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believing in children, learning together

Collective Worship and inclusive assemblies

The Accord Coalition for Inclusive Education believes that state funded schools should provide their pupils with inclusive, inspiring and stimulating assemblies in place of compulsory acts of worship.

The issues

The law, as it stands, requires every state maintained school in England and Wales to hold a daily act of worship. In the case of schools with a religious character, this worship must be 'in accordance with the tenets and practices of the religion or religious denomination' of the school. And in the case of schools without a religious character, this worship must be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character', which means that a majority of school assemblies must be broadly Christian in nature. Even though society is becoming increasingly diverse, no schools are allowed by law to have daily assemblies that aim to be equally inclusive to all pupils, regardless of their or their parents' religious or non-religious beliefs.

The law on Collective Worship is largely unenforced. In 2004, Ofsted stopped asking its inspectors to consider it, [citing at the time that](#) 76% of secondary schools were non-compliant with the law: either not having worship every day, or in some cases, not having worship at all. A [ComRes survey](#), commissioned by the BBC and published in July 2011 found that only 28% of school pupils in England took part in daily collective worship.

Nonetheless, many schools do have some form of regular worship, and this can be exclusionary to families of different religions or of no religion. Parents can opt-out their children from assemblies, but this right is rarely used as most parents are not aware of it, and because opting children out is often found to be very unsatisfactory. Pupils who are opted out may be singled out by their peers, not provided with alternative activity and may miss out entirely on receiving the communication of school information and the ethical or moral teaching that is so often entwined with worship.

Under current arrangements, pupils under the compulsory school age are not able to opt themselves out of worship, even if they have formed their own views on matters of religion and belief, so may wish to be withdrawn from or stay in assemblies against the decision of

their parents. This appears to deny children their freedom of thought, conscience and belief, as guaranteed under Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights and Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The solution

Accord believes that the laws as they stand should be replaced with guidance for schools which should encourage them to provide inclusive assemblies which further the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils and staff, regardless of their religion or belief. These assemblies can draw upon and forge shared values, investigating ethical and moral values from a variety of sources, including religious and philosophical.

These assemblies could explore topics such as happiness, sadness, beauty and the arts; encourage kindness, sharing and creativity; consider life, love, and death; and examine what it means to be human. And these assemblies should delve into different religious and non-religious points of view. But they should come from a position that is inclusive of and accessible for all pupils and staff.

Given that the reformed laws would be inclusive of the beliefs of all, Accord would not see that there would be a continued need for opt-out rights. However, should the law remain in its current form, Accord believes that the age that children under 16 who are of sufficient maturity, intelligence and understanding should be able to opt themselves out of assemblies, as recommend by the parliamentary select committee, the Joint Committee On Human Rights, in their [nineteenth report](#) in 2008.

The Accord Coalition calls on the Government to reform the current law on Collective Worship and instead introduce a requirement for Assemblies that are inclusive and explore shared values

About the Accord Coalition

The Accord Coalition is a campaign coalition, launched in 2008, which brings together a wide range of organisations, both religious and non-religious, who want state funded schools to be open and suitable to all children of every background, no matter what their parents' or their own beliefs, and who are concerned that restrictive legislation around admissions, employment and the curriculum in state funded faith schools can serve to undermine community cohesion and not adequately prepare children for life in our increasingly diverse society.

Accord's growing list of members and supporters includes the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the British Humanist Association, the Christian think tank Ekklesia, the British Muslims for Secular Democracy, The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and the race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust.