Journal of Trainee Teacher Education Research

JoTTER: Volume 3 (2012)

Pupils' Perspectives of the Purpose and Value of Collective Worship: A Case-study of 10-11 Year Olds in a Faith-school Context

Elisabeth Rutherford

(PGCE General Primary, 2010-2011)

email: e.rutherford@cantab.net

Abstract

Collective worship is a statutory requirement, however its purpose is often viewed as uncertain and its value controversial. This article explores the views of twelve Year 6 pupils at an urban, Church of England Aided Primary School. Those with a Christian faith, other faith or no religious background were interviewed in focus groups to identify if this affects pupils' perspectives. All the students generally identified the purpose of collective worship to be threefold: gathering together as a whole school, learning new things and providing a religious element, particularly prayer. Most pupils seemed to value these aspects but their responses highlighted the need for children to be more involved in collective worship and for the content to be more varied and relevant to their daily lives. Finally, whilst pupils recognised the importance of a religious element, collective worship did not always engage them to self-reflect and therefore develop spiritually, especially boys from a non-religious background. It is difficult to know how this vital purpose of collective worship can be met. However, first steps may be to explain what worship and prayer are and then to give time for personal experience and response.

Introduction

Collective worship has been statutory since 1944 but the current legislation has been revised little since the 1988 Education Reform Act. This act states that "all pupils in attendance at a maintained school shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship" (6.1) that is "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character" (7.1). However in a changing society, growing ever more multicultural and secularised, this legal framework and its interpretation are highly controversial. Moreover, with collective worship occurring daily and requiring valuable time from curriculum teaching and learning, the question of the purpose (the reasons for having it) and value (how pupils actually benefit) of collective worship remain uncertain.

In order to consider the purpose and value of collective worship, the perspectives of 10-11 year olds (Year 6 pupils) at a Church of England (CE) Aided Primary School were consulted in focus groups. This school has 334 children on roll and a diverse, urban catchment, making it possible to include those of Christian, other faith and non-religious backgrounds in the study and research if this affects their perspective of collective worship. As a faith-school, a particular impact on the content and design of collective worship and also the perspectives of the pupils studied needs to be recognised. Nonetheless, these pupils' perspectives provide useful insight for considering the purpose and value of collective worship more widely.

In this article I will first discuss the present literature on the purpose and value of collective worship and recognise the importance of researching pupils' perspectives in order to gain further depths of understanding into its role in school life. The case-study of twelve pupils and the focus group methods will next be explained to set the context for the findings to be presented and discussed. Finally, the research will be evaluated and conclusions, with implications for future teaching practice, drawn.

Literature Review

The Purpose of Collective Worship

Moral, Cultural and Social Development

According to Circular 1/94, produced to aid understanding of the statutory requirements set out in the 1988 Education Act, collective worship should promote pupils' "spiritual, moral and cultural development" (DFE, 1994: 6,1). These aims are difficult to define and are controversial, although most believe that collective worship should support pupils morally and culturally. Cheetham (2004: 6) argues that most leaders and teachers agree that collective worship has a moral aim of "encouraging good behaviour" and an educational (or cultural) aim of increasing children's awareness of different world-views. It is also believed, though perhaps more commonly in the past, that experiencing worship aids pupils' understanding of religious belief (Copley, 2000). In addition, Cheetham (2004: 6) suggests collective worship has a social aim of "building a sense of school community"; a concept supported by the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967: Para. 570) which described collective worship as a "unifying force for the school". These three purposes are widely supported by leaders of collective worship and the sense of gathering together for moral, cultural and educational development is generally considered important.

However, Cheetham (2004) also suggests two other aims of collective worship that are more contentious: a national aim to promote a sense of identity (linked to building a sense of community) and, crucially, a religious aim of nurturing faith. Although the religious aim is perhaps the most controversial purpose for collective worship, it is also the most vital. Without some consideration of the spiritual dimension, it would merely be collective teaching rather than worship, revealed by the distinction made between assembly and collective worship (DFE, 1994: Para.58). As stated in Circular 1/94, worship "must in some sense reflect something special or separate from ordinary school activities and it should be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power" (DFE, 1994: Para. 57). This definition reflects quite a narrow, religious view of worship that some do not believe is appropriate for school environments, where education is used to scrutinise and test beliefs rather than assume them (Hull, 1975). Therefore, many academics and teachers now subscribe to the view of worship as 'worth-ship' (Slee, 1990), exploring what is of

ultimate value in our lives and celebrating different achievements. Yet, there is a real danger with this view of worship as, similarly to the other aims of collective worship discussed, it again places an emphasis on the immanent and present world. It does not explore or provide opportunities for children to reflect on the possibility of there being more beyond the material world we experience. This is despite recent findings that "spirituality is a common, natural feature of most, probably all children's lives" (Nye, 2009: 9). It is thus important to consider the importance of spiritual development as an aim for collective worship.

Spiritual Development

Spiritual development has proved very difficult to explain but one of the most useful definitions comes from OFSTED (1994: 86):

> "Spiritual development relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal experience which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. 'Spiritual' is not synonymous with 'religious'; all areas of the curriculum may contribute to pupils' spiritual development."

While this definition only hints at how spiritual development can actually be promoted in collective worship (and other parts of the curriculum), it does reveal spirituality to be a focus on ideas of the meaning and purpose of life and a sense of something beyond the material world. The definition also indicates that time for reflection is required.

The idea of spirituality emerged in education in the 1944 Act (7) but it is only more recently, since the 1990s, that the concept has been scrutinised more closely and promoted as a possible way to find a consensus between society's religious and non-religious views of the aims of collective worship. Spiritual development is evidently important as it is placed as the first aim in Circular 1/94 (DFE, 1994). Also, OFSTED (2004) has stated how spirituality links and contributes to pupils' social, cultural and moral development, thus making it necessary for all other purposes of collective worship to be fulfilled. Additionally, as McLaughlin (2003: 359) argues, this spirituality may be "religiously tethered" (focused through devotion to God/gods) or "untethered" (disconnected from religion). This interpretation, alongside the growing emphasis that spirituality is a focus on the search for meaning and not the end point (Erricker, 1998), therefore enables greater consensus between religious and non-religious views of the aims of collective worship.

There are some arguments against these views of spirituality, including the debate as to whether it can exist outside a religious framework, which some argue provides meaning and makes reflection more than about the "inner me" (Davies, 2007: 313). Also, Marples (2006) questions whether spirituality does actually exist as a separate domain from more critically appraised subjects such as philosophy. However, in general, there is a consensus that it is valuable to promote pupils' spiritual development in collective worship by: enabling pupils to discover who they are and how they should relate to others; supporting the knowledge and development of pupils' personal beliefs and encouraging their search for meaning in the world (Davies, 2007). How this is to be achieved in practice remains uncertain, although providing space for guided reflection and silence for personal response is a significant direction for leaders of collective worship to explore (Copley, 1992; Hyde, Yust & Ota, 2010).

The Value of Collective Worship

The purposes set out above are the reasons given by the government and teachers for why collective worship is important. However, it is crucial to consider if, in practice, pupils actually benefit from the aims intended or if they value other aspects of collective worship. Furthermore, it is also useful to investigate how they think collective worship could be improved, or if they value it at all.

There has been a very limited amount of research into pupils' perspectives on collective worship and it has mainly been derived from secondary school students. Nevertheless, this research is still useful to provide insights into how collective worship may be perceived and valued by primary school children, especially those in Year 6 who often begin to show similar attitudes to older pupils (Gill, 2004).

The main value that many pupils place on collective worship is the importance of gathering together and doing something as a school, though not necessarily for a religious act of worship (Gill, 2000). Many students would like to have greater involvement in collective worship, perhaps participating more, helping to lead assemblies or choosing topics that they are more interested in (Gill, 2004). Integration of all in the school and creating "inter-community harmony" and cohesion is also considered a vital element of collective worship (Miller & McKenna, 2011: 179). Consequently, pupils often dislike the strong emphasis on Christian worship which can exclude those from other

faith or non-religious backgrounds. (This value is similar to those held by leaders of collective worship, hence the growing emphasis on spirituality rather than religion.) There is a tendency, among secondary students at least, to believe that Christianity no longer fits into everyday life in Britain and to resent the feeling that they are being expected or even made to believe things (Gill, 2004). However, although in Gill's study students tend not to refer to a spiritual dimension of collective worship other than in a religious sense, there is a feeling amongst pupils that they want to be given space to "discover for themselves" (Gill, 2004: 192). Yet Watson's (2001) study of OFSTED reports reveals that many schools are unsuccessful at promoting pupils' spiritual development because they do not provide enough time for reflection.

It seems therefore that the few pupils studied value some aspects of collective worship, particularly assembling altogether and being involved. However, the spiritual dimension, that is vital for worship to be taking place, is often disliked by students. They feel they are not being given a choice about the religious beliefs that are presented to them and are uncomfortable with how people of different faith backgrounds can share in this together. Moreover, spiritual development may not be being promoted if those leading worship are unclear about how to support this aspect, perhaps indicated by the need some students feel to have more time to discover a sense of spirituality for themselves. If this is the case on a wider scale, it is therefore important to consider what collective worship can offer pupils in today's society and to find out how they think it can be improved to better meet their needs.

Research Design

Researching Pupils' Perspectives

The focus of this research was to investigate pupils' perspectives of collective worship, considering their beliefs of its purpose and the value they placed on it. There is now a general belief that children's opinions are important for several reasons. First, "children are expert witnesses" (Alexander, 2010: 143) and so can give valuable insights into aspects of collective worship that adults leading it may not have even conceived. Secondly, as pupils are those affected by decisions made, it is now believed to be their right to have their views consulted. This practice is developed in the Every Child Matters Agenda (DfES, 2004) and by OFSTED (2005) which now inspects if

schools consult pupils effectively, and asks for children's views itself. Although the heterogeneity of children's views must be recognised and the researcher must always be careful not to focus only on ideas that support their hypothesis, pupils' perspectives on collective worship should provide a new or clearer understanding of its actual role in school life.

Case-Study Approach

To undertake this research a case-study approach was used which can be defined as "the study of an instance in action" (Bassey, 1999: 30). It is a useful design for studying a bounded group in its context, especially for complex subjects such as collective worship where, like for all religious topics, there can be great diversity and overlap between different children's experiences and understanding (Nesbitt, 2000). In this case, twelve Year 6 pupils formed the bounded group for study, partly due to pragmatism but linked to the concept that "the fewer cases investigated, the more information can be collected about each of them" (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000: 2). Hence, a small case-study of twelve was chosen in order to produce rich data to analyse which could provide insight to "see things we otherwise might not have seen" (Donmoyer, 2000: 63) and could then be used to compare to similar findings in the literature.

