'No offence to God but I don't believe in Him': religion, schooling and children's rights

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Since the Children Act (2004) in both England and Wales, schools are expected to give due attention to the issue of children's rights, particularly respect for the views of pupils in matters that affect them, as outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC. However, one theme that has been relatively unexplored in the literature on children's rights and education is religion and the role it plays in everyday school life, an issue that has relevance for Article 12, but also Article 14, which refers to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This article approaches the topic of religion, schooling and children's rights empirically, through a focus on rural church schools. It draws on in-depth qualitative research with pupils and other stakeholders from two case study schools in order to explore the significance of ethos values and experiences of religious practices for debates in this area.

Introduction

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which the United Kingdom is a signatory, was an important influence on both the English and Welsh versions of the *Children Act (2004),* enshrining some its key principles into law. Among other things, the *Acts* stipulate that local education authorities should provide for children's and young people's participation in the design and delivery of the educational services they use. This responsibility has typically been implemented through 'pupil voice' initiatives, including 'circle time', school councils and pupil working groups (Fielding 2004). Indeed, in Wales, the *Act* makes it mandatory for all schools to run a school council for pupils to input their perspectives. Such mechanisms draw explicitly on Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that adults should have respect for the views of children in matters that affect them.

Despite this increased emphasis on children's rights, scholars such as Alderson (2000) and Whitty and Wisby (2007) have highlighted the often quite limited impact and effectiveness of initiatives such as school councils. In the absence of a broader democratic approach to schooling, rather than the prevalent authoritarian model (e.g. see Osler and Starkey 2006), such mechanisms often lack in status within the context of school power relations. As such, the voicing of children's views and experiences rarely results in significant changes to teaching and learning, behaviour policies or school ethos. Furthermore, in focusing on pupil voice as schools' primary response to children's rights, Article 12 of the UNCRC can be privileged over other relevant parts of the convention that might also offer the opportunity to critically consider and potentially improve children's educational experiences.

One theme that has been relatively unexplored in the literature on children's rights and education is the role of religion in everyday school life. This is an issue that has relevance when considering Article 12 of the UNCRC, but also Article 14, which refers to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. All English and Welsh schools are expected to provide for pupils' spiritual development and hold a daily act of worship that is 'wholly or mainly of a Christian nature'. This latter requirement has recently been criticised in a United Nations monitoring report as potentially contradicting Article 14 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2016). Of particular interest for this article, are state-funded faith schools, which according to government figures, make up approximately 35% of all schools in England and 17% in Wales. The specific focus here is on rural church schools and the significance of their ethos values and religious practices for debates on schooling and children's rights. The article will begin by outlining some of these debates, before reporting on in-depth qualitative research from two case study schools.

Faith schools and children's rights

Since the introduction of the UNCRC, children's rights have enjoyed a prominent legal status internationally and governments have been provided with a key reference point for how children should be treated. The convention has been signed by all countries in the world, and ratified by all except the United States, making it one of the most widely adopted international treaties of all time. The convention includes 54 articles, which between them, present a manifesto for the welfare and protection of children, as well as the promotion of children's agency, decision-making and participation (Wyness 2012). Article 12-15 of the convention, often referred to as a 'charter for children', represent this latter theme of children as active members of society. They include respect for the views of the child, freedom of

expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of association. Article 12 and 14 are of most relevance to this article and are presented in full form in Table 1.

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 14

1. States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

2. States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Table 1. Articles 12 and 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Opponents of faith schools have often referred to Article 14 – freedom of thought, conscience and religion - as part of wider debates about faith schools and pupil autonomy.

One strand of this discussion has centred on philosophical arguments, with a number of scholars concluding that faith schools do, in their very nature, indoctrinate pupils and limit their autonomy (e.g. Hand 2003; Marples 2005). As such, it could be argued that parents' rights to educate their children in a religious tradition through attendance at a faith school, effectively maintain primacy over children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Parker-Jenkins 2005). Some proponents of non-religious traditions such as 'new atheism', have also adopted this argument, insisting that if children are taught particular religious 'truths' without alternatives, then this amounts to indoctrination. Indeed, British Humanists have drawn on the UNCRC to argue against the existence of faith schools in favour of inclusive community schools (e.g. Mason 2005). However, I would argue that there are a number of problems with these positions, as outlined below.

