

BEING A SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ASSEMBLY

A high quality school assembly is one of the most important aspects of a school's curriculum. Its potential to nurture a positive school ethos that stresses care for the self, others and the pursuit of all forms of excellence should not be underestimated. It powerfully nurtures the development of intrapersonal intelligence.

What follows illustrates how school assemblies, in all phases of schooling, can make a positive contribution to pupil self-development and therefore be at the heart of raising achievement and standards. The examples given are based upon a form of assembly that has been developed by planning to encourage pupils to reflect upon a set of universal values, such as love, peace, truth, co-operation and respect. These values act as the foundation not only for religious education (RE) but for the development of personal, social and health education (PSHE), citizenship and the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) aspects of the curriculum. In other words they underpin the school's institutional values and the whole of the curriculum! I acknowledge with deep gratitude the inspiration of many teachers who have so powerfully contributed to the ideas contained in this article. Particularly, thanks to the school community at West Kidlington Primary and Nursery School in Oxfordshire where I was headteacher for nearly seven years.

1. WHAT IS AN ASSEMBLY?

An assembly is when the school community, or a part of it, meets together to share aspects of life that are of worth. It acts as a medium for

communicating matters of significance from one generation to another. In England, an act of collective worship is usually held as part of an assembly as it has been a legal requirement since the 1944 Education Act.

2. ROLE AND PURPOSE OF AN ASSEMBLY

A school explains the role and purpose of assembly in its documentation:

"Our Assemblies, which include our Acts of Worship [the legal obligation], are an important feature of our school's life. They act as one of the main ways by which we create our positive reflective ethos and promote our values-based education. I am grateful to all colleagues who make a positive contribution to them. In fact, all colleagues make a tremendous contribution through their presence and active participation. Pupils are very aware that all staff, by their positive attitude, involve themselves in assemblies, acting as role models for the pupils to emulate. Assemblies contain times of quiet reflection that enable pupils to develop the deepest values and aspirations of the human spirit."

A visitor to this school remarked:

*"The most important thing is wholeness - a **whole community**. This is not a place that is only devoted to teaching pupils things. The function of the school is that the pupils learn their academic stuff more effectively because they learn in a valued, structured environment. The quality of learning is better, and life skills and values are absorbed in ways they are in few other schools. No detail about people, individuals, or the conduct of the school, is considered unimportant. There's a clear sense of vision."*

As the quote above exemplifies, assemblies should aim to create, nurture and sustain a sense of community. They can serve to develop a positive school ethos that affirms the school's identity and aspirations. The result being that the school lives in cohesive harmony that sustains the pursuit of excellence in all its forms.

The physical setting for an assembly is important and when possible care should be taken with such detail as heating, ventilation, comfort and the aesthetic nature of the room. To achieve an assembly of excellence the appropriate atmosphere and tone can be created through the sensitive use of:

- ❖ a central focus, such as a display, that can help pupils think about the theme of the assembly;
- ❖ music that can help create a calm and reflective mood;
- ❖ black-out and spot lighting (if available) help to make assembly time special;
- ❖ the leader of the assembly being seated in an attitude appropriate for a reflective experience as the pupils arrive for assembly;
- ❖ all adults in an assembly modelling the behaviour that is expected of the pupils;
- ❖ pupils being actively included in all aspects of the assembly.

Underlying the above is the assumption that all who lead an assembly understand the term *spiritual*. To come to an understanding of this term is essential in-service education for the whole staff. This is necessary because

developing and deepening the spiritual dimension of life is key to ensuring that assemblies are powerful vehicles for establishing schools of excellence.

3. MORNING ASSEMBLIES

Monday morning assembly is particularly important, as it should bring the whole school back together again after the weekend break, to re-focus upon the week in view, on its objectives and the tools that will be used to achieve them. Other assemblies during the week build on the standards that are set at the beginning of the week. Schools should develop their own pattern of assemblies that will include whole school, key stage, year group and class assemblies. Also the time of assembly will vary with purpose.