The disadvantages of the case-study approach are that, whilst it is valuable to understand the intricate details of one case, it is difficult to generalise to other cases. Care must therefore be taken not to overstate the findings and to be clear about how conclusions drawn can be made relevant to other situations (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). However, by attempting to understand the unique and shared characteristics of pupils' perspectives together, new insights about the purpose and value of collective worship may be discovered (Simons, 1996).

Focus Group Method

The main research method used was focus groups: two groups with six children in each. Focus groups "collect data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan, 1997: 6) and were chosen partly for efficiency but mainly in order to encourage ideas to be shared and comparisons to be made between the participants' own experiences. To directly address issues of consensus and disagreement, heterogeneous groups were used, with those from Christian, other faith and non-religious backgrounds all represented. Although the interactions and contributions

made by the participants will undoubtedly have been affected by the heterogeneous group setting and the fact they were discussing with their peers and not strangers, the complexity of the issue of collective worship merited the need to analyse group interaction (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to privately write down their ideas at the end of the focus group to enable all to have their individual voice heard, without feeling pressurised by the group. A semi-structured design was used for conducting the focus groups as this enabled comparisons to be made between the two groups, whilst allowing the children's voices and own interests to be heard and reflections developed further (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). This relied on myself, as moderator, facilitating the group so that all felt able to speak on the topic. Intuition was also required to analyse the answers already given to choose which areas to explore further (Evans, 2009).

To triangulate the results, important for clarifying their validity and making them more trustworthy (Stake, 1995), I also carried out participant observations to identify if the behaviour displayed by the children during collective worship correlated with what they said during the focus groups (Morgan, 1997). Observations were made of three children, one of each from a Christian, other faith and non-religious background, during different forms of collective worship at the school. A focus was placed on the direction of their attention, their body language and their level of participation whilst different parts of the worship were taking place. Despite only carrying out observations on three children, and the likelihood of having missed some important actions due to the practical difficulty of observing all at the same time, it is still beneficial to see if the experiences of these three children tie into their comments, to give strength to themes found and conclusions made.

Finally, the focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed in order to analyse the data carefully and thoroughly. Key themes were identified by both a deductive and an inductive approach, meaning that some expected strands were investigated whilst an open mind was kept for themes that emerged from the data itself (Evans, 2009). Concepts identified from the text were coded thematically in order to detect the evidence that could be used to justify analysis and conclusions made (Evans, 2009). Although analysis was therefore slightly further removed from the original data, the context of comments was still considered and analysis of differences could be examined more easily.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted according to responsibilities laid out in *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2004) and faculty requirements (Appendix 1). Respect for participants was maintained at all times. Researching collective worship meant that a particular sensitivity was required to respect personal, sacred beliefs held (Nesbitt, 2000).

Prior to the study, the research question was discussed and agreed with both my mentor and the head teacher of the school. With the school's permission a letter offering withdrawal from the study was sent to all parents, explaining the nature of the research, the processes that would be undertaken and how the data would be stored and used (Appendix 2). Further to this, once the reasons and process for the research had been explained to the children themselves, each individual was consulted about whether they were willing to participate and be audio recorded during the focus group. In this way, the children's right to form and express their own views (UN, 1989: Article 12) was maintained. To ensure the children's data was protected, the audio recordings were agreed to only be kept by the researcher for one year and only transcriptions would be published. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was assured (and so in this research all names are removed and initials changed).

In order to respect every individual, heterogeneous focus groups were used so children did not feel that their own faith or non-religious belief was being particularly targeted and that no one group was being advantaged over another. Additionally, it was explained to the pupils that their views were all valued and attempts were made to respond similarly to all remarks about collective worship. In analysing and reporting the data the comments have been considered in the context in which they occurred and efforts to represent the full range of views have been made. Examples of transcriptions (Appendix 3) and observations (Appendix 4) are available to enable others to scrutinise the analysis undertaken.

Findings and Discussion

The Purpose of Collective Worship

There were three types of purpose for collective worship that the pupils identified, all of which can be compared to the government and teachers' intended aims: gathering together, learning and undertaking religious worship with prayer. However it is also important to recognise that at least three children stated they were unsure of a purpose.

Gathering together

Nearly all the pupils agreed that one of the main purposes of collective worship was to gather together As one child phrased it, 'the whole school is one thing rather than individual people, so we do it together' (Boy, Christian). There was a real sense that it was important not to feel alone but to share together and through this, learn to work as a team or community. Furthermore, one child suggested that they should not be forced to sing because this would mean 'the people who are told to will hate the teachers more and not get along so well' (Boy, Non-religious). This statement reveals the child's idea that collective worship is intended to create unity within the school community, a concept supported by another student who said 'they probably think it will help equality' (Boy, Christian). Of particular interest, one girl of another faith, who was withdrawn from collective worship with overt Christian teaching, remarked 'it can't be like, all short people on one side and all tall people on one side…we all need to be in a group'. Therefore the pupils did identify an intended social purpose (Cheetham, 2004) of creating unity and togetherness in the school.