Firstly, assertions regarding indoctrination often seem to assume that religious indoctrination is the only type that can exist within education. Yet, schools are in the business of nurturing a range of values and beliefs on an everyday basis e.g. all schools in England are required to promote 'fundamental British values' (Department for Education 2014). Neither can the school curriculum be viewed as neutral and unbiased, as subjects such as history frequently promote particular political and moral attitudes (Pring 2005). Similarly, sociologists of education have long written about the 'hidden curriculum' of class, gender and 'race', which is communicated through school organisation, classroom interaction and peer group cultures (Portelli 1993). Pike (2008) has provocatively argued that teaching the principles of liberal democracy through citizenship education could also be viewed as indoctrination, as Evangelical Christians might argue liberal democratic values are contrary to their religious views and way of life. Whilst others might view the inculcation of liberal values as a positive thing, the argument nevertheless highlights that values promoted in

schools can never be completely neutral, even in a religious sense. The question therefore becomes about the type and level of 'indoctrination' occurring within a particular school, and whether or not this is viewed as limiting children's autonomy and freedom of religion.

A second problem with arguments that oppose faith schools on the basis they infringe upon children's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, centres on the particular interpretation adopted of Article 14 of the UNCRC, which is actually rather more nuanced than critics often recognise. Taylor (2017) argues that in its full form, Article 14 represents an unresolved tension between the developing capacity of children to exercise freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right of parents to provide direction and guidance in this regard. The Convention is not generally taken to mean that parents should be prevented from raising their children in line with a particular religious tradition, for example through a faith-based education, and is supported by religious groups around the world as a consequence (UNICEF summary). Indeed, Taylor (2017) discusses how earlier drafts of Article 14, which were clearer in stating the child's independent right to make autonomous religious choices, were amended in order to calm the controversy they had created amongst potential signatories and hence avoid jeopardizing the success of the entire convention. Determining the extent to which this right is being respected in a faith school context will therefore depend on specific judgements about the relative balance of the child's views vis-à-vis their parents, something that is likely to change as the child grows in age and competence.

A third problem with arguments about faith schools and their relationship to autonomy and children's rights is that they often assume that children are always willing to be indoctrinated. This effectively constructs childhood through a developmental lens, viewing children as passive and unable to make their own decisions or develop their own

point of view. Whilst the ability to exercise agency is clearly influenced by the structural positions that children of different ages experience, it has nevertheless been demonstrated that they are religious actors in their own right. Hemming and Madge (2012) refer to a number of ways in which children show religious agency, including attaching their own value and importance to particular concepts, ideas and rituals, and reconfiguring and renegotiating formal religious meanings and practices. Recognising children as active agents opens up the possibility that pupils may resist or negotiate religious values and practices promoted and enacted in schools, through subtle or less subtle means. In previous research, I have highlighted a range of ways that primary aged pupils respond to school prayer requirements, including keeping their eyes open during prayer, making the sign of the cross too quickly so they can reach the front of the dinner queue, changing the words of Christian prayers to align them with other religious traditions, and even creating their own prayer spaces in the toilet cubicles (Hemming 2015).

Taking the above points together, I would suggest it is difficult to sustain the argument that faith schools are necessarily in the business of indoctrination in a way that compromises children's autonomy and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Whilst faith schools could in theory be promoting problematic values and practices that do restrict children's rights, there is no reason to assume that they are inevitably doing so. Indeed, the extent to which individual schools with or without a religious character respect children's autonomy and rights, could vary considerably due to the diversity present within both the faith school and non-faith school sectors (Jackson 2003). As such, the issue effectively translates into a question that can only be adequately addressed through empirical research rather than theoretical debate. It is for this reason that this article sets out to explore religion

and children's rights with reference to qualitative fieldwork in schools, with a specific focus on ethos values and religious practices, as outlined in the next section.

Methodology

The article draws on data from a wider research project on rural church schools, which involved in-depth fieldwork in two Anglican primaries (identified here by pseudonyms) during the autumn term of 2014. Fringefield was a Voluntary Controlled[1] Church in Wales school, located 2 miles from the edge of a large urban area in a small village in South Wales. The majority of its pupils (around 80%) commuted in from a working-class suburb of the nearby urban area, although a small number came from more affluent families from the surrounding village (around 20%). In contrast, Woodington was a Voluntary Aided Church of England School, located in a larger rural village in West England, situated 8 miles away from the nearest urban settlement. Its pupil intake consisted of local residents mainly from higher socio-economic groups (around 65%) and a proportion commuting from villages and towns more than 2 miles away with a more mixed social class composition (around 35%). Despite their different circumstances[2], both schools could be described as 'small' with fewer than 150 pupils on roll and both had been identified as high performing in recent inspections, achieving good or excellent/outstanding[3].

Fieldwork took place for approximately 12 weeks in each school, for at least one day a week. In both schools, the focus of the research was with pupils from Years 5 and 6 (aged 9-11). The project employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with senior staff members (2 for each school) and local villagers (4-5 for each school), focus groups with parents (with 3-5 members for each

school), and paired interviews with pupils conducted away from the classroom (23-24 for each school). The pupil sample was predominantly white in both schools, with a mix of mostly Christian and non-religious affiliations. Children also took part in mapping and collaging activities, and data from the latter is discussed in this article. The collaging task involved pupils working in small groups of up to four, to create a visual representation of their school. They were provided with a range of art materials, including different types of paper, felt-tip pens, pencil crayons, scissors and glue. Pupils were encouraged to use images and words to portray their school to a young audience unfamiliar with it and discussed their work with the researcher when completed. Appropriate procedures were put in place to ensure informed consent from all participants for data collection, including children, in line with the requirements of the relevant university ethics committee.

The above methods were also supplemented by a documentary analysis of SIAMS or GWELLA reports[4] for other Anglican schools in the surrounding district or local education authority, encompassing approximately 20 schools in both cases, many of which shared similar rural characteristics to the case study schools. The reports were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach in order to place the case study schools in a wider context concerning issues such as school ethos, collective worship, religious education (RE), approaches to religious diversity, participation of pupils and parents, and links to the church and wider community.

Valuing school values

In 2001, the Church of England's *The Way Ahead* report set out a vision for the development of Christian distinctiveness in all Anglican schools, identifying a number of important aspects

for achieving this goal. Broadly in line with the report's vision, Jelfs (2010) found that Anglican schools construct their distinctiveness through a range of mechanisms, including their core ethos, mission and beliefs, and a strong moral framework, emphasising values such as responsibility, honesty, forgiveness, politeness and celebration. She also highlighted a number of other features as significant: frequent Christian routines including prayer, worship, symbols and artefacts, the development of nurturing relationships and a warm and caring 'family' atmosphere, and a close connection with local church and priest. However, Street (2007) argues that, for secondary schools, *The Way Ahead* report has led to few changes in school practices, aside from the prioritisation of a 'value-driven ethos'.

Regardless of the report's impact, it appears that 'values' are typically viewed as an essential component of an Anglican school's character and so this is where I begin my discussion. In the case of the two schools in my study, both had clearly defined ethos values. Fringefield boasted 22 values: pride, courage, determination, positives, perseverance, politeness, empathy, co-operation, patience, faith, self-belief, kindness, honesty, trust, respect, loyalty, acceptance, commitment, forgiveness, love, responsibility and equality, whereas Woodington had adopted a set of 6 values: forgiveness, friendship, trust, truthfulness, courage and justice. In this regard, both institutions were similar to other Anglican schools in the surrounding areas, where SIAMS and GWELLA reports indicated an important role for Christian values in contributing to a positive school ethos.

As with the Anglican schools in Colson's (2004) study, the two schools in my research communicated their values in a variety of ways. These included displays around the school building, assemblies and church services, lessons such as RE and PSE, and the school website. Assemblies and collective worship were viewed as especially important in this

regard, providing an opportunity to emphasise the Christian nature of the values through explicit discussion and linking them with Bible stories. Staff would focus on one particular value each month or half-term period and discussed the importance of presenting the values in accessible language that related to children's everyday experiences.

We have values of the month, which are introduced through a worship. And then we follow that up with awards, who's been showing that value. And it's embedded into our RE schemes of work then as well. (Fringefield Deputy Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

It's not just these are nice things to do and to be to each other, it's where do those values come from and [...] for a Church of England school, that those are - those values are being identified as Christian values and coming from Bible stories originally. (Woodington Deputy Head Teacher, Female, Catholic)

Parents and villagers were all very positive about the values the schools were fostering. Interviewees felt that they were demonstrated through the behaviour and actions of both pupils and staff members and also in the personal qualities that children took away with them on leaving the schools. Parents (and indeed staff) commonly expressed the idea that pupils were respectful and the schools were committed to developing 'the whole child' as well as academic abilities.

It's interesting how many of those values go – actually stick in. Because when you sit down and talk to [pupils] or something, those are the things that come out – the very values that they've been looking at. And so it's all part of the educational process. (Fringefield Vicar, Male, Anglican)

> *I think they do foster that whole ethos of everyone's – everyone is valued, everyone's opinions are valued. And I think you see that throughout the school. Respect and value.* (Patricia, Woodington Parent, Female, Anglican)

Like the staff members, some parents explicitly linked the ethos values to the Christian character of the schools, believing that church schools were particularly good at promoting positive values. However, there were also examples of parents who felt that the school values were generic humanist values and could not be viewed as exclusively religious. In many ways, such comments highlighted the success of the values approach for including those families and children who did not identify as Christian.