What should be demonstrated in an assembly is a reiteration of the value of each individual pupil including their individual thoughts and abilities. There should be a reiteration of the importance of those elements to the community and the secure place of each pupil within the school. Finally, at a subtle but powerful level, a reminder of the importance to each pupil and adult in the assembly of the school itself. Indeed a very complex web of ideas, observations and intentions should be woven if the assembly is to be one of excellence.

The pupils should be invited to consider their inner capabilities, their positive worth, their place in the community and their purpose for the week, and to do it from the touchstone of that month's positive value. Pupils respond in the affirmative, so that they are focused, positive, calm, and ready to start. The school community starts from the individual pupil and the value of each one, and allows them to see their part in their own world.

4. THE ROLE OF REFLECTION

Careful thinking about the physical setting for an assembly leads on to the consideration of its form and content. The practice of reflection, sometimes known as creative visualisation or stilling, is probably at least as rare in schools as it is in the larger world. Reflection helps pupils focus upon the positive aspects of themselves that they can value and build on. Incidentally, the use of the word meditation is deliberately avoided because it can create an impression, to the world at large, of images of cross-legged gurus reciting mantras! Reflection, on the other hand, is not so open to misinterpretation.

Silent reflection should be a key element in an assembly. It has several crucial elements that include:

- ❖ creating an appropriate atmosphere in the assembly that is conducive to leading the pupils in a reflective exercise;
- ❖ encouraging pupils to sit in a relaxed, comfortable and still manner;
- ❖ developing the ability to use the inner eye of imagination;
- ❖ the person conducting the assembly using appropriate words to stimulate the creation of a picture on the screen of the minds of the pupils;
- ❖ pupils developing the skills necessary to go within themselves, thus being observers of their thoughts in order to nurture positive images that support positive behaviour.

The ability of the leader of the assembly to be able to set high expectations in terms of appropriate pupil behaviour and attitude cannot be over emphasised. The pupils will model themselves on this person whose behaviour must be sincere and authentic. Pupils are quick to spot inconsistencies in adult behaviour. They will avoid entering into the reflective spirit of an assembly

taken by an adult whose own inner world is unstable. (Some may say that this is an unrealistic expectation, as each adult is on their own path of spiritual development. However, the crucial aspect is to maintain an honest approach that avoids making any pretence at what is untrue in terms of personal beliefs and values.)

5. EXAMPLES OF WORDS USED DURING REFLECTIONS

The following are examples of appropriate words that have been used successfully for reflections during assemblies:

With each breath let your body become more and more relaxed. With each out breath, breathe out any worry ... with each in breath feel yourself breathing in quietness and calm ...

Now imagine a beautiful waterfall of light entering the top of your head ... feel the waterfall of light gently flowing through your head ... down your neck ... into your chest and shoulders...The waterfall of light is warm and full of gentle energy. ..Feel it move down your shoulders, into your arms ... your hands and out through your fingers. More light falls as a waterfall down your back - into your tummy - your legs - down to your feet and out through your toes - washing away with it any stress or worry.

Now you are completely bathed in a continuous waterfall of light ... enjoy its freshness and the gentle calm it brings ... in a moment you are going to leave the waterfall of light and you will find yourself back in the hall, feeling relaxed, calm and refreshed ... when you are ready, open your eyes.

In the following, consider the purpose behind each of the four parts of the reflection:

- a. *This morning in a moment of silence let us sit very still, close our eyes and feel relaxed.*
- b. *On the screen of your mind, see yourself in your classroom, working hard at an activity, co-operating with others. Feel good about this work.*
- c. *Now think about our month's value - the value of trust - and think about someone you really trust. How do we become trustworthy, so others will trust us? What qualities do we need to develop? Patience, tact, friendliness, co-operation, honesty, may be some of the qualities.*
- d. *Choose one to think about during the day....Now open your eyes again.*

In **a**, this form of words, which is often used, invites pupils to adopt a particular physical and mental attitude that sets the scene for the reflection. Pupils come to understand the expression *on the screen of your mind* in **b** and with practice learn to use their creative imagination. Positive feelings are invited about working with others in the classroom. In **c** the month's value word of trust is used. (The school has a cycle of monthly values that are fostered in the pupils.) Thinking about someone the pupil trusts helps to develop a deeper understanding of the concept before returning to think about self-development. Finally in **d** pupils are invited to take the thinking developed during the reflection into the rest of the day. This helps in the development of the value by making it a recurring theme to think about.

6. KEY ELEMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO A SUCCESSFUL ASSEMBLY:

PLANNING

The importance of planning cannot be underestimated. Last minute thinking does not create meaningful assemblies. Assemblies can be based on a yearly plan that incorporates monthly values and weekly themes. This plan is the subject of staff discussion and amendment because it is important that all staff feel comfortable with the proposed themes. This process gives a sense of ownership of both the process and content of the assemblies. This is vital as it stops assemblies from being seen as elements of the curriculum for which headteachers are solely responsible.

The following is an example of a yearly plan of themes and values:

PLANNING FOR ASSEMBLIES
Themes for Acts of Worship and Associated Values
1998-1999

DATE – WEEK BEGINNING	VALUE	THEME
6 th September	QUALITY	Values
13 th September		Religious Ceremonies
20 th September		Prayer/Reflection
27 th September	UNITY	Famous People
4 th October		Health Week (Care for Yourself)
11 th October		Aspects of Hinduism
18 th October		Harvest
1 st November	PEACE	Remembrance Discussion about conflict – prayer for peace
8 th November		Jesus
15 th November		Feelings/thoughts
22 nd November		Worship
29 th November		Individual differences
6 th December	HAPPINESS	Positive attitudes/character/personality
13 th December		Christmas

Planning for Assemblies continued

DATE WEEK BEGINNING	VALUE	THEME
11 th January	HOPE	The Bible
18 th January		Beauty and Wonder
25 January	PATIENCE	Places of Worship, church, temple and other sacred, special or personal places
7th February		Love – different sorts for different things
14 th February		Spring – New beginnings
28 th February	CARE	Dying (Loss)
6 th March		Mothers – her role. Rest of the family Mother's Day
13 th March		Excellence: Examples from religious stories
20 th March		Easter
27 th May		Community Humility
3 rd April		Wesak Celebrating birth, death and enlightening of Buddha
10 th April		Birth of a child, growth, babies, new member of family, baptism
1 st May	SIMPLICITY	Learning about drugs
8 th May		Friends of Jesus Relationships
15 th May		Environment – care
22 nd May	UNDERSTANDING	Disability, blindness or deafness

Planning for Assemblies continued

DATE – WEEK BEGINNING	VALUE	THEME
5 th June	TRUST	What are religious artefacts?
12 th June		Co-operations, kindness, doing your best, enjoyment
19 th June		People in need Charity
26 th June		Care of animals
3 rd July	FREEDOM	Journeys
10 th July		Giving thanks

On 26 June the assembly theme was Care of Animals. The planning for the assembly can be seen illustrated in the following mind-map.

