**Learning through observations: the potential of Collective Worship in primary schools**

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This article reports the learning achieved by a group of trainee teachers about acts of collective worship organised in English primary schools. Using data gathered from non-participant observation questionnaires, it describes, from the viewpoint of observers, three main findings related to children and their learning, the position of CW in primary schools and their own learning about it. The findings reveal that children learn, among other things, values, dispositions, morals and issues connected to their self-esteem, reflection, prayer and spirituality. Participants consider these to be attempts to empower children to be active in out-of-school contexts. The data suggest that these trainees think that collective worship has a place in primary schools as it holds many benefits for the children, school and wider community. In terms of their own learning, the data shows that they learnt about the purpose and value of collective worship, their professionalism and the practice within their respective schools.

**Key** **words:** Collective Worship (CW); purpose; status; trainee; pupil; learning; spirituality

**Introduction**

Trainee teachers undertake miscellaneous activities during their placements. Some of these are required by their training provider, whereas others are optional and/or subject to the interests, schedules and opportunities available to them. Fundamentally, they observe experienced teachers teach and perform a host of other actions in the classroom. However, out of the classroom, they may attend meetings, support with playground duties and assist in outdoor activities.

All these experiences are aimed at preparing trainees to adopt the role of a teacher after completing their course. As teachers, many lead whole school assemblies or collective worship (CW). It has been found that some new teachers experience ‘shock’ as teaching is one of the few professions in which newly qualified teachers immediately take on many of the same role responsibilities as their more experienced colleagues (Ferfolija, 2008). In addition, some find learning to teach challenging; personally, emotionally and cognitively (Chaplain, 2008; Philpott, 2015; Timostuk & Ugaste, 2012).

In such a context, it would be sensible to provide trainees with an opportunity to observe CW closely to make them cognizant of its expectations. Similarly, providing training will increase their knowledge and understanding about the status and contribution of CW. For some, it could increase their confidence in preparing and delivering appropriate CW. Moreover, trainees will gain a nuanced understanding of the distinction between CW and assembly. The aim of this research was twofold. First, to ascertain trainees’ views about the provision of CW whilst developing their knowledge and understanding about matters related to CW and second, to explore the potential value of CW for children. The investigation was prompted by anecdotal evidence and conversations with trainees which revealed that, in cases where they had not observed a CW, some were missing out from gaining a holistic view of school activities and what CW entailed.

In fulfilling their wider professional responsibilities, trainees are expected to make a positive contribution to the wider life and ethos of schools (DfE, 2011). Specifically, they are expected to demonstrate consistently high standards of personal and professional conduct and to show tolerance of and respect for the rights of others and the different faiths and beliefs. Furthermore, they are expected to ensure that their personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils’ vulnerability or might lead them to break the law (DfE, 2011). Thus, observing a CW –a very important aspect of school life (Smith & Smith, 2013) would place trainees in good stead to be responsive to these professional expectations mainly because of its contested nature (Louden, 2004; Mogra, 2016; Smith & Smith, 2013) and how this status interacts with their own beliefs and values as they begin to carve their educational philosophy.

**Literature Review**

CW is meant to be a core activity in all schools across the UK (Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015). In England and Wales, schools have been required to provide an act of CW since it was first made compulsory in the 1944 Education Act (Cheetham, 2000). Currently, the general position on CW in English schools is that all maintained schools, without a religious character, must provide a daily act of broadly Christian CW. Academies without a religious character must also provide a daily act of broadly Christian CW by virtue of their funding agreement (DfE, 2015). In some maintained schools without a religious character, where broadly Christian CW is not appropriate, head teachers can apply to their local SACRE to have the broadly Christian requirement disapplied and replaced by CW distinctive of another faith, taking account of the family background and aptitude of the pupils (Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015; Khir, 2000; DfE 2015). However, an academy wishing to have the broadly Christian requirement disapplied and replaced by CW distinctive of another faith should apply to the Secretary of State (DfE 2015). Regardless, through the ‘conscience clause’ parents have the right to withdraw their children from CW (Louden, 2004). These contested and complex features have led to national initiatives calling to maintain the status quo, and abolishing or reforming the duty to hold acts of CW (QCA, 2007; Butler-Sloss, 2015, Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; Cumper & Mawhinney, 2015).

Nevertheless, as an expected feature of regular school life, it offers experiences which can deepen the inner sense and engender feelings of self-worth, the uniqueness of individuals and, simultaneously, a sense of belonging to the community. The findings from Davies (2000) showed that school worship was highly valued by head teachers for a variety of social, educational and personal reasons, with religious reasons having the least priority. On the other hand, Lees (2012) suggested that schools were ‘not good at promoting the idea that humans have an interior world’ (p.122). However, CW has been found to be a means through which opportunities can be offered to children to nurture their spirituality and inner lives by exploring, for instance, big questions related to meaning, identity and purpose (Eaude, 2014). Furthermore, CW has been considered to be an exceptional vehicle through which morals, virtue ethics and spiritual education which shape whole school values can occur (McCreery, 1993; Gay, 2000; QCA, 2007; Smith & Smith, 2013). CW can contribute towards acquiring a sense of awe and wonder, reverence and respect. Moreover, CW aims to provide an opportunity for pupils to worship God and to explore their own beliefs (DfE, 1994). In many schools CW affords opportunities for silence as well. Wood and Tribe (2016) explored the understandings of the value that community silence may have both for individual students and for the corporate life of the school. For some, although this experience may be uncomfortable, nevertheless, for others it is experienced as a time of healing and calm. In addition, the productive involvement in shared silent space may offer students the opportunity to experience a sense of control, self-direction and ‘personal authenticity’ (Wood & Tribe, 2016, p.153).

In most schools, pupils and staff continue to pronounce that they are ‘going to assembly’ when, in reality, CW and assembly are, in law, two distinct activities. Assemblies are gatherings where the school comes together for the purpose of giving information, celebrating achievements, performing plays, saying goodbyes and other such activities, whereas CW is that part of the gathering where an act of worship takes place. Nevertheless, an act of CW can be related to the day to day life, aspirations and concerns of the school (DfE, 1994).

In seeking to identify a religious component of school assemblies, Smith & Smith (2013, p.9-10) found that, for them, the notion of CW was of little or no value because of the anomalies within the law. Consequently, they refrained from using the language of CW and remained with the more traditional and apposite notion of school assembly as it accurately referred to the distinct event which occurs in schools (Smith & Smith, 2013, p.10). However, for the purposes of this research, the use of CW was retained to impress this distinction upon the trainees so that they could view school activities in a more nuanced manner as they venture into knowing and understanding the complexities of education and professional practice.

Smith & Smith (2013) observed that most discussions about this activity focus on the problems of legal compliance whereas other important matters, such as the ways in which they contribute in shaping whole school values, are neglected. In their research they approached assemblies from the perspective of their ethical content through an identification and analysis of the substantial material being communicated. Their small scale project involved observing primary school assemblies in four different types of schools, with three visits in each school. They also wanted to see whether pupil numbers, religious affiliation or socio-economic location would impact on the assemblies’ ethical content (Smith & Smith, 2013). Though they found that different virtues were emphasised in different schools depending on their social location, their main finding was that the dominant ethical approach was one of virtue ethics which worked well when supported by religious and cultural resources (Smith & Smith, 2013, p.17).

**This study**

This research explored the observations of CW undertaken by second year Bachelor of Arts primary trainees in one English university. The observation took place during their placement with a view to determining their thoughts about several aspects related to CW.

***Method***

As far as could be ascertained, there is limited research undertaken with trainee teachers and their development related to CW as part of their overall initial teacher training in the UK. This paper consists of data collected from a sample of students in their second year of a three year university teacher training course in the West Midlands, England. The research was based on their first-hand observations of CW in schools with the aim of establishing what trainees thought children gained from CW and whether or not they thought there was a place for CW in primary schools. They were also invited to note the extent to which the observation had been useful in developing their knowledge and understanding of CW.

A research questionnaire was designed to facilitate the non-participant observation of an act of CW during their placement (Bryman, 2016). The questionnaire was distributed before the start of their practice so that they could observe and record the details of an act of CW whilst in school. The questionnaire was voluntarily downloaded and after the observation, two copies made. They were asked to retain one for themselves and to deposit the other in the researcher’s or partnership office (Bryman, 2016).

This method enabled data to be gathered from random schools throughout and beyond the West Midlands. To maintain anonymity, the names of trainees and schools were not requested. A sample of 27 responses was received. It is likely that the responses would have been higher had the questionnaire been distributed by hand. Some students may not have observed CW in schools and therefore reminders could have been sent to increase the observations and returns.

**Findings**

In any given CW, most children are expected to benefit in their own ways, as the purpose of CW has an open-ended element to it (DfE, 1994). These trainees were asked to record what they thought children had gained from the CW and to deliberate on its relevance for the children. As the study utilised a questionnaire, an opportunity to explore the understanding of the trainees answering the questionnaire was absent, and, as such, this is a limitation of using a questionnaire only (Bryman, 2016). The researcher let the students interpret CW. In some responses, therefore, an ambiguity is evident about what constituted an assembly and an act of CW, as these were used interchangeably. In terms of the overall results, caution is to be exercised in reading this apparent healthier picture and suggests the need for a larger study.

***Children and learning***

Their responses show at least four themes, as detailed below. First, values and dispositions were encouraged. The second recognisable theme was that of promoting children’s self-esteem and giving them a sense of pride by celebrating their achievements. The third, an unsurprising theme, related to reflections, faith and prayer. However, the data also revealed a fourth theme surpassing these personal aspects, which it seems, attempted to empower children to be active in out-of-school contexts. This appears to resonate with the call from Buchanan and Hyde (2008) for students to achieve cognitive competencies and engage in experiences which have the power to be transformative.

Across these 27 schools, on the days the observations took place, a wide range of topics were delivered. Some children were discovering the importance of being healthy. In another school, children were assisted with understanding their emotions and how to deal with them and being appreciative, thankful, forgiving and sharing. These were reported to be relevant by trainees as they felt that some ‘children find it difficult to deal with their emotions.’ Children also gain ‘great insights into inspirational people’ especially when the focus is on ‘real’ people like Nelson Mandela. In at least three schools, the significance of social development was mentioned as a reason for the assembly being relevant. In a Reception class, ‘following an assembly, children revealed that it was about being nice to others and not upsetting people.’ Older children thought that they had been encouraged to reflect about ‘what they say to others and how this may affect them.’ A trainee recorded that ‘assemblies benefitted children as they considered the bad habit they could give up and how could they help others give up bad habits.’

In other places, their observations coincided with Father’s Day where pupils were informed about its origins. This was thought to be relevant by these trainees as children understood the purpose of making cards and the reasons for celebrating it. In addition, the assembly showed all the different roles fathers have and, therefore, trainees thought that the assembly ‘was non-stereotypical’ and it showed children ‘to appreciate all the things their fathers do.’

In at least six schools, there appears to be an emphasis on delivering specific knowledge to the children enabling them to ponder about matters of faith and prayers. For instance, children learnt ‘the story of Pentecost and why we [sic] celebrate it.’ In another school, where most of the children were Muslims, they ‘learnt what Easter means for Christians.’ In a Catholic school, some children gained a deeper ‘understanding of how important Mary is to the Catholic faith.’ Research investigating the meaning and function of prayer for children showed that it was a valued aspect of life and that it assisted them in clarifying and articulating deep feelings (Mountain, 2005).

In a Church of England school, some children ‘gained information about the workings and the beliefs of the Church of England’ and pupils were ‘expected to understand the values and morals of the Church and how it can be used to support the community.’ In some schools, children were able ‘to share their ways of worshipping and praying, however, they did not acquire any new knowledge and understanding.’

In general, it could be said, as reported by a trainee, that an ‘assembly is a peaceful time.’ Simultaneously, some found that children also became ‘aware of what is going on in the wider world.’ Moreover, in another school, pupils were provided with ‘some basic election knowledge, [that] politics has an effect on education [and since] children will eventually be voters. Working as a team is crucial in life.’

***Collective worship in schools***

Participants in this research were asked about the provision for CW in primary schools. Of the 27 responses, only one did not observe a CW declaring that ‘I feel they may not have time and this is why I did not see Collective Worship.’ Three had not replied, the rest made positive comments.

In general, it was thought that CW had a place in primary schools because it holds many benefits for the children and highlights the range of necessary issues that are relevant for pupils. In other words, these trainees seem to think that CW provides opportunities that can address some basic human needs for stability, security and a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Semetsky, 2009). One trainee felt CW provides children with time to reflect and discuss issues in ‘a judgement free and relaxed environment.’ Specifically, there appears to be three broad categories which form the basis for justifying CW.

Some trainees thought that CW should have a place because it gives children an occasion to explore and learn about different cultures and experiences. It was felt by some that all children should have the opportunity to be involved through observations and participation as it is important for children to know and understand why people worship and what it involves and to learn about what is expected of them in a child friendly way. In other words, they appear to be arguing for its continuity as it is relevant, meaningful and allows for a variety of responses (Cheetham, 2000). Moreover, a participant stressed that CW allows time for the whole school to celebrate achievements of certain children and it also supports the children’s knowledge and understanding of a particular subject.