> *We wanted her to go to a faith school [...]. Faith schools tend to have good discipline, moreover values.* (Lindsay, Woodington Parent, Female, Anglican)

> *These of course aren't just Christian values, they are positive human values and promoted in some form by other religions and by non-religious groups and schools too.* (Michael, Woodington Parent, Male, No Religion)

Children were very aware of the values promoted in their school and were easily able to recall them during interviews, particularly at Woodington where there were fewer values to remember. Their responses provided further support for research observations highlighting the high frequency with which pupils were hearing about the values and the ways in which they were rewarded for showing them. For example, at Fringefield, pupils would receive an award in assemblies for demonstrating the 'value of the month'.

INTERVIEWER:

So do you know what your values are?

PUPILS: (Eddie/Gertrude/Nigella, Woodington, Female, Age 10-11, No Religion):

[In unison] *Respect. Courage. Friendship, Forgiveness.*

The prominence of ethos values in children's everyday school experiences was also represented in various ways in the collaging task (see Figures 1-4). This was especially true at Woodington, with its smaller and more memorably set of values, where children often explicitly stated on their artwork the school's core values of trust, forgiveness, courage, justice, truthfulness and friendship. At Fringefield, where there were 22 school values to remember, children tended to include them in more implicit ways, through themes such as protecting the environment, healthy lifestyles and global knowledge. A second major subject in pupils' artwork from both schools was Christianity. Most of the collages included the symbol of the cross, an illustration of the nearby church and/or the words 'religion' or 'faith'. Discussions with children after the task confirmed these were intended to indicate a church school. Pupils therefore seemed to view school values as going hand in hand with religious ethos and character.

At both schools, friendship was another major theme to feature in the collages, portrayed through words such as 'friendship/friendly', 'togetherness', 'love', 'caring' and 'kind', as well as pictures of hearts and children holding hands and playing together. Children also used a range of other words to denote the positive characteristics of the schools and the experience of being a member, such as 'fun', 'amazing', 'awesome' and 'brilliant'. Whilst these words may have been influenced to some degree by the task specification – representing the school to outsiders, the children seemed genuine in their intentions when discussing their finished work with the researcher. The focus on friendships and positive

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experiences may not have always directly coincided with the 'official' school values, but were nevertheless consistent with the principles behind them and arguably represented the enactment of these values through everyday relationships.

[Figure 1–4 near here]

Overall, the vast majority of school stakeholders, including the children, seemed to be very happy with the role of Christian ethos values in everyday school life. The broad nature of the values meant that non-religious families did not feel excluded and were able to accept them. Similarly, the school values generally aligned well with the interest and value that children attributed to positive friendship and relationships in school, as represented in their artwork. However, there were a few issues that arose that, although not particularly problematic in the context of ethos values, did prove to be more significant when considering religious practices taking place in the schools.

The first issue was concerned with the relationship between religious ethos values and behaviour management in the schools. Research by Badger (2000, cited in Jelfs 2010, 31) found that stated values in church schools do not always match how they are enacted in practice, with narrow academic and behavioural goals sometimes trumping wider religious concerns with caring, support and the development of the whole child. There was little evidence of this mismatch at Fringefield and Woodington but there were nevertheless times when the relationship between ethos values and school rules seemed uncertain. Although staff rarely mentioned behaviour management or rules explicitly when discussing ethos and values, pupils were not always able to make a clear distinction between the two. At least one child at Woodington expressed concern that he might get into trouble for failing to remember

the values, and others talked about the values as though they were rules. This was despite the fact that rules and behaviour management schemes in both of the schools were displayed prominently but separately from ethos values.

> *Yeah. I should know [the values] by heart though. They tell us off if we don't.* (Larry, Woodington Pupil, Male, Age 10, No Religion)

A second issue that arose was the extent to which children participated in the development of the ethos values in each school. Colson (2004) found that Anglican school values originate from a variety of church sources and school stakeholders, and that the definition of values was often a process of negotiation, with head teachers playing a leading role. A similar process had taken place at Fringefield, with values emerging from a consultation with a range of people including teachers, parents, governors, pupils and local church representatives. At Woodington, the school leadership team had adopted particular values that were deemed most appropriate from those recommended by the diocese. As such, pupils appeared to have made a bigger contribution to the setting of values at Fringefield than at Woodington.