GOOD PRACTICE PRIMARY SCHOOL ASSEMBLY RECORD SHEET

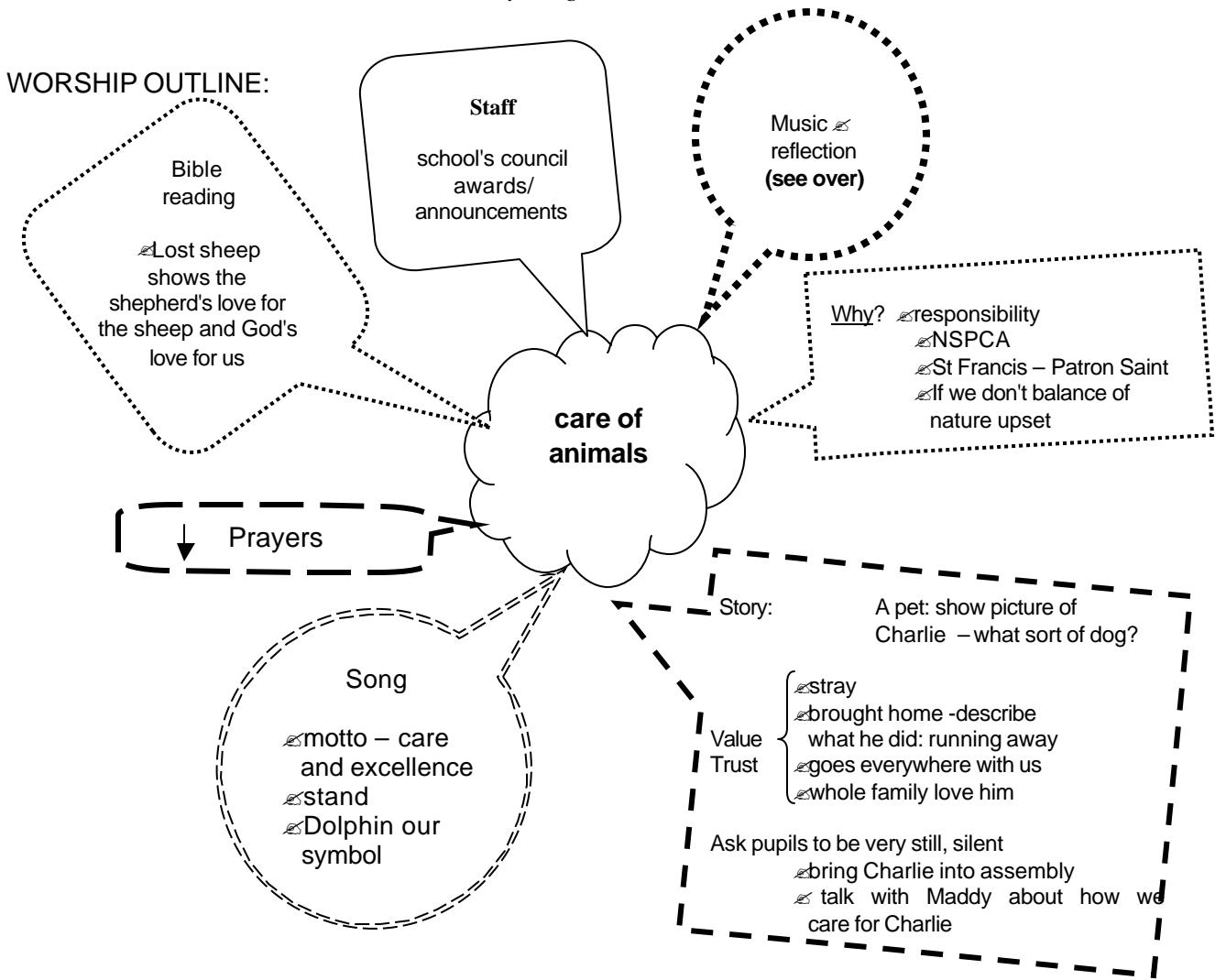
VALUE: Trust

DATE: 26.6.99.

THEME: *Care of Animals*

LEARNING INTENTIONS: All things in nature: plants/animals are inter-connected and have their place in God's world. Human beings must take responsibility for looking after the world and everything in it.

WORSHIP OUTLINE:



REFLECTION: Let us sit quite still and closing our eyes let us pray:

Dear God, thank you for our natural world with all its many animals. We give thanks today for our pets. May we be ever mindful of our responsibility towards our pets showing them care, consideration and kindness so that they can always trust us. Amen.