Learning

A second purpose the children gave for having collective worship was to 'learn about stuff' (Girl, Non-religious). Two pupils agreed that there was always a message to learn in collective worship and for a few children there was a sense that collective worship was for them to learn about faith and different cultures. For example, one pupil explained that you 'take an interest when (you are) with other people who have a different opinion to you' (Girl, Other faith). This idea is also linked to the view, held by several pupils, that RE was a form of collective worship, suggesting the children believed that, if they were learning about world faiths, they were participating in collective worship. Therefore the pupils generally agreed with the intended educational, cultural and moral purposes of collective worship (Cheetham, 2004): to find out about religions and other cultures and to learn a message.

Religious Worship and Prayer

Contrasting with the literature, there was finally a general belief amongst the pupils that a religious element, particularly prayer, was vital for a gathering to be collective worship. Illustrating this idea are several comments explaining that collective worship involves 'singing and praying to God as one' (Girl, Christian), and 'praying and hearing stories about God' (Girl, Non-religious). Additionally, when discussing if assemblies were always collective worship several children were very clear that religion or prayer had to be included. Assemblies on joining a karate club or being shown yoyos were seen as a form of advertising or publicity because prayer was not involved. Sharing assembly was thought by one not to be collective worship, described instead as when 'you share the work we've done rather than doing religious things' (Boy, Christian). Some class assemblies were explained to be 'not always religious' because they were often on a 'PSHE-based topic' (Girl, Non-religious). Overall, as indicated in Circular 1/94 (DFE, 1994), there was a sense that there was a religious or spiritual dimension that made worship different from lessons or a gathering of people. In addition the pupils' views seemed to contradict one opinion accepted by many academics and teachers - they did not think that assemblies based on 'worth-ship', like sharing assemblies, were a form of collective worship.

However, there was one distinct group of pupils, non-religious boys, who did not recognise any purpose of collective worship. In discussions they all occasionally supported what another child said but when questioned directly, and in their written responses, no purpose was identified by two individuals and the other suggested the school had collective worship 'because [the head teacher] likes it'. The fact that they saw no reason for collective worship suggests that it may be important for leaders of collective worship to be clear about and to explain its purpose for all to understand.

The Value of Collective Worship

Despite the majority of pupils recognising several purposes of collective worship, it was important to find out if they actually valued collective worship for those reasons or if they did not think it was essential. Alongside this, the pupils suggested ways in which they thought collective worship could be improved.

Gathering together with active involvement

Similarly to the pupils interviewed by Gill (2004), the children seemed to value gathering as a school community - the girl of a non-Christian faith who discussed the need to be mixed up certainly seemed to value individuals in the school coming together, perhaps as she is generally withdrawn from collective worship and may feel excluded. However, the pupils recognised that it was difficult to have Reception to Year 6 children altogether as some topics (for example, fireworks injuries) were unsuitable to discuss with younger children. The pupils could also feel crowded. Another theme, that ran through both focus groups, was the need for pupils to not just be together but to feel a part of the collective worship through active involvement. One pupil said 'I only like assemblies if you join in with it' (Boy, Christian). Nearly every child mentioned that they enjoyed collective worship where people acted the stories out or they liked other pupils being involved at the front. For example, on remembering a recent assembly,

> "they got some kids to act in it so it was more entertaining…cause otherwise you're just sat on the bench and listening, whereas if you're actually acting it out, then you have something to watch and look at and make you understand it better."
>
> (Girl, Non-religious)

This quotation reveals several benefits the children perceive from active involvement (and having visual prompts) in collective worship: making it more fun, interesting and memorable and enabling greater understanding to be reached. These ideas are also supported by the children's favourite, and clearly memorable, examples of collective worship, all of which used pupil participation. Additionally, from observations, the children seemed to be more animated when their peers were at the front and when singing songs with actions (see 10.16 and 10.22, Appendix 4). Half the children also remarked that they enjoyed singing because it was fun and they were 'singing altogether as one' (Girl, Other faith). As Gill (2004) also found that pupils wanted to be more involved in collective worship, it seems that for pupils to value coming together it is vital they are able to actively participate.

Learning

Learning about religion, especially a variety of different faiths and cultures, was seen as important by several pupils, although this may have been overstated because some considered RE to be a form of collective worship. Some pupils recognised that they would learn 'about faith' (Boy, Non-religious) but this was not always valued highly, with one student saying that they should not have

class assemblies because they learn 'mostly about God and, like, we need to learn more stuff' (Girl, Christian). This statement, and others, reveal that a few pupils did not value learning about faith as highly as other curriculum subjects, for example, Literacy or Numeracy. Therefore the purpose of educating pupils in collective worship about faith was only recognised by some pupils.

Additionally, the pupils widely agreed that learning could be improved by changing the stories. Many remarks were made that, by Year 6, they had heard all the stories before, that 'most people already know them' (Girl, Other faith) and that they were bored of them. This view is shown by the phrase 'and you're like, oh, not again' (Girl, Other faith). They recognised that there could be a wider variety in Bible teachings - 'there's, like, a thousand stories in the Bible and they choose, like, the same ten' (Boy, Other faith) - although difficulties in this were understood by one Christian girl who said, 'it's because some of the stories in the Bible, maybe, all the little ones, like, um, they probably wouldn't understand'. However, the need to provide varied teaching in assemblies was definitely important to pupils, illustrated by the approval shown that 'in RE, [the teacher] always does something different' (Girl, Non-religious).

The subject of the assembly was also said to matter and one suggestion, although possibly led by the researcher, was to have more stories from everyday life. The pupil commented that 'it's always about things that have happened in the past…sometimes it's a bit, like, hard to imagine, so you're not sure how it would be back then' (Boy, Christian). This idea, although linked to changing the stories, indicates that some pupils may not be able to relate to Bible teachings fully. Perhaps, as Gill (2004) found, students would benefit from helping to decide the content of collective worship teaching, ensuring that it was more relevant to their daily lives. Therefore, from the literature and this study, it seems that varying the content of teaching in collective worship is important to pupils.

Religious Worship and Prayer

The final key value the pupils recognised in collective worship was a religious or spiritual element, although the greatest variation in pupils' value of collective worship was about this religious content, intended to develop the pupils spiritually. In contrast to Gill's (2004) study, probably because it was a Christian school, most pupils were prepared to accept the high level of Christian content in collective worship. However, some children did not value it, feeling left out or that the

worship was not aimed at them. This was shown by specific references to Christians praying and also the remark 'I'm not a Christian so I don't feel that passionate about singing, like, Christian songs' (Girl, Non-religious). One child therefore suggested that 'there should be, like, a God assembly and then, like, not a God assembly' (Girl, Christian), similar to the idea that many leaders of collective worship hold (Cheetham, 2004). It is particularly concerning that pupils (especially boys) from a non-religious background, who are perhaps not having spiritual development promoted at home, were those that expressed the most difficulty in participating. One child even went so far as to say about collective worship: 'there's not anything I like. I just have to suffer it' (Boy, Non-religious). For this strong view to be stated, collective worship cannot have been engaging this child and, by not participating and reflecting, his spiritual development is unlikely to have been promoted. It is therefore important to consider how children from all religious backgrounds might be engaged and encouraged to reflect and therefore be spiritually developed through collective worship.

Furthermore, the importance and relevance of prayer, a time of reflection considered vital by OFSTED (Watson, 2001), was generally recognised by pupils as essential for collective worship. However, how far prayer was valued by them, and so promoted their spiritual development, remains uncertain. For one child, prayer was obviously a vital element of school life: 'lessons for me are just about, possibly less important than praying to God' (Girl, Christian). From observations, most children also chose to join in with times of prayer – bowing their heads or saying 'Amen' (see 10.21, Appendix 4). Also, another pupil appeared to have some idea of its intended purpose:

> "if we come together then maybe, like, if we're saying the same prayer, like, we have the same worry then we can, like, help each other and stuff. Or if you used to have that worry you can say how you sorted it out."
>
> (Girl, Non-religious)

This response suggests an awareness of the need to pray collectively and support each other as a community. However, the suggestion of sharing information about how you sorted a concern out signals that prayer was not necessarily seen as a relationship with a transcendent being but only a relationship with others. Therefore, prayer may not have fully supported pupils' spiritual development in terms of contemplating more than the present, material world.

Further to this, other pupils generally seemed to recognise that prayer was necessary for worship to take place but not why this was, suggesting it did not offer them spiritual development.

> "I think the only time when [collective worship] is actually, like, properly serious, is when we start praying…'cause that's when people try and take the opportunity to start talking, so Miss says you have to be all, like, serious now and, like, don't talk."
>
> (Boy, Other faith)

This quote illustrates the sense that prayer was important but only due to the context in which it happened; this was not his own experience. From observing collective worship, prayer was introduced as a time to be quiet, a candle was lit, some pupils and teachers closed their eyes and then a prayer was said, but the focus groups illustrate that perhaps the reason for praying like this has rarely been explained to, or at least understood by, the children. There was also not much time given for personal reflection and individual response, as has been suggested for promoting children's spiritual development (Hyde et al., 2010).

Perhaps, as with religious content in general, most pupils recognised prayer as a time to be respectful but felt it was not intended for them and so did not value it. For example, one boy said, 'if you're a Christian you want to pray to God as well' (Boy, Other faith). Although this child was observed joining in with 'Amen' at the end of prayers in acts of collective worship (see 10.21, Appendix 4), the sense that the time of prayer was only for Christians was apparent in his comment.

Therefore, it seems that the religious element of collective worship, both Christian teaching and prayer, whilst being recognised as vital and accepted by most, was not fully understood. Several of the non-Christian pupils suggested that they did not think the religious element was intended for them and so were probably less engaged with these aspects, or they did not know how to respond. This is similar to Gill's (2004) findings: students did not listen to or feel involved with the religious parts of collective worship. If this is the case, then collective worship is not fully meeting the spiritual development needs of most pupils.

Evaluation

Although this research does provide some useful insights into pupils' perspectives of the value and purpose of collective worship, there are some problems and limitations that need to be recognised.

First, the focus groups required a better setting as the discussions had to take place in a large community area that occasionally people, including the head teacher who led much of the collective worship, walked through. Although the children did not seem too concerned or restricted by this, it is likely to have influenced how comfortable they felt in putting their ideas forward (Nesbitt, 2000). Furthermore, the audio recording quality was affected if someone spoke nearby and at one point I had to stop the flow of conversation to wait while a whole class walked past, which perhaps left some ideas unsaid.

Secondly, the focus groups could have been moderated more successfully. As a trainee teacher of the children, the pupils may have been unwilling to share some information with me, although it is possible they found it easier to contribute than with an unknown researcher. Additionally, it was difficult not to work within the roles of the teacher-pupil relationship and, as an inexperienced researcher, I occasionally used positive praise that may have encouraged the pupils to express particular views. From the transcripts it has also been possible to identify questions that may have led the students to give particular responses. Moderation could have been improved by allowing the children to speak for longer without interruption and following their ideas more, which may have provided greater insight (Morgan, 1997). A more focused question about their feelings towards prayer and worship would also have been helpful for understanding further how collective worship promoted their spiritual development.

Thirdly, the use of the focus group, while advantageous for giving the children ideas and identifying where there was consensus or divergence in their views, may have affected the contributions the pupils made (Flick, 2009). This is particularly likely as I used heterogeneous groups where difference in opinion may have made participants wary about what they said, especially with their classmates rather than strangers present. Difficulties in some children expressing their views were apparent since some pupils contributed little and only when directly asked. Perhaps starting the focus group with an unrelated ice-breaker (Morgan, 1997) would have encouraged discussion, as the drawing and writing warm-up I planned failed to put them at ease, even if it did provide a starting point for conversation. Also, I believe one boy contributed little because he disliked missing art and therefore another time for the focus group would have been better.

Finally, for practical reasons, the case-study was very small (only involving about one-third of Year 6) and it was difficult to have equal numbers of each religious background represented. Thus, despite achieving some depth in pupils' perspectives, the breadth is limited, the ability to generalise is uncertain and conclusions cannot be widely applied. For more to be understood about pupils' perspectives of the purpose and value of collective worship a larger sample is required. Moreover, to study the perspectives of a variety of ages and in different types of schools would increase understanding further.

Conclusion with Implications for Future Practice

This case-study of Year 6 pupils' perspectives of the purpose and value of collective worship in a faith school, whilst being a small sample that is difficult to generalise from, does provide useful insights from which conclusions can be drawn. It is evident that most pupils did see a similar purpose for collective worship to those laid out in Circular 1/94 (DFE, 1994). They mainly understood and valued that collective worship enabled them to come together as one school community. They also thought it was important to learn about faith and God, indicating the purpose of morally and culturally developing pupils was being met. Additionally, most saw the need to have a religious element in collective worship, although whether this was actually effective in promoting pupils' spiritual development is uncertain. However, some pupils identified no purpose for collective worship and all suggested ways in which it could be improved. From this research I have therefore identified three particular aspects for developing collective worship in my future practice.

First, pupils seemed to value being actively involved in collective worship, for example, singing or acting. Additionally, where props or visual cues were used, the acts of worship were enjoyed and understood more by the pupils. However, it appears that collective worship has remained highly influenced by the behaviourist approach, where pupils are considered passive in the learning process and will understand through listening and receiving (Pollard, 2010). Despite difficulties in making collective worship accessible for all ages, I intend to make collective worship more active, whether through acting, singing or other activities. I will also investigate whether, perhaps in class assemblies when groups are smaller, peer discussion can be used to enable the children to learn from each other's ideas and experiences, which may be more accessible and meaningful to them

(Mercer, 2000). Furthermore, I intend to continue to consult pupils about what they enjoy about collective worship, hence making them more involved and meeting their needs.

Secondly, I believe it is vital in my future practice to use different stories alongside new ways to present them. The majority of pupils commented on how they had heard the stories before, already knew them and were bored of them and therefore became disengaged during these acts of collective worship. In order to be promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural and social development it is thus crucial to have long term plans for the material to be covered during collective worship. Also, as one pupil mentioned having stories that were more relevant to everyday life and Gill (2004) found that students wanted to choose topics that they thought were important, I plan to ask pupils what they would like to reflect upon. In this way, pupils may remain more engaged during collective worship and perhaps find more meaning or relevance in the content to their own lives.

Finally, the pupils generally believed that for assemblies to be acts of collective worship there had to be a time of prayer, suggesting they recognised the need for a transcendent element rather than just learning about or celebrating things in the material world. However, some children felt this time of worship was not for them and the fact that all the non-religious boys saw no purpose or value in collective worship has important implications for my future practice. This trend certainly needs to be investigated and understood further but it does appear that collective worship must be developed in order to meet these children's spiritual needs particularly. There is no formula for how this can be achieved but, as stated, spirituality requires opportunities for reflection, considering more than the material world around us. Therefore, I believe that by explaining what worship and prayer are and then providing more freedom for personal response, collective worship could have a clearer purpose and value of spiritual development to all pupils.

References

Alexander, R. (2010). *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Oxon: Routledge.

Bassey, M. (1999). *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

British Educational Research Association (BERA.) (2004) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Notts: BERA.

Central Advisory Council for Education (CACE.) (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools* ('The Plowden Report'), London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO).

Cheetham, R. (2004). *Collective Worship: Issues and Opportunities*. London: SPCK.

Copley, T. (1992) Silence and Collective Worship. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 14(2), 74-79.

Copley, T. (2000). *Spiritual Development in the State School*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Davies, G. (2007). Spiritual Development in Church Schools – A Survey of Welsh Head Teacher's Perceptions. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 12(3), 307-324.

Department for Education (DFE). (1994). *Religious Education and Collective Worship*. Circular 1/94. London: Department for Education.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES.) (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. London: DfES.

Donmoyer, R. (2000). Generalisability and the Single-Case Study. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley & P. Foster (eds.) *Case Study Method*. (pp. 45-68). London: SAGE.

