by a trainee who learnt the format of CW, which was 'useful' because [we] 'will most likely have to take an assembly after [we] qualify'.

The importance of introducing trainees to strategies for character education and supporting pupil wellbeing has been identified in teacher education (DfE, 2015:23). In addition, the development of trainees' reflective capacities in teacher education has also been advocated (DfE, 2015). The data suggest that these can be achieved by encouraging trainees to undertake a structured observation of CW during placements.

However, some trainees may need guidance in conducting their observations. Therefore using a structured observation questionnaire might be supportive in carrying out the reflection. Simultaneously, it can be evidence for their portfolio.

In the absence of evidence to show the extent to which trainees observe CW during their placements, these findings highlight both the need and value for developing their knowledge and understanding of various aspects related to CW. Thus, it would be worthwhile to encourage trainees to 'sit-in' and observe CW as part of their learning during their placements to discover and evaluate the status, pedagogy, nature of provision and role of CW.

This research has implications for training providers as well, despite being small scale. The findings resonate with the desire of some trainees to include CW in their session, albeit briefly. Perhaps the potential role that CW can play in the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils can be highlighted and as well as its ability to make a positive contribution to the wider life and ethos of the school.

The uncertainties about trainees exercising their right of withdrawal could be mitigated by emphasising that the observation experience is a professional learning activity. They would 'sit-in' the CW rather than formally participate. Nevertheless, should any trainees wish to be exempted from this, then they should be allowed to do so.

The data were gathered from both faith and state schools, as declared by the trainees. Providing trainees with an opportunity to observe CW has uncovered an unexpected experience; that CW would be expected in faith schools is unsurprising, however, for a trainee a misconception had been addressed: 'It was useful as I was unaware of any explicit collective worship in school until attending this assembly. My school [has no] affinity with any faith'.

**Conclusion**

In a religious education session, CW features as an appendage for illustrating the uniqueness of RE in the school curriculum. Some trainees find its legal characteristics surprising and many are unaware of its special status. This experience prompted the need to include an observation of CW as part of their overall experience of the various activities undertaken on placement. In the absence of any incentive for trainees to observe assemblies or CW, the results have shown some of the benefits of conducting observations and the learning that can take place as part of their training.

These trainees conducted unstructured observations. Since they were without any criteria in which to critique or evaluate their observations, their discussions were quite atheoretical and ostensibly descriptions of observed events. To address this limitation, future studies need to be designed in such a way that they provide opportunities for discussion and evaluation regarding the potential implications for education.

The research points towards further studies about CW to better understand the extent to which trainees think they are prepared, if at all, to lead assemblies in general and CW in particular. More broadly, there are unanswered questions about CW from the perspectives of children.

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