There were at least six trainees who justified a place for CW from a social and personal perspective. Some emphasised the need to have social experience outside the classroom as it brings a community of people together as one and creates a rich learning experience. This collective school atmosphere was important to others because there was ‘less emphasis on religion and include[d] all children, making them feel part of the community.’ A trainee thought that CW provides ‘time to discuss whole school issues since children are able to participate by sharing their experiences and ideas with the rest of the Key Stage.’ Another participant sensed that it was good for children’s self-esteem and for building the schools’ ethos. Dobmeier (2011) has argued that qualities like self-esteem are increasingly important for children to develop in today’s materialistic society.

It was expected that the moral and values development of children would feature as a reason for the continued support for CW (Cheetham, 2004; Mogra, 2016; Smith & Smith, 2013). At least seven trainees posited that CW had a place because it taught important morals. They argued that children need to understand the value of morals and ethical attitudes and how it applies to them. Another trainee contended that ‘it [is] important that the school can get together to share important shared values –build on the idea of school community.’ Several recognised the allocated time for CW as being important for encouraging children to respect others’ views and learn about different beliefs and values. For example, a student explained:

I believe there is a place for Collective Worship within schools. I think that it does not mean that the faith should be pushed upon children, but the morals and values that the faith base themselves on can be used to help develop the pupils’ sense of belonging to a community. The collective nature of faith and worship allows children to reflect upon their own principles and attitudes to different situations in life. Pupils also have a chance to realise that they have the ability to make changes to succeed and to work together to be part of the community whose aims are positive values and choices.

Having said that, there were at least three who expressed some reservations about CW. One felt that it should be delivered ‘Sometime –[as] sometimes [it] can be too long which leads to misbehaviour but [it] is good for celebrating achievements and promoting good values and citizenship.’ A second trainee declared: ‘possibly, but only when a range of religions are included to give children a variety of views on religion.’ A third wrote: ‘I believe there is a place for reflection and a time to share thoughts, beliefs, experiences and feelings. I do not think that it should have a specific religious focus, and it should be weekly.’ In addition to such practical reservations, others have various concerns about CW in the context of their personal standpoints, the link between moral nurture and religious nurture, among others (McCreery, 1993; Cheetham, 2004).

CW can provide opportunities for self-reflection and self-introspection. In the absence of such opportunities, some pupils might miss out on collective messages which highlight behaviours which are socially censured and enhance pupils’ social development. As noted earlier, CW educates and empowers pupils in adopting prosocial behaviour. Importantly, the emotional distance between peers can be reduced through CW, and, where appropriate, thoughts or prayers for the victims and the perpetrators can be included. In so doing, CW provides time for allowing pupils to reflect on the consequences of anti-social behaviour. In the context of cyberbullying, Kyriacou & Zuin (2016) discuss the subject of ‘moral disengagement’ whose foundations, they maintain, are based on the desensitisation of prosocial values and emotional empathy towards another person. According to them, morally disengaged individuals rarely put themselves in the place of the individual being denigrated and they become desensitised to others’ suffering and emotional pain (Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016, p.35). Thus, CW can promote empathy, provide moments of reflection on the limits of their actions and make pupils aware of the suffering of others.

***Learning about CW***

In response to the question regarding the extent to which the observation had been useful in developing their knowledge and understanding of CW, all respondents offered positive comments. These are classified into four areas of learning: purpose, value, professionalism and practice. One student ‘did not see collective worship.’

Responses show that four trainees were enabled to consider the purpose, nature and impact that CW may have. They confirmed that CW is ‘an important element of school practice and should be included as part of the school day to unite the school.’ Several observed the different uses of CW in schools. However, some trainees, based on their observations of CW highlighted the need to teach all religions in schools rather than just one which can limit children’s ideas and beliefs. A trainee noted that the CW was interesting ‘compared to the more “assembly” [sic] like ones I have seen before.’ Another participant found ‘this observation difficult due to collective worship not being taught as I imagined it. It would have been useful for me to observe an RE lesson, due to the CW I observed being integrated.’