Erricker, C. (1998). Spiritual Confusion: A Critique of Current Education Policy in England and Wales. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality,* 3(1), 51-63.

Evans, M. (2009). Analysing Qualitative Data. In E. Wilson (ed.) *School-based Research: A Guide for Education Students*. (pp. 125-136). London: SAGE.

Gill, J. (2000). The Contribution of the Act of Collective Worship to Spiritual and Moral Development. In R. Best (ed.) *Education for Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development*. (pp. 106-116). London: Continuum.

Gill, J. (2004). The Act of Collective Worship: Pupil's Perspectives. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 26(2), 185-196.

Gomm, R., Hammersley, M., & Foster, P. (2000). Case Study and Generalisation. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley & P. Foster (eds.) *Case Study Method*. (pp. 98-115). London: SAGE.

Flick, U. (2009). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.

Hammersley, M. & Gomm, R. (2000). Introduction. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley & P. Foster (eds.) *Case Study Method*. (pp. 1-16). London: SAGE.

Hull, J. (1975). *School Worship: An Obituary*. London: SCM.

Hyde, B., Yust, K.M. & Ota, C. (2010). Silence, Agency and Spiritual Development. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality,* 15(2), 97-99.

Marples, R. (2006). Against (the Use of the Term) 'Spiritual Education'. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 11(2), 293-306.

McLaughlin, T.H. (2003). Education, Spirituality and the Common School. In D. Carr & J. Haldane (eds.) *Spirituality, Philosophy and Education*. (pp. 181-194). London : RoutledgeFalmer.

Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and Minds: How We Use Language to Think Together*. Oxon: Routledge.

Miller, J. & McKenna, U. (2011). Religion and Religious Education: Comparing and Contrasting Pupils' and Teachers' Views in an English School. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33(2), 173-187.

Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. (2nd ed.) London: SAGE.

Nesbitt, E. (2000). Researching 8 to 13-Year Olds' Perspectives on their Experience of Religion. In A. Lewis & G. Lindsay (eds.) *Researching Children's Perspectives*. (pp. 135-149). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Nye, R. (2009). *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*. London: Church House Publishing.

Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). (1994). *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools. Part 4. Inspection Schedule Guidance. Consolidated Edition, 1994*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO).

Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). (2004). *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO).

Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). (2005). *Framework for the inspection of schools in England from September 2005*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO).

Pollard, A. (Ed.). (2008). *Reflective Teaching: Evidence-informed Professional Practice* (3rd ed.). London: Continuum International Publishing.

Rudduck, J. & McIntyre, D. (2007). *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils*. Oxon: Routledge.

Slee, N. (1990). Developments in School Worship: An Overview. *Journal of Beliefs and Values,* 11(1), pp. 5-10.

Stake, R.E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. London: SAGE

Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.N. & Rook, D.W. (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE.

Simons, H. (1996). The Paradox of Case Study. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(2), 225-240.

United Nations (UN.) (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. From, http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm (06/03/2011).

Watson, J. (2001). OFSTED's Spiritual Dimension: An Analytical Audit of Inspection Reports. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(2), 205-219.

Appendix 1: Ethical Checklist

University of Cambridge - Faculty of Education
Early Years and Primary PGCE
Ethics checklist for research during PGCE placements

This checklist is intended for use ONLY by Faculty of Education students undertaking initial teacher education ('trainees') for classroom-based research carried during their formal professional placements as temporary members of school staff. The context of this research is that it will be undertaken with pupils in classes for which a qualified teacher has legal responsibility who acts as 'gatekeeper' and where the trainee's intended enquiry has been discussed with and approved by the responsible teacher(s) for the class(es) concerned.

Trainee name: _____

School/setting: _____

Questions to be answered by the trainee -please *clearly ring* the appropriate response.

1) Do you understand why educational enquiry must be scrutinized from an ethical standpoint before any research commences?	yes/no
2) Have you read and do you understand the current guideline on educational research ethics issued by the **British Educational Research Association?** (available at http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica1.pdf)	yes/no
3) Can you confirm that *to the best of your belief* the research you plan to carry out will NOT be to the educational detriment to any pupils involved, and that there is no reason to expect it to cause any harm to any participant –including damaging any pupil's confidence, motivation, interest or self belief in school?	yes/no
4) Can you confirm that you will have sought any necessary permissions - for example to record lessons, or to work with pupils outside of timetabled lessons- in line with the school's policies and procedures? This might include seeking permission from parents, with guidance from school staff.	yes/no
5) Can you confirm that you have discussed your research plan with your mentor and other staff responsible for any specific class(es), and that they have approved your plan?	yes/no
6) Can you confirm that any substantial change to your research design subsequent to completing this form, will be discussed for approval with your mentor (and other school staff if necessary) and shared by email with your partnership tutor?	yes/no

Trainee signature and date:_____

Partnership Tutor name: _____

☐ I have checked that the trainee has responded 'yes' to all questions above.
☐ I have discussed issues arising from the trainee not responding 'yes' to one or more of the questions above, and am convinced that this project is ethical (as explained in notes overleaf)

Partnership Tutor signature and date:

_____

Appendix 2: Information and Opportunity for Withdrawal Letter Sent to Parents

Small-scale Research Projects

There are two trainee teachers from the University of Cambridge working with Year 6 this half term. As part of their Post-Graduate Certificate in Education course they are conducting small-scale research projects, focusing on children's ideas about factors that impact on their learning.

