**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

Children & Society ✳ WILEY

# Remembrance and ritual in English schools

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**Abstract**

This article explores war remembrance and ritual in English schools. The *Remembrance in Schools* project (2013–2020) investigated remembrance practices in schools in England through questionnaires, interviews and observations. Schools are unique as sites of remembrance because children constitute the majority of participants in rituals. School-based rituals of remembrance might potentially reproduce dominant discourses of war-normalisation that conflate military values and nationalism with morally 'good' values and an imagined community of the nation. They also provide a contested, ambivalent space in which ambiguities of practice and thinking may encourage the emergence, in small ways, of counter-narratives about war and its remembrance.

**KEYWORDS**
children, remembrance, ritual, school

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and the current post-Brexit moment of critical reflection on British national identity, rituals of war remembrance represent an important, complex space where 'everyday militarisms' (Beier & Tabak, 2020) become part of children's lives. In this article, we ask: what is being remembered about war in schools? What rituals of remembrance are carried out in schools, and what meanings do adults and children ascribe to them? Mass education through schooling is a site of intense and regular ritual activity, from assemblies,

to examination, to graduation (Wulf, 2020). Children in English schools have participated in annual rituals of war remembrance each November since the 1920s (Connelly, 2002; Wright, 2020, 2021). In line with state-sanctioned observances, they have remembered those who have lost their lives, initially in the First World War and subsequently in later conflicts, in events built around artefacts and texts concerned with military endeavour and loss, the symbolism of the poppy and a communal period of silence. Yet, there is little empirical research that documents and interrogates the meaning of these rituals in the present. While children and young people have some agency in how they enact and interpret these activities, as individual citizens with their own interests and memories (Leonard, 2014), rituals regularly serve to reproduce the dominant discourses of adults. With this in mind, our interest is to explore what values, beliefs and ideological positions are conjured in the regular performance of Remembrance Day rituals in English schools each November.

First, we consider the relationship between schooling, memory and ritual, bringing together literature in these connected fields and pointing to the lack of empirical research on remembrance in English schools. Second, we introduce the *Remembrance in Schools* project and we discuss its findings relating to remembrance practices in schools in England between 2013 and 2020. Drawing on interview, questionnaire and observational data, we argue that rituals of remembrance in schools are complex, multivalent and multivocal activities that reproduce dominant discourses of national identity and ontologies of war (Danilova & Dolan, 2020) while also offering moments of ambiguity and ambivalence that lend nuance to how remembrance is enacted. Finally, we draw attention to the lack of engagement with discourses of decolonisation, or reconciliation with the brutalities of British colonial and military history. We suggest that rituals of remembrance are a productive context for addressing the nuance of collective remembering and to offer children opportunities to grasp the complex relationships between past and present in British society (Sriprakash et al., 2020).

## Ritual, remembering, reproduction and agency

Remembrance rituals are a powerful means of enacting social memory (Connerton, 1989; Haight et al., 2021). For our present purposes, it is important to establish *how* rituals are enacted in such a way as to reinforce a particular approach to remembering, or, conversely, as an articulation of resistance to established forms of remembering. van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) early analysis of ritual structure applies a broad tripartite structure of separation, transition and incorporation to understanding how ritual events work to enact or reproduce social structure, including the transmission of cultural knowledge. Turner (1969) complicates this picture by offering a more nuanced understanding both of ritual structure and its relationship to symbolism. Rituals regularly begin with a process through which individuals are removed from the normal activities of everyday life. This is often followed by a period of transition or liminality where the substance or message of the ritual is conveyed, explicitly or symbolically. Finally, rituals may conclude with a process of reaggregation, where individuals are stewarded out of ritual practices and back into the everyday. While the exact delineation of these phases varies significantly between rituals and indeed in individual experiences of the same ritual (Tambiah, 1979), this broad structure is a useful starting point for understanding how rituals 'work' to give meaning to a specific set of practices. These practices, in their strangeness from the familiar world of everyday life, may be both memorable to the individual and instrumental in how they serve to orchestrate the act of remembering to reproduce particular structural arrangements (e.g. between generations, or

between subjects and the state). A common structure for Remembrance Day rituals in schools is: (a) the separation of teachers and pupils from the normal run of the school day, both temporally and spatially; (b) a period of liminality during the ritual itself; and (c) reaggregation into the normal spaces and temporal rhythms of the school day. The substance or stuff of remembrance rituals—memorials, the poppy, war poetry, military historical materials and silence—combine to articulate an explicit or implicit sense of what should be remembered. In this breakdown of remembrance rituals, the act or remembering can be marked out as 'sacred' in contrast to the 'profane' everyday of school life—although as we suggest below, this binary does not fully capture the nuance of experience observed and articulated by project participants.

