

Collective Worship in Brent Schools

What is collective worship?

'Collective worship' is a requirement of the Education Act 1996. It has no meaning outside of the school environment. At its best it can achieve a great deal. It can be a daily collective activity which among much else can recognise and emphasise common values, aspirations and commitments. Each school needs to think about what is beneficial for the whole school community in the light of the diverse faith traditions and backgrounds of its children and adults. The advice given to the Brent Education Authority (since the late 1980's) is that in order to encourage all pupils and staff (from Christian, other religious or non-religious backgrounds) to willingly participate together in collective worship Brent SACRE has developed a model approach which schools are invited to adopt as a basis for a policy on collective worship. To enable community and foundation schools to follow this approach they must apply to SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) for what is called a 'determination' to lift the requirement of the Education Act 1996 that collective worship should be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character". The Education Act does give parents the right to withdraw their children from collective worship. It is hoped, however, that if schools *have a 'determination' and follow an appropriate approach for collective worship* parents will not feel the need to choose this option.

Why should we bother with collective worship?

The second of the National Curriculum's two aims is: *'to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life'.*

'It should develop their knowledge, understanding and appreciation of their own and different beliefs and cultures, and how these influence individuals and societies. The school curriculum should pass on enduring values, develop pupils' integrity and autonomy and help them to be responsible and caring citizens capable of contributing to the development of a just society.'

The importance of this aim is indicated by an expectation that this development will take place from the very beginning of children's education. The Foundation Stage Profile includes the following steps within its breakdown of the Early Learning Goals:

- the child understands that people have different needs, views, cultures and beliefs that need to be treated with respect
- the child has a developing respect for own culture and beliefs and those of other people
- the child begins to know about own culture and beliefs and those of other people
- the child understands that s/he can expect others to treat her or his needs, views, cultures and beliefs with respect.

How can collective worship contribute to children's learning?

Principles for Early Years' education recognise that, in order to learn most effectively, children need to feel **included, secure and valued**. It is important that there are positive relationships between parents and adults in the school. A **seamless transition between home and school** is fundamental to learning within the school setting, and learning needs to build on what children already experience, know and do.

These principles apply equally to every stage of a child's learning.

Effective collective worship in school can provide this connection between home and school, between the values and beliefs a child experiences at home and those experienced at school. Through effective collective worship the child can feel included, secure and valued. The child can develop respect and understanding of the beliefs, values and cultures of other people. Through collective worship each child can contribute to the development of the school's values and to the development of the school as a respectful community.

Effective collective worship provides children with an experience of stillness and reflection which:

- is usually difficult for them to achieve in their busy day
- is integral to spiritual development
- helps them focus on their developing beliefs and values
- gives them space to consider the mystery which is at the heart of life
- supports their emotional development
- they can draw on at times of need.

Brent SACRE's Model Approach

How should schools introduce collective worship?

Brent SACRE believes that it is important that the school community periodically discusses and refreshes its awareness of the place of collective worship in the school. Adults in the school need to help children's understanding according to their age and ability. It is important that the school community is clear about the following:

Britain is a predominantly Christian country, becoming gradually more secular and comprising of increasing numbers of people following other faith traditions. Developments in collective worship are part of this journey of change where different traditions are becoming conscious of themselves and each other, of their relationships with each other and of their position in this country in a changing way.

Non-faith schools are a secular space. This does not mean a non-religious space but a space where no one religious or non-religious tradition takes precedence over another.

As a secular space, the school is a forum where expressions of religious and non-religious faith together with dialogue and discussions about and between different faiths can take place. Brent SACRE believes this should be encouraged – that a healthy school community readily includes open, vigorous and respectful

exchanges of and about faith. Indeed, it believes this is central to the well-being of each individual as well as the community.

Brent SACRE's Model Approach should help schools to facilitate a version of collective worship that eases and promotes a polite and vigorous expression of faiths and a dialogue between them by providing a clear 'frame' through which religious and non-religious material and practice can be introduced.

The use of the 'framing' described below (see Recommended Procedures) protects the integrity of the faith of each person in the school community by making it clear to everyone present who is identified with the worship being shared, and who is observing and listening. For example, collective worship during Divali could include the school's Hindu children and adults playing and singing bhajans (sacred songs) for others to observe, learn about and respond to according to their beliefs. On another occasion Christian children and adults may offer prayers together while others listen. On yet another occasion children and adults from atheist non-religious backgrounds may share a reading or statement which expresses their values.

SACRE recognises that this inclusive and open expression of faiths may be new to some schools and that they may need to move in this direction gradually. SACRE encourages discussion within the whole school community and with parents for this to happen. SACRE also sees this process as a gateway to the development of a healthy and vigorous provision for children's spiritual development throughout the school and the curriculum.

What are the elements of effective school collective worship?