The first project is researching pupils' perspectives about the value and purpose of collective worship. It will involve interviewing a group of children together, discussing questions about why they think collective worship is/is not important, whether they enjoy it and how they would like to improve it. Audio recordings of the children's responses and observations of a few children during collective worship will be made but will only be used, without children's names, by the trainee this academic year.

Hopefully you will be happy for your child to be involved in this research. If not, please let your child's class teacher know by Tuesday 25th January.

Appendix 3: Example of Transcription Notes from Second Focus Group

Transcription Extract from the 2nd Focus Group, Tues 1st Feb 2011

R - Moderator

A and B – Christian

C, D and E – Non-religious

F – Other faith

......

R - Ok, so, thinking about this. So what do you think CW is then? So, was some mention.. C, you said assembly straight away. Why do you think assembly is CW?

C – Because there's a big collection of us and we're all worshipping. **[P: gathering]**

E – Not always.

R – And you're all worshipping. How are you worshipping do you think? What makes it worship?

C – Praying and hearing stories about God and singing about.. **[P: praying][P: stories][P: singing] [P: God]**

R – F?

F – I think it's when you pray together. **[P: praying]**

C – Yeah, like that (*I can't remember the action at this point – hand together?)*

R – Yeah? So that was something you said as well. A?

A – I think it's like when you're in church and you're in, you're altogether **[P: gathering]** and you're doing and singing and praying about God as one **[P: singing][P: praying] [P: God]**. And

you're collecting, this may sound a bit weird, collecting, like, all the words and songs about God and saying like..

R – So, you're kind of like collecting them altogether in yourself?

A – Yeah.

R – Ok, great. C?

C – I think there's maybe like a big group of people praying and worshipping and stuff. **[P: gathering] [P: praying]**

R – Ok, so do you think you could do it with

B – (whispered) discussion.

R – just one of you.

(General 'No' – definitely E, F, A)

C – I think maybe at least 3 cause then it's a group. **[P: gathering]**

F – Two. That counts as a group.

B – I have an imaginary friend. Unless you have an imaginary friend, but like..

F – I have an imaginary friend.

R – So why do you think in a school we have this CW? Go on B, what do you think? Why in school do we have it?

B – Um, is it.. um, because.. No, I don't know.

R – Have a think, see what other people say and think. Cause it's not going to be a question to me because it's what you think. Ok, E, do you have an idea? Was your hand up?

E – No, I was just doing that.

R – Just doing that. Have a think. A, let's start with you.

A – Um, I think like, um forgotten.

R – You've forgotten. Right. Just talk to the person next to you for a second so you can have a think together. So, why do you think we have CW in school? What is it trying to do or is it important? Have a chat and think.

(General discussion - some points picked are picked out)

A – I think it's because we're a Christian school (C – yeah) and so maybe it's one of the things that we have to do. **[P: Christian school]** Well, we don't have to.

D – No idea. **[P: no suggested purpose]**

E – I'm not sure. **[P: no suggested purpose]**

F – Because it has nothing else to do? They have to fill in the space so they have an assembly. Ooh, is it because we're a Christian school? **[P: Christian school]**

E – Yeah, probably.

R – Umm, that's one reason.. I'll come back to that F.

B – ooh, ooh, is it like, um, we're, we have it because, er, we have it because.. oh it's gone again.

R – Oh, it's gone again. It will come back. Go for it. Think while we go for A.

A – I think it's when because we have to have it I don't think because this is a Christian school. **[P: Christian school]** And when a Christian might often do this and so..

R – So Christians would often do this and so..

A – Yeah.

R – Has it come back B?

B – Yeah.

R – Go for it.

B – Um, do we have it because, is Mrs ____ a .. **[P: Christian head teacher]**

F – Christian

B – Yeah, and that's why we have like stories of God or something? **[P: stories][P: God]**

R – Ok, because Mrs ____ is a Christian?

C – Not necessarily because *she's* a Christian, cause our *school's* Christian. **[P: Christian school]**

A – Cause if Mrs ____ left then

C – It'd still be a Christian school. **[P: Christian school]**

A – Yeah

R - Yeah? Go on C.

C – No, cause we're like a big group of Christians, like united, so we're doing it together. **[gathering][united]**

…..

Appendix 4: Example of Observations of Pupils in Collective Worship

Whole School Assembly Led by a Local Priest, Wednesday 9th February 2011

10.05	Start of Assembly	F – fidgeting, A and H – looking to the front.
		All joined in repeating a prayer with the leader.
10.08	What does 'church' mean?	All leaning forward, not making eye contact (either disengaged or thinking as asked).
		Not engaged in putting hands up.
		F – looking around, A – fidgeting, H – hand on chin.
10.14	Singing with guitar	A and F – joined in
		H – ended up joining in later (perhaps because friend was singing?)
10.16	Talk with children volunteering to help	A and F volunteered
		H – head in both hands with fingers around eyes, spoke to a friend.
	Psalm reading with volunteers and props	All sat quite still, looking to the front.
		H – stretched.
		A – looked around as another pupil was disciplined by a TA.
10.21	End of the reading	All bowed heads. A and F joined in with saying 'Amen'.
		A and H did not applaud the volunteers.
10.22	Singing to a CD	All singing.
		F – joined in with actions.
		H – smiled at his friend joining in with the actions.
10.26	End	