COLLECTIVE WORSHIP IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS

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Introduction

School worship has been a feature of school life in England for centuries. It has also been a compulsory part of education since 1944 Education Act, while the subsequent 1988 Education Reform Act made the provisions to re-affirm the place of collective worship in schools with some amendments. However, the issue of worship in schools has led to some controversy and debate in recent years. It has moved from being an activity taken for granted to an issue which is widely discussed. In this article, an attempt will be made to introduce the knowledge pertaining to English experience of collective worship in schools which cannot be found any kind of equivalent schools’ activities in Turkey and to address some of issues surrounding the subject. To do so, the following topics will be explained and examined in the light of extant literature: legal framework for collective worship, definitions of it, the purpose and implementation of collective worship in schools and critical evaluation of collective worship.

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Legal Framework for Collective Worship

The 1944 Education Act made a daily act of worship in school compulsory. Collective worship was seen then as an integral part of religious education in county and voluntary schools (RE Council 1996). In terms of the Act "The school day in every county school and in every voluntary school shall begin with collective worship on the part of all pupils in attendance at the school" (Section 25 (I)). It is fact that the Act only gave the legal confirmation what was already implemented in the majority of schools. The Durham Report (1970) explains this in the following terms:

The Act merely gave statutory support to what was already recognised procedure in most schools. The practice of beginning and sometimes ending the school day with prayers had long been customary and went back to the years before 1870 when public education was almost entirely provided by voluntary schools (p. 129).

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) which is recognised as the most significant educational legislation in recent decades in England confirmed the place of collective worship in school which was introduced by the 1944 Education Act with two changes. The first one is concerned with the content of worship and the second is about time of collective worship in school. This Act tried to make clear the content of worship in school, and it states that "Collective worship shall be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character" (HMSO 1988 Sect. 7.1). The other change provides an opportunity to organise collective worship at any time during the school day, or at different times for different classes or sections of schools in terms of the 1988 ERA (Sec. 6.2.). It should be noted that the 1944 Act stipulated that worship need be held at the beginning of the day.

The legal framework for collective worship is set in the Act of 1988 and the Act of 1993. The Department of Education and Science Circular (DES) (3/89 and 1/94) offer guidance in the understanding of the provisions in the Acts. It should be noted that these circulars do not claim to be authoritative in a legal sense, though they embody the intentions of government of the day. Let us explain the key features of collective worship in terms of the aforementioned legal framework. These are: the responsibility for collective worship, attendance and the right of withdrawal, timing and location of collective worship and the character of worship.
The Responsibility for Collective Worship

According to the 1988 ERA, headteachers in county schools are responsible, after consultation with the governors, to arrange for collective worship to take place (HMSO 1988, Sec. 6.3a). It does not mean that it is the role of headteachers always to conduct collective worship. Rather they ensure that it carries out and is suitably organised. Generally speaking, it is common practice for headteacher to share the conduct of worship with others, including pupils, as well as people in local community (Webster 1995; 17).

In voluntary or equivalent grant maintained schools responsibility for collective worship given by legislation is different from county schools. It is responsibility of governors after consultation with their headteachers (HMSO 1988; Sec. 6.3b). This provision protects schools where worship is governed by particular trust deeds. It ensures that the worship complies with the religious traditions which schools arise such as Anglican, Roman Catholic, Jews, Muslim. They have often a close link with particular churches and their clergy and lay members.

Attendance and Right of Withdrawal

Collective worship is compulsory for all students in schools unless parents exercise their right of withdrawal. This also applies to students in the sixth forms of maintained schools for which the governors have a responsibility to ensure that collective worship is provided on at least one day a week for students who wish to attend. Nursery schools or classes are not covered by the legislation.

Parents have a right to withdraw their children from collective worship. In the case of the withdrawal from worship schools do not have a responsibility to provide alternative forms of worship. However, a school may offer alternative worship if is not of a denominational character and does not involve it an additional expense (HMSO 1988, Sec. 9.1, 9.3). Teachers have also a right to exercise the withdrawal from collective worship and the provision of law prohibits any discrimination against teachers based on their attendance or non-attendance at school worship (Sec. 10.1).

Timing and Location of Collective Worship

Whereas the 1944 Act stated that the school day began with an act of worship for all pupils the 1988 ERA introduced greater flexibility. It is allowed to conduct the collective worship at any time within the school day which the school thinks is
appropriate. Schools generally find that assembling before lunch or at the end of the school day is more beneficial (McGreery 1993; 13). According to OFSTED inspection report for Religious Education and Collective Worship it often takes no longer than 15-20 minutes (OFSTED 1994).

Collective worship takes place on school premises. This denotes the activity as a school based rather than a denominational one. However, the legislation allows to organise collective worship in other places to observe holy days and festivals of importance form religious community for voluntary schools (Webster 1995; 20). The 1944 Act stipulated for a single act of worship in which all of the pupils of school were present. This was impractical in many schools, particularly large ones (ibid.; 21). The 1988 ERA brought a flexibility about this issue. Collective worship may organise in different places in school for separate groups of pupils. A group of pupils refers to a body of students that takes part in other school activities or is organised for other teaching purposes rather than a group which shares a particular religious belief.

The Character of Collective Worship

The 1988 ERA states that the acts of collective worship must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character" (HMSO 1988 Sec. 7.1) in county schools. Worship of a broadly Christian character means worship which reflects the broad traditions of Christian beliefs without being distinctive of particular Christian denominations. ‘Mainly’ of this character should be understood that over a term the majority of school acts of worship should demonstrate such nature (DFE 1994). This vague term (wholly or mainly) is open to wide interpretation. In some schools it could be interpreted as 51 percents of worship, in others it could be as much as 99 percent. If the Act stipulates the majority of worship broadly Christian what are the rest to be? The Act does not provide a response, however, many interpret that this is where other religious traditions can be represented and where aspect's of school's values and concerns can be explored (McGreery 1993; 16). Moreover, collective worship should take account of pupils' backgrounds and circumstances, ages, ethnic origins and aptitudes (HMSO 1993, Sec.138.5c). The voluntary schools about the character of collective worship is different from county schools. Governing bodies decide the character and content of worship in voluntary schools (Webster 2000; 203).
Defining Worship

A single clear definition of collective worship everyone agree does not exist. Difficulty for the definition mainly stems from two reasons. Firstly, the understanding of worship can be different in a given religious tradition or denomination, and the second one concerns with the implication of collective worship in particular school which is increasingly becoming more secular and multi-faith in England. It is obvious that different definition of collective worship makes a different impact on the content and implication of collective worship in schools. Sometimes the lack of definition by the legislation causes the confusion in practice. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines worship as follows:

1. To honour or reverse as a supernatural being or power or as a holy thing; to adore with appropriate acts rites or ceremonies
2. To regard with extreme respect or devotion; to adore
3. To engage in worship; to perform or take part in the act of worship

From these statements it is clear that worship is primarily a religious activity (Miles 1990; 7). However, what it should be understood from worship in school remains an important question. The Circular 1994 (Paragraph 57) defines worship in the following terms:

Worship should be taken to have its natural and ordinary meaning. That is it 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.

The above definition was criticised by the Church of England Board of Education as offering a ‘too simplistic view of the nature and theology of worship’ (RE Council 1996; 39). Gates (1989) sees worship ‘a generic activity of ascribing worth and value, identifying targets and ideals from and for life and work’ (p. 13).

This is in line with the further view of worship in The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as: ‘to regard with extreme respect or devotion...’. Although this definition of worship may be called a weak one it is common in the guidance given their schools by Local Education Authorities (Webster 2000; 208). It is difficult to find a middle way and probably unnecessary. Webster (2000) argues that the legislation permits worship according to each definition. The weak definition takes a support
from teachers and governors in non-denominational schools and to give schools the
greatest flexibility for collective worship (p. 208).

With respect to collective worship one other point deserves the further explana-
tion. This is distinction between 'collective worship and corporate worship. Gent
(1989) noted that one of the most interesting effects of the 1988 ERA has been a
rediscovery of the distinction between 'corporate' and 'collective' worship.
Collective worship is appropriate to a group of possessing a wide diversity of reli-
gious, agnostic and non religious stances. Miles (1990) distinguishes them as fol-
lovs: 'Corporate worship is characterised by commitment to beliefs; collective wor-
ship involves no necessary prior commitment to beliefs and a way of life' (p.9). The
SHAP Working Party comments that 'Since pupils and staff in county schools rep-
resent a spectrum of secular and religious views, it follows that corporate acts of wor-
ship cannot reflect the life of the school as a whole (RE Council 1996; 43). In other
word, corporate worship is an activity of a corpus or body of worshippers who make
up the congregation of a church, synagogue or mosque. However, collective wor-
ship is an school activity and cannot expect pupils to committed to a particular creed.
Because it is an educational activity which provides opportunity for worship. It
should also be noted that distinction between collective and corporate worship is not
always easy in practice (ibid.; 43).