GROUP OF PUPILS: All

TEACHER: John

PLANNING NOTES FOR THE INITIAL REFLECTION

1. Welcome all: visitors from USA, other visitors, staff and pupils

~~we~~hope everyone had a good weekend despite the changeable weather

~~we~~hope this week is both happy and one in which we can say to ourselves that we have understood and put into practice our values this month of TRUST.

2. Reflection: Beginning our week being determined to do our best is very important so may I invite everyone in the hall to:

~~we~~sit very still, with straight backs, hands in our laps and gently close our eyes

~~we~~now be aware of your breathing and for a few moments with each in breath feel calm and with each out breath let go of any thought which may be troubling you.....

~~we~~now on the screen of your mind see your favourite pet see its colour, size, characteristics see it being cared for be aware of your feelings when you look at this pet feelings of happiness and lovewith these thoughts in your mind open your eyes and bring your attention to me.

Yes, animals – caring for them – what pets have we got?

Hands up – dogs, cats, etc. c/f Mr. Brown's cat that had been taken to the vet. Mr. and Mrs. Brown love their cat.

For secondary school colleagues I have included the following mind-map as an example of an assembly on the theme of using personal power.

GOOD PRACTICE SECONDARY SCHOOL ASSEMBLY RECORD SHEET

VALUE: Support of others

THEME: *How do we use the power we have to help others? ...a reflection on Toy Story (1)*

LEARNING INTENTIONS: We have a relationship with our friends and can influence them negatively and positively. We have a responsibility to reflect on the consequences of our actions and words, and decide how we will help others to grow.

Assembly outline

Source

Toy Story – Woody the cowboy who uses his power to destroy Buzz and bring him down to earth, but who needs Buzz to challenge his limited horizons.
Buzz Lightyear, the visionary who needs Woody to rescue him and to help him face reality and his limitations – he's just a toy.

Music

Song from *Toy Story* – 'a friend in need'.
Visual resource – extract of the film.

Theme

Using your power

Conclusion

We have to decide how we will use our power – a choice to help friends, or to hold them back.

Reflection and drawing together

Will I be a friend who will empower my friends to do their best?

Challenge, and encourage them?

Links to our lives

- examples of challenge and encouraging others
- Pupils' suggestions.

REFLECTION AND DEDICATION: (using the candle flame as a focus)

In our school life we will face many pressures from friends – and have choices to make. Let's make the decision to help our friends to grow in their skills and strengths, and not hold them back. The light of the candle is dedicated to all in our school who have good friends, and all who at the moment feel they need a good friend.

GROUP OF PUPILS: Year 7-9 (also years 10-13, but message adapted)

RESOURCES: OHP/OHTs, Video of *Toy Story* and video machine, candle and matches, music

MEMBER OF STAFF/VISITOR: Alison

7. CREATING AN ASSEMBLY OF EXCELLENCE

Outstanding assemblies occur when a positive connection **is** established between the leader of the assembly and those taking part. This includes both pupils and staff! The content of the assembly must be both relevant and appropriate to the age and stage of the pupils. The leader should consciously work to enable all to be focused and in a frame of mind that is conducive to a spiritual awareness. Spirituality is here defined as, that which is concerned with the inner personal world of thoughts, feelings and emotions. Spiritual awareness is achieved through a process of establishing rapport with each person attending the assembly. How this is done is both subtle, complex and requires good quality teaching skills. Some of the crucial elements that are needed for a successful assembly are noted below.