> *One of the things we did here was we explored – tried to make more explicit the kind of values we decided we wanted to share. So we did a consultation with everybody involved in the school – the children, the staff, the parents, the local authority, the diocese. Everybody was invited to tell us or inform us as to values they thought were important. [...] The children came up with fifteen of the values. And I thought they wouldn't understand what I meant.* (Fringefield Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

These two issues - the relationship between religion and behaviour management, and the nature of children's participation in the religious life of the schools – are significant for

debates about religion, schooling and children's rights. I will therefore return to them later in the article, after the next section, where I explore religious practices in the two schools.

Practising religious practices

Alongside values, religious practices are a central feature of life at church schools, and they were an important component of assemblies at Fringefield and Woodington. A small number of previous studies have addressed pupils' views and experiences of assemblies and collective worship. Kay (1996) found that children at the end of the primary phase favoured assemblies over RE due to their friendliness and pleasantness. However, the opposite was true for those in the middle of the secondary phase, where assemblies were seen as less enjoyable and relevant than academic aspects of school life. Gill (2004) also found that pupils' responses to assemblies tend to change as they grow older. On entering primary school, children accept collective worship without question, but by the time they leave, start to reject the idea that they should be pressured into believing things. Towards the end of secondary school, pupils express doubts about the content and relevance of biblical material and confusion at the goals of multi-faith approaches.

At the two schools in my research, pupils regularly took part in religious practices during assemblies and collective worship or church services, including listening to Bible stories and teachings about values, participating in prayers and singing, lighting candles and celebrating achievement. Assemblies were often supported by visits from church ministers, who took an active role in leading the proceedings. A large proportion of the collective activities at the schools had a religious flavour, including seasonal events such as Harvest Festival, Remembrance Day and Christmas celebrations. The prominence given to religious

activities was particularly evident at Fringefield, which held a daily corporate assembly. At Woodington, the whole school would meet three times a week, with teachers responsible for leading a classroom assembly on the remaining days, and pupils appearing slightly less familiar with the assembly rituals.

> *We sing together, we pray together, we light the candle together – well we don't all light the candle.* (Nicki, Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian)

> *We do like – well first of all they like tell us a story about like out of the Bible. Then we like say a prayer and stuff.* (Sasha, Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 10, Unsure of Religion)

On the whole, children were quite positive about religious practices at the schools, offering examples of times when they had enjoyed singing or taken part in activities at the front of assembly. They particularly emphasised occasions when they had felt actively involved in the proceedings. Because the interviewees were all from the upper end of the primary phase, they were also occasionally helping to organise or run the assemblies, through tasks like operating the projector equipment. Pupils at Woodington especially liked the weekly 'Open the Book' sessions, where members of local congregations came into school to act out Bible stories, involving some of the children as they did so.

> AMELIA (Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian):
> *I like the PowerPoints.*
> MARY (Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian):
> *Yeah.*
> AMELIA:
> *And I like when we sing new songs and we learn new songs.*

MAYA (Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 9, Christian):

We have 'Open the Book' on Friday.

HOLLY (Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 9, No Religion):

It's really, really good because then – on 'Open the Book' you get to …

MAYA:

It teaches you a story.

HOLLY:

[…] People like act out a story from the Bible. And then we take it in turn each week for each class to show what they've done that week. It's really, really good.

Prayer was a major part of assemblies and collective worship, including prayers that pupils chanted together (such as the Lord's Prayer) and others led by teaching staff. Previous research has found that prayer can be important in young people's lives (Collins-Mayo 2008) and recent studies have emphasised the way in which youth typically view prayer as a conversation with God in the context of a close personal relationship (e.g. Mason 2015). However, there is currently little research on younger children's perspectives and experiences of prayer. In this present study, many pupils spoke positively about taking part in prayer, viewing it as a calming process that brought them nearer to God.

I like prayers because you can just talk to God and it's really nice to talk to God. (Jonny, Fringefield Pupil, Male, Age 10, Christian)

I think it's a nice time. A nice calm, relaxing time where we like pray and it's just like nice you know. (Emily, Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion)

Despite the positive experiences of religious practices and prayer reported above, there were children who did not enjoy these aspects of school life. There were two main reasons for this, the first of which could be described as the 'boredom factor'. Pupils often expressed concern over the length and duration of the assemblies they attended and the repetitive nature of songs and prayers, which they found rather tedious. One of the staff members at Woodington also acknowledged that children sometimes complained of boredom and the school had tried to increase the numbers of visitors coming into assemblies to make them more interesting.

> *Yeah. Some prayers, some of the ones that we do everyday are a bit – like we get a bit like bored of them [laughs] after a while.* (Zoe, Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 10, Christian)

The second reason given for not enjoying religious practices and prayer related to some of the children's developing non-religious identities. Non-religion has traditionally been an under-researched phenomenon in the social sciences, but this is now beginning to change, with recent calls for more research on the growing number of non-religious children and young people (Hemming 2017). A small minority of pupils at Fringefield and Woodington expressed disinterest in, or dislike of, Christian themed songs and stories or RE lessons, linking this back to their own non-religious positions. However, the most problematic issue for a larger number of non-religious pupils was prayer, which was often experienced as awkward or meaningless if individuals did not believe in God. Similar views were also voiced by pupils at other schools during pilot fieldwork undertaken for this research project[5]. Although the issue was not raised in either of the parent focus groups, and was not obviously linked to any specific section of the two school communities, it was clearly an important one for many of the child interviewees.

Sometimes it is awkward [doing prayers] since I have no religion. Like no offence to God but I don't believe in him. (Matt, Fringefield Pupil, Male, Age 9, No Religion)

GERTRUDE (Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion):

I just like – people are there like bowing down and praying, and I'm like 'What do I do cos I don't really believe'. They're like that and I'm like I don't know what to do because I don't believe. But if I'm there like that, I look silly.

MILLIE (Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion):

You think you're talking to God but [laughs] he's not really there.

LAUREN (Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion):

I feel like I'm just talking to myself. Yeah.

MILLIE:

Yeah. It's like you're talking to the air.

The most concerning finding was that many of these children were under the impression that they were required to pray in order to avoid being disciplined by teachers and some gave examples of when this had occurred previously at different points in their school career. In their eyes, pupils were being asked to participate in compulsory prayer. As such, religious practices were perceived to be intertwined with school rules and behaviour management, in the same way as I explored in the last section with reference to values. However, the situation with prayer was more problematic because the broad support for, and consensus around the values, did not appear to extend to religious practices in quite the same way.

Like in Class 2 I'd just be like saying the prayer – like not even saying the prayer. And then I'd get told off saying oh like you can say it out front if you want to, you can come say it out front. (Rich, Fingefield Pupil, Male, Age 11, No Religion)

I find it really awkward like praying cos in a way you've got to do it because everyone else is doing it. And I don't really like doing it, but you have to. (Nigella, Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion)

And we have to say it though […] 'Cos otherwise all the teachers say like 'Shut your eyes' or something. Yeah we have to. (Destiny, Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 11, Christian)

Staff at the two schools had a slightly different take on the issue. They expressed awareness that not all families attending the schools had Christian backgrounds, mentioning instances where children had discussed their non-belief in God. As such, they were insistent that religious practices in school were not intended to indoctrinate pupils but rather to gently introduce them to Christianity and provide opportunities for reflection. Parents were generally reminded of the school's ethos before pupils joined and had the right to withdraw their children from Christian worship if they so desired, although this option was rarely enacted. Beyond this, teaching staff argued that they would be happy for non-religious pupils to sit quietly during prayers by individual arrangement and the head teacher at Fringefield gave examples of when this had occurred in the past. However, the head teacher at Woodington pointed out that the school would not want to advertise the choice not to pray too overtly, because then no one would want to take part, thus undermining the order and purpose of the assembly. An explicit link was therefore made between participation in prayer and behaviour and ethos management.

First, if parents want to withdraw their children from prayer and worship then they do have the right to do that and the school will action it. After that, it's about saying things like "If you want to pray with us then you can, or if you want to reflect on it then you can do that instead." […] I think you have to be careful because sometimes if you make a choice too obvious than nobody takes part in what you're trying to achieve. If you said "you can choose to stay behind and pray if you want to" then only three children would stay behind.
(Woodington Head Teacher, Male, Anglican)

We've had a couple like that, and what we say is that "whatever you want to do that's fine but you bow your head quietly because others around you do want to pray. If you don't want to pray cos you don't believe that's fine, but maybe just think about something that you think is important and reflect." (Fringefield Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

Despite the positions outlined by school staff, many non-religious children were nevertheless praying in assemblies because they thought that it was compulsory, or else developing their own subtle strategies to avoid doing so (see earlier discussion on religious agency). It seemed that the key issue here was lack of communication – older non-religious pupils were simply unaware that they could negotiate opting out of prayer and school staff did not seem to know that some of their pupils were unhappy with existing arrangements. The implications of this finding is discussed in detail in the final section of the article.

Discussion

In summary, the findings have shown that although ethos values and religious practices were both central features of the Anglican schools in this research, their reception from various

stakeholders was slightly different. In the case of ethos values, they tended to attract wide support, including from children and non-religious parents, because they were generally consistent with broader understandings of good citizenship, as well as children's developing views and priorities. However, in the case of religious practices, although many pupils experienced these positively, important issues arose regarding children's engagement, and also the perception from non-religious pupils that prayer was compulsory. In considering these features – ethos values and religious practices – two common themes began to emerge. The first was the relationship between religion and behaviour management and the second was the nature of children's participation in the religious life of the schools. I will take each of these in turn in exploring how the research findings relate to children's rights and debates about pupils' autonomy, indoctrination and participation.

The relationship between religion and behaviour management is most relevant to Article 14 of the UNCRC – freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Although there was little evidence to suggest the schools in this research were indoctrinating children with values that might be viewed as problematic, the fact that some of the pupils were confusing school values and school rules does raise questions about what we actually mean when we use the term 'value'. Can autonomous individuals necessarily 'value' something that is presented as mandatory? What is the precise relationship between rules and values? Such questions arguably hold even greater significant in the more problematic case of 'compulsory' prayer. Given that young people are most likely to understand prayer as a personal relationship with the divine (Mason 2015), can enforced prayer really be viewed as a prayer if the individual does not believe in God? Could such a practice even erode the value of prayer and undermine its spiritual purpose?

The 'compulsory' prayer example also brings into question the extent to which non-religious pupils are sufficiently accommodated within church schools, and the degree to which their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is fully respected. This is particularly pertinent given the Anglican educational commitment to provide for the spiritual needs of children of all faiths and none (e.g. see National Society 2012), as well as the fact that many Anglican schools cater for rural communities that have access to few educational alternatives. The SIAMS and GWELLA report analysis undertaken as part of this research showed that although inspections often concluded that Anglican schools provide an inclusive environment for those of Christian faiths, other faiths, and no faith, there were rarely any details about how this was achieved in practice, particularly in relation to 'no religion'. More attention to this issue from both academics and practitioners might help to stimulate useful debates on how church schools might best approach provision for non-religion pupils.

At Fringefield and Woodington, one suggestion to address the 'compulsory' prayer issue could involve writing to parents of pupils in Years 5 and 6 (aged 9-11) to communicate the school's position, hence avoiding any whole school announcements and associated problems that might create. In the spirit of Article 14 of the UNCRC, it might be deemed appropriate for younger children to receive religious guidance regarding prayer, but those towards the upper end of the primary phase may be at a stage where their developing non-religious identities need to be taken more seriously. Given that research has shown that parents are not always aware of their right to withdraw their children from RE and collective worship and many would not wish to single out their child in that way (Richardson et al. 2013), the suggested communication would offer a more sensitive way to approach the issue.

Moving on to the nature of children's participation in the religious life of schools, this theme links most obviously to Article 12 of the UNCRC – respect for the views of the child. There was variable practice evident across the schools in this regard, with only Fringefield offering chances for pupils to contribute to the setting of school values, but both schools providing limited opportunities to participate actively in organising religious practices. This variability was also evident in the SIAMS and GWELLA report analysis, which showed that active participation from children in organising religious practices and developing school values tended to be more prevalent in schools surrounding Fringefield than Woodington.

The participation issue is arguably much easier to address than the freedom of religion issue discussed earlier. Pupil voice initiatives, such as school councils, are generally already in place in all schools and if used effectively, could offer the chance for children to contribute their own ideas about school ethos values and the form and content of assemblies and collective worship. Given that many pupils expressed positive views about religious practices when they were given the chance to get fully involved, such as taking part in performances or singing new songs, this approach would not only provide an effective way of enacting Article 12 of the UNCRC but might also help to reduce some of the boredom that many of the children complained about.

Notes

1. Voluntary Controlled schools are fully funded by the state, but maintain a distinctive religious ethos and character. Voluntary Aided faith schools are expected to raise 10% of their own capital funding costs but enjoy greater autonomy in relation to school governance and Religious Education (RE).

2. The differences between the demographics of the two intakes had important consequences for the schools' relationship to diversity and change within their local village communities, but due to restrictions in space here, these issues are explored elsewhere in the author's forthcoming work.

3. At the time, the school inspectorate in Wales – Estyn – used a four point scale consisting of excellent, good, adequate and unsatisfactory, whereas the school inspectorate in England – Ofsted – used a four point scale consisting of outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate.