Collective worship in schools should aim to provide the opportunity for pupils to
worship God, to consider spiritual and moral issues and to explore their own beliefs;
to encourage participation and response, throughout listening to and joining in the
worship offered; and to develop community spirit, promote a common ethos and
shared values, and reinforce positive attitudes (DFE 1994 a, p 20).

**Aim and Implementation of Worship in Schools**

The aims of collective worship are explained by the DFE in Circular 1/94, Religious
Education and Collective Worship thus:

Webster (2000) expresses the key purpose of collective worship with six aims in
line with the spirit of the DFE 1/1994 Circular. The first is moral value of collecti-
ve worship which analyses contemporary issues affecting young people such as the
Third Worlds, drug abuse and presents varying responses to them. Secondly, it aims
to help young people to develop their own values. Thirdly, it encourages pupils to
think and identify about the spiritual dimension of living. The fourth purpose
emphasises and celebrates shared values, especially as they are evident in the of each
school community like ways of respect and responsibility in school, home and society. The fifth aim is to encourage a community spirit, togetherness with others and a sense of obligation to them as human beings. The final one is to do with reflection on that beyond which is sometimes called God and sometimes the Absolute.

As it pointed out earlier, collective worship can be performed as single act or separate acts in different places in school premises in the convenience time of day. It takes approximately 15-20 minutes. The content of worship may change in terms of type of school (voluntary or county school) and religious affiliations of pupil’s family. There is also a debate about the nature of worship in schools among teaching professions and scholars. What should the main feature of collective worship be in schools? The possible options are; Christian worship, multi-faith worship and secular worship. It is obvious that it is not possible to explain and describe the different kinds of collective worship in various school environments in the limited space of an article. Therefore, in order to help to understand collective worship in English schools selected two assemblies proposed by Brown (1995) for primary school will be summarised. Selected topics are *infant* baptism and *Ramazan*.

**Infant Baptism**: Firstly, knowledge about the meaning and application of infant baptism in Christianity are given by leader of collective worship. For all Christians who perform infant baptism the ceremony is symbolic cleansing from sin and acceptance into the family of the church. The leader also narrates the story of Jesus’ baptism and asks from pupils to think about the ceremony of baptism in Christianity in the assembly. The objectives of the assembly are;

- begin to develop an understanding of the importance of initiation ceremonies within religions;
- develop an awareness of the events within a community which are significant to its members.

As the children enter the room for assembly, music suggestive of the theme of water is played and symbols of baptism including a lighted candle are displayed so that it becomes a focal point for attention. Afterwards, it should begin by darkening the room and projecting a slide of a church showing the font or a scene of infant baptism. Leader of assembly asks the question related to baptism such as ‘what is baptism?, why is baptism a time to celebrate?, why do we give presents and send cards?’. Then all children are invited to join the following prayer:

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Thank you for the chance to belong to special families.
Thank you for special places to celebrate special times.
Thank you for our own special names.

Suggested artefacts as resource for infant baptism are a certificate, baptismal candle, Christening robe, baptism cards which is written dealing with infant baptism (Brown 1995:29-31).

Ramadan: The assembly begins with a brief explanation of Ramadan - what it is, why Muslims fast, how difficult this can be. Pupils can be encouraged to think how hard it would be particularly in summer without eating and drinking the whole day. Reasons and benefits for Muslims from fasting should be given and knowledge about

- to help pupils understand the importance of Ramadan for Muslims;
- to enable pupils to recognise the importance of discipline and self-discipline
- to appreciate the significance of charitable giving

lunar calendar and the festival Eid-ul Fitr is provided. Two Quranic verses concerning the Ramadan and fasting are read and one of the stories about Mohammed's life could be told. The aims of the assembly for Ramadan are;

The assembly concludes with two poems, one about Ramadan, the other the feast which marks the end of the fast (Brown 1995: 32-34).

Criticisms on Collective Worship

The existence and legislation for collective worship has proved to be controversial and divisive within by religious communities and educationalists. The main criticism against school worship can be divided into two groups. These are; opposition of the existence of collective worship in county schools and criticism pertaining to some parts of implementation and legislation for school worship. The criticisms from both perspectives will be explored in terms of the extant literature.

Halstead & Khan-Cheema (1987) argue that a large number of educationalists, policy makers and practitioners were opposed the existence of worship in county schools. However, this seems to be some extent exaggeration concerning the issue. Since, there is no strong criticism about the existence of collective worship in county school in relevant literature. According to a British Social Attitudes Survey (1991) 70 % of respondents believed that daily prayer in schools should take place (RE Council 1996, 69). Perhaps, the most considerable criticism of collective worship
comes from John Hull’s book, *School Worship: an Obituary* (1975). He claimed that the necessary conditions for worship are no longer to be found in state schools, and he reached the conclusion that:

Real tension has developed between the aims of education and nature of worship in daily assembly, to such a degree that compulsory worship in daily assembly stands out as an anachronism, inadequate as worship and ill-related to the needs and concerns of the school and society in which it is situated (Hull 1975; 62).

Hull’s conclusion emerges not from antagonism to the Christian faith, but rather from commitment to it. His argument is that in today’s society the concept of education needs to be clearly distinguished from related concepts, like instruction, indoctrination, training, nurture and catechism. For Hull, education is a critical process. Moreover, as stressed by Hull, worship logically entails certain beliefs and the acceptance of those beliefs as true. Because processes of worship and education, therefore, fundamentally different and logically incompatible:

Nurture prepares for beliefs, evangelisation summons belief, instruction implies belief, catechism strengthens belief and worship assumes belief. But education scrutinises belief. It is clear, then, that worship and education cannot take place concurrently (Hull 1975).

Recently, Felderhof (1999 & 2000) re-examined, in his two articles, Hull’s aforementioned book and strongly criticised his case for the abolition of worship in schools. He argued that it was mistaken in important respects. For him, Hull attempted to establish his thesis through the analysis of the concept of education and of the concept of worship, and thus to show their essential incompatibility. According to Felderhof, despite his careful analysis of the concepts of education and worship, at a critical point his account seems to rely on a form of philosophical evidential. He provides a considerable criticism in Hull’s understanding of education and school worship. For Felderhof, there is no single understanding and interpretation of education and worship, but there are many forms of education and worship in school. He is also against Hull’s Socratic method, which everything must be questioned with this kind of radical scepticism. Furthermore, in a way, it is not only makes sense to worship as a part of the educational process, but that worship is of its essence as its motivation, substance and goal. With respect to worship in school practices do not necessary develop on the formation of belief systems and, religiously speaking, worship actually embraces a radical questioning.
The second type of criticisms for worship in school can broadly be divided into three groups; compulsory nature of collective worship, its content and its daily implementation. Firstly, school worship should be an optional activity rather than compulsory driven activity. Compulsion in the difficult area of personal beliefs seems out of place in a modern educational philosophy and runs counter to the values of freedom and respect which schools seek to encourage (Webster 2000; 205). Second, the 1988 ERA states that ‘collective worship should be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’. Some scholars believe that the explicit definition of the content of worship is considered as departure from welcoming the new pluralist flavour of society (Watson 1993; 160). It also creates a fear that schools will become the extensions of churches. Furthermore, it is possibly offensive to member of some Muslim, Sikh and Jewish traditions, and it was interpreted to be subordination of minority faith in collective worship (Abdul Mabud 1992; 92). Thirdly, there is a widespread and deep dissatisfaction with daily nature of collective worship. In the practice, according to OFSTED inspection report for religious education and collective worship only 20% of inspected secondary schools comply with legal requirement of daily implementation of worship (OFSTED 1994). Fewer but better quality acts of worship is generally supported by many, including churches. For instance, at the 1995 North of England Education Conference, the Archbishop of York, John Habgood publicly admitted that collective worship is not working well, that fewer occasions might lead to better quality and that a review might be helpful (Chadwick 1997; 103).

Conclusion

As a part of English education in schools the place of collective worship was explained in terms of recent legislation. It is obvious that the 1988 Education Reform Act re-affirmed the compulsory nature of collective worship in country and voluntary schools. Some of confusions about nature and implementation of collective worship have been tried to clarify with the 1989 and 1994 DEF circulars. It has been stressed that it is collective worship rather than corporate worship. In other word, it does not have its basis in any religious community and it is not a worship in its strictest sense, but the educational process of school. From content point of view its broadly Christian character brings some anxieties for non-Christian communities and seculars. It appears to us that the existence of worship in school will possibly be
remained in the future with the further changes in its implementation and nature in England. In recent years there is an attempt to associate collective worship with spiritual development of pupils, which is one of the main intention of all school curriculum in England.

REFERENCES