In addition to learning about the nature and different purposes of CW, trainees appear to have better understood the value of CW and the wider contributions it can make. For instance, a participant observed various components of a CW which made them think of all the benefits that each little part offers. According to a trainee, in a Special Educational Needs school, the assembly was short, nevertheless, ‘there is still a lot going on and the children look forward to the assembly each week because they are interactive, they can get involved and it may just be their week to receive a reward.’ In a mainstream school, a trainee learnt that ‘assemblies can assist children to scrutinise positive and negative actions or views and how they can be affected by them.’ In general, the importance of bringing children together to appreciate one another’s diverse religious and cultural backgrounds was reinforced. Such an experience was felt to be important by these trainees because some ‘pupils have a limited experience of this; both learning and being part of the multicultural society.’

Trainees are aware that after completing their course they join the teaching community and become professionals. Inviting these trainees to observe CW from a ‘distance’ appears to have crystallised this important perspective expected of them. The observations were useful for most trainees as they were able ‘to see first-hand how children responded to faith and worship.’ It was refreshing to see, according to another trainee, ‘children of all cultures and religions …excited and engaged in the creation of a “community” event.’ This function related to the blessing of the building under the Church of England, nevertheless, ‘children of different faiths were also included and involved with emphasis being on the positive values of working together to achieve and being part of a community.’ Similarly, in another school, a trainee was assisted to deepen their ‘understanding of the Catholic faith and see first-hand the type of worship that is practiced’ there.

Beyond these experiences in faith schools, where some trainees might have expected to be exposed to CW, in other schools, some trainees were surprised to discover CW as reflected in the following comment: ‘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.’ Another trainee admitted: ‘The children involved seem to respond well and enjoy participating, I also enjoyed the service. My children are Catholic as is my family and, as a result of this, I would be attending Collective Worship on a regular basis with my children.’

Many trainees appear to attach the value of these observations to their personal growth in terms of their own knowledge and understanding of the diverse practices of CW. The observations supported some trainees ‘greatly’ because they developed their ‘knowledge of how Collective Worships are delivered and how they can be delivered successfully’ and ‘how to approach whole school issues and the activities suitable to use during assemblies.’

Moreover, these observations were significant to them as they were given a greater understanding of the most effective methods to deliver CW, especially in the Foundation Stage. Consequently, some felt more confident in delivering CW in the future and to incorporate it into the classroom. Since CW covers a wide range of issues, trainees saw that these can sometimes be illustrated with a story or real life experience as a good way of making the message accessible to all children. Indeed, a student discovered that children learn ‘vital lessons about life’ which can be delivered in ‘an engaging and effective way through collective worship such as this.’

Some trainees appreciated the opportunity to observe the manner in which CW is organised. These observations assisted them to understand that CW, for sharing worship experiences, can be class based or whole school. This was relevant for them since they now ‘know the format of collective worship in most schools, which is useful’ because they ‘will most likely have to take an assembly after [they] qualify.’

Apart from these generic practical elements of CW, others appear to have had an exposition to deeper issues of school life in the context of CW. For instance, some were given ‘an idea of how to deal with sensitive issues’, whereas, for others, it was instructive ‘in understanding what elements are relevant to include in collective worship to engage children and make it useful for them. I [had] never learnt that involving children in collective worship is very useful in maintaining their engagement.’

**Conclusion**

It has been noted that the provision of CW in schools raises doubts, concerns and anxieties. However, the experience of observing CW in school for these participants has been both meaningful and informative. It is, therefore, argued that, in addition to all types of school assembly, CW, being a significant activity in the life of all schools, should specifically be included as part of the observations undertaken by trainees during their school based experiences so that they are exposed to and reflect on all the activities which they are likely to carry out when they first start teaching. Moreover, whilst on training, they will benefit philosophically and practically in relation to CW. Simultaneously, course providers should include it as part of their studies.

The focus of the content of CW observed in these schools is diverse and pupils are exposed to a wide range of information, experiences and issues both secular and religious and traditional and contemporary at the hands of adults representing various perspectives and worldviews. It is relevant for pupils to be aware of the values and ethos espoused by the community of the school so that they mature into a complex world. CW remains to be one of the means of achieving this in schools.

These trainee teachers thought that children gained from CW is many ways. Universal values and dispositions were being encouraged and children’s self-esteem were promoted and a sense of pride given to them. Pupils were given opportunities to reflect in a relaxed atmosphere and were being empowered to be active in out of school contexts. Inside a school, the creation of a strong sense of community can empower pupils so that their overall outlook is transformed. Based on the potential of CW to be transformative, educational, social and personal, these future teachers felt that, in general, CW has a place in primary schools.

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