Effective collective worship includes:

- opportunities and support for children and adults to share stories, prayers, objects, sayings, poems etc which are important to them, express their values or are part of their home tradition
- an atmosphere of focus and a period of calm silence so that children and adults can reflect, meditate or pray according to their own traditions, often in response to material shared
- an emphasis on the values expressed by festivals, local, national and international events e.g. UN day, National Pet week, Respect festival
- an emphasis on the values expressed by stories, possibly connected with a festival, sayings, prayers, songs or poems
- connections between values expressed by material from one or more traditions and the experience and lives of all present
- opportunities to focus on the values of the whole school community (this could be through a song created by the school community or through other forms of expression where children and adults clarify their values)
- celebration of contributions of individuals or groups to the school, children and adults, emphasising the sense of purpose and service
- sharing and celebrating aspects of children's learning and achievement, drawing out the values which have enabled this

Recommended Procedures

These procedures are designed to safeguard the interests of all children.

1. When children or adults share a text, artwork, piece of music, or saying they should introduce the piece with words which clearly identifies the tradition from which it comes so that a safe boundary is created from which all can freely respond to it.

For example:

‘ I/we are sharing this reading from the Gospel of Mark in the Bible. While this has special meaning for Christians we can all listen and respond in the way which is right for each of us.’

‘ I am sharing this reading from the Gospel of Mark in the Bible. While this has special meaning for me as a Christian I hope you will hear something in it which is helpful to you.’

‘I/we am/are sharing this *hadith* which is important for many Muslims so that we can understand what it says and let it effect us in the way that is right for each one of us’

‘I am going to tell you this fable from Aesop’s fables which have particular meaning for many people, including Humanists and are also strongly connected to stories from Hinduism and Buddhism. Let us all reflect on what this story says about greed.’

2. After leading the group to a period of calm silence, we recommend saying:

‘Now we can use this quiet that we have made to reflect, meditate or pray according to our own beliefs.’

Brent SACRE believes that this is the most appropriate way to provide the opportunity for all to worship including those whose tradition focuses on worshipping God, without compromising anyone’s integrity. (For a method of creating an atmosphere of focus and a period of calm silence see Appendix 1)

3. When festivals are celebrated SACRE recommends that children and adults present and share aspects of the festivals of their own traditions. It may be that if a culture of mutual respect is developing some children will still feel unsure about public recognition of their affiliation with a faith tradition. This may be the case particularly if there are very small numbers in the school or if the child has witnessed negative responses to their tradition during their life.

4. SACRE recommends that adults and children make decisions about collective worship and choose the content and format together, using these guidelines.

5. Individuals or groups need to be mindful of sensitivities of members of the whole school community in the choices they make and in the way they present material.

6. The teacher with responsibility for collective worship needs to ensure that there is a balance of material from different traditions through a term.

7. When members of local faith communities are invited to lead collective worship it is important that they comply with points 1 and 2 of these procedures.

8. Children may like to create their own more child-friendly term for collective worship. Children in one school in Brent used the term ‘Pause’.

Organisation

1. Brent SACRE understands the term 'collective' to mean coming together. Therefore, it does not expect groups of children to separate for collective worship following particular faith traditions. At the same time, the SACRE understands that it is often not possible for a whole school to come together. It also believes that children can benefit particularly from collective worship in smaller groups such as their class or form group. It is for the school to decide the balance between coming together in larger or smaller groups.
2. If the act of collective worship is part of an assembly adults need to ensure that there is a recognisable change of focus and mood from the rest of the assembly.
3. The act of collective worship need not be very long or elaborate: five or ten minutes involving an atmosphere of focus and a period of calm silence each day is usually plenty.
4. It is also for the school to decide the most appropriate time of the day.
5. SACRE hopes that all members of the school community will enjoy and benefit from the school's act of collective worship and that the whole community will want to be included. However, parents do have the right to withdraw their children if they believe this is in the best interests of the child.
6. Brent schools should be prepared to provide facilities for children to reflect, meditate or pray. This would be in addition to the daily act of collective worship.

Appendix 1

This is a simple way to help children experience a calm and positive silence in which they can reflect, meditate or pray. By focusing on sound to become still, a more immediate and attentive silence can be created. These words are a guideline. It is the use of voice, its lowered pitch, slow pace and calm tone which is important, focusing the children on the sounds they can hear.

'I want you to sit in a listening position (this could be with your head lowered, eyes closed, hands folded or any way that helps you to listen carefully).

Now we are going to quieten our minds and still our bodies by listening..... to the sounds outside.....Listen to the different kinds of sounds you can hear.....loud noises....quiet sounds in the background.....that may be you didn't notice first of all.....Now bring your attention to any sounds in the room.....We can become aware of any silence which we have made.....

Now we are going to use this quiet that we have made to reflect, meditate or pray (according to our beliefs)'

In my experience, this is a very effective way of helping children to become still – from very little wriggly children to rowdy adolescents. During INSET sessions teachers have similarly responded very positively. An electric silence usually pervades the room very quickly. At first this silence can be held for a short time, gradually being increased as the children become more practised.

This practice should not be confused with Buddhist or Hindu meditation. Silence is created to allow for focused reflection, meditation or prayer according to each person's tradition.