Before the beginning of an assembly, the person leading it arrives early to ensure that the room is properly prepared. Preparation includes ensuring that appropriate music will be played. That is, music that will assist the process of helping everyone to be reflective. The school hall, in terms of cleanliness, display, heating, ventilation and tidiness creates an atmosphere that is conducive for ensuring a successful assembly. Coloured spot lighting, if available can be used to help create a special warm atmosphere. The leader of the assembly sits down and models the behaviour expected of everyone coming to the assembly. A relaxed, friendly yet serious attitude is adopted. This is not a time for exaggerated smiles or gestures. These can act as a signal that social interaction is expected and therefore should only be used when interactions between people are expected. Pupils are taught that assemblies are about developing inner thoughts and so they become used, and indeed, look forward to a quiet reflective atmosphere. It is often a mistake to look on assembly as a time to entertain the pupils. Teachers sometimes fall

into the trap of trying to entertain pupils in order to hold their attention. Poor behaviour and inappropriate responses can often follow!

The leader models stillness as the pupils enter the hall. Staff model the expected behaviour too, as do pupils. Members of staff avoid interacting with each other or acting to police the behaviour of the pupils. Such action is inappropriate as it creates a negative perception about what assembly is about. A key strategy that the leader of the assembly uses is eye contact. He or she tries to have eye contact with as many pupils and staff as possible during these first few minutes. This connection is so very important as it demonstrates that each person is valued and held in respect. (However, it should be noted that in some cultures direct eye contact between adults and pupils is considered disrespectful. Sensitivity is necessary in employing this technique. For instance, by explaining to the pupils what eye contact is for and why it is used.) This moment of eye contact is very powerful and demonstrates that connections can be established between people without the need for exaggerated gesture. It is also a highly effective way of establishing discipline, as each pupil is aware that they are being actively observed. The leader maintains control in subtle ways, such as through self-confidence. A held look to a pupil who is not focused is usually all that is needed to check inappropriate behaviour. The pupils are reminded in this way that assembly is a time for reflective thought.

It is vital that an assembly has an enriching quality. This can be accomplished by associating the theme of the assembly with the experience of the pupils. This makes the experience relevant and real to them. Telling an inspiring story, such as the one by Oscar Wilde about *The Selfish Giant*, enables pupils to make connections with their own attitudes and behaviour. Also, relating your own personal experience to the theme of the assembly and drawing in other members of staff to comment can be enriching. Relating exciting experiences, such as being taken on the back of a modern motorbike

dressed in appropriate kit, grabs the full attention of everyone. Describing the journey with all its thoughts, feelings and emotions uses a personal story to illustrate a theme that relates to real experiences. Such communication techniques help to connect the subject matter with the pupils' own lives. Such connections are

needed if they are to grasp the relevance to them of the values and principles discussed during assembly. We need them to say, "*Yes, I'll try that, I'll change to-day!*" Thus guidance and encouragement are prerequisites for enabling pupils to have that inner debate that modifies behaviour through self-regulation and self-discipline.

The leader of the assembly may also usefully reinforce the concept of the school as a community by telling groups that they have done well. Referring to positive examples of good behaviour or work creates a culture of success and high pupil self-esteem.

By involving the pupils, by changing the tone of voice or one's physical position pupil interest is maintained. For staff too the assembly is important, as they appreciate assemblies that are spiritually nourishing. The prayer or reflection, at the end of assembly, should encapsulate the learning objective of the assembly. Time is well spent working out appropriate wording. It need not be long! For instance: *Help us to make our love unconditional and give it to others often.* (The story would have explained the meaning of unconditional.) When the spiritual content of the assembly is present and relevant then the adults are affected positively too.

The benefits of an *assembly of excellence* to both individuals and the school in general are enormous. Effects can include:

- ¤¤ heightened awareness of the needs of others;

- greater sensitivity to the feelings of others;
- raised self-esteem;
- good behaviour based on self-discipline;
- potential to heighten consciousness;
- development of spiritual intelligence;
- generating an ethos that is calm, happy and purposeful;

- raising achievement and standards;
- contributing to developing personal autonomy and contentment.

Such positive effects speak powerfully for the future development of assemblies. I do hope that the thoughts contained in this article will act as inspiration for others to explore the full educational potential of the assembly.

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