4. These inspections are also referred to as Section 48 (England) or Section 50 (Wales) reports and deal exclusively with aspects of school life linked to the religious remit of the school, including character and ethos, collective worship, religious leadership and, in the case of Voluntary Aided schools, RE. Estyn or Ofsted inspect RE in Voluntary Controlled schools.

5. Pilot fieldwork took place in two additional Anglican primary schools located in rural localities in the West of England, together encompassing paired interviews with 23 pupils in Years 5 and 6.

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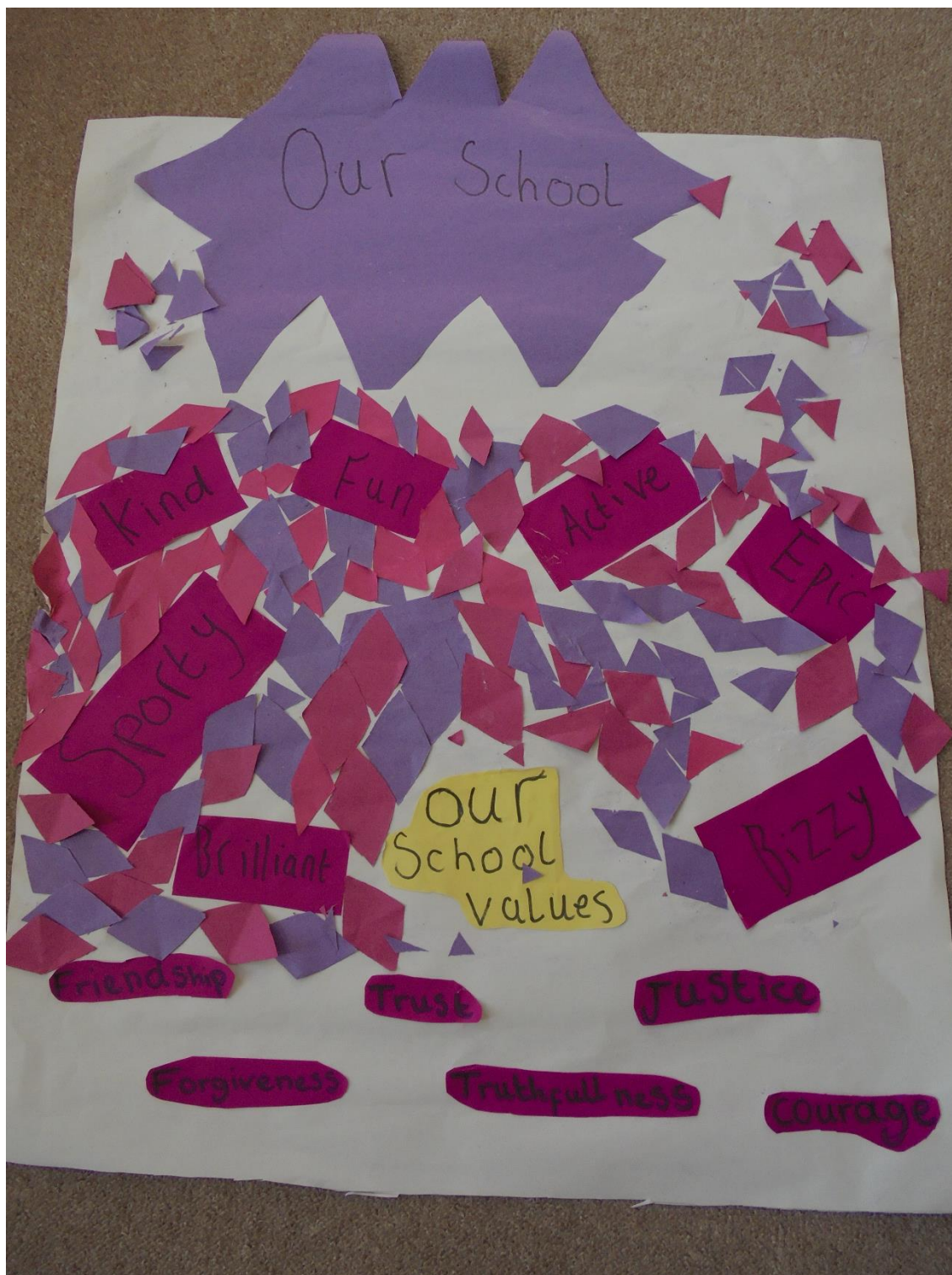
Figure 1. Collage from Woodington – example A.

Figure 2. Collage from Woodington – example B.

Figure 3. Collage from Fringefield – example A.

Figure 4. Collage from Fringefield – example B.