As a context for establishing collective social memory, rituals are closely linked to the reproduction of existing social structures and forms of social control. As Ball and Collet-Sabé (2022) argue, echoing Foucault (1977), schooling is a principal site of government and discipline. Historically, sociological analyses of schooling have focused on how the rituals and regimens of mass schooling are intended to nurture social cohesion and/or social control through the reproduction of existing subjectivities, social structures and institutions. Durkheim laid the early groundwork for a functionalist, conservative sociological imagining of society reproduced through the habituated ritual activities of schooling. Dewey's progressive framing of moral habits in education is similarly concerned with cohesion, although centred around growth and change rather than stasis in values. Others (Levinson, 2000; McLaren, 1986; Wulf, 2020) have more recently articulated how the rituals of life in school serve processes of cultural and social reproduction. Seen through this lens, remembrance rituals serve as a technology (Brown, 2012; Foucault, 1977) through which the bodies and thoughts of children can be disciplined into behaviour which is deemed morally good or appropriate and linked to a sense of patriotism and national identity. To return to Danilova and Dolan (2020), this conflation of patriotism and national identity with morally 'good' qualities may be subsumed under an ontology of war that in subtle ways becomes part of the normal cycle of activities in schools. The 'we', 'our', 'us' that recur through remembrance rituals, moreover, signify an 'imagined' collective national identity and community (Anderson, 1983). This imagined identity and community is bounded, potentially excluding those who are deemed not to share aspects of this identity and of the past experiences of the community; and yet, the sense of a historical continuity of shared experiences and values is fundamentally illusory (Aldridge, 2014).

That said, individual experiences and enactments of ritual practice may also offer, in some cases, opportunities for agentic action on the part of individuals or groups linked by the unique sense of togetherness or '*communitas*' produced by the ritual experience (Turner, 1969). The sense of collective identity produced may derive from what Edwards (2005) refers to as relational agency, or the empowerment of acting together. Torab (1996), for example, describes how women in urban Iran participating in the *jalaseh* ritual are able to perform traditional modes of gendered piety while also subtly contesting essentialised notions of gender (see also, Reynolds & Erikson, 2017). Hall and Jefferson (1993) point to the importance of ritual and symbolism in youth subcultures that resist social reproduction. It is important to consider varied forms of agentic expression and acknowledge their potential ambiguities beyond a more superficial understanding of agency as a process of rational choice in action (Coole, 2005). Pupils can in small, usually unobtrusive ways, opt to join in, to do what they are told by adults or what they realise they are expected to do, or to quietly resist, fidget, murmur, delay or subtly alter the course of events. They might join in not quite knowing why they are there. They might buy in to as much as they understand. They might question, perhaps just to themselves, some of the dominant narratives. Recognising the active, if not always explicit, role of children in shaping ritual practice is resonant with a broader tradition in critical pedagogy scholarship which illuminates the

powerful disciplinary technologies at work in education while also recognising how individual and collective action, however, momentary or fleeting, can be counter-hegemonic (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2022). In this sense, the messy social reality of ritual practice leaves open the door for children and teachers alike to enact small gestures of resistance at the margins of practice. That these actions may appear inconsequential (such as fidgeting) or irreverent or playful (giggling, dragging feet and failing to participate) is perhaps testament to the fact that the very nature of the ritual of remembrance does not afford a language through which dissent or resistance can become legitimately visible. To dismiss the counter-actions of students or teachers as mere distraction or misbehaviour would be to accede to a hegemonic view that privileges only the dominant ritual moves of remembrance as those acts worthy of attention.

With the above in mind, however, we do not claim that rituals of remembrance in schools are sites that favour the overt articulation of agency. Choice over whether to participate and the mode of participation, and the ability explicitly to voice one's own opinions, are constrained in the highly charged atmosphere of collective, ritualistic, remembrance events and arguably, in the school setting given the age and associated power dynamics operating there. Children at remembrance events are expected to adhere to a particular social script of thought and behaviour. Yet, these events are also contested, and have been—and still are—appropriated and mobilised for different political aims. Children might only partly understand these behavioural expectations and political tensions. Yet relational agency and nuanced, dispersed forms of agentic expression may be articulated through individual and collective enactments of remembrance, as they have been by children implicated in acts of remembrance in Britain in the past (Wright, 2021). These considerations of the balance between scripted and prescribed actions and the spaces for nuance and agentic action are now explored through our primary research.

## The remembrance in schools project

The *Remembrance in Schools* project (2013–2020) documented and interrogated school-based remembrance practices linked to Remembrance Day (Haight et al., 2021). Existing studies explore a range of remembrance practices involving young people (Danilova & Dolan, 2020; Kidd & Sayner, 2018; Pennell, 2018). Others have documented annual commemorations of Remembrance Day in public spaces (Brown, 2012). However, there is a dearth of empirical research focusing on young people's remembrance practices in the context of the annual school commemorations of Remembrance Day (see Imber & Fraser, 2011 for a notable exception).

Our data collection tools are not unique. They have been used in different combinations in other studies of remembrance practices (e.g. Imber & Fraser, 2011; Mitima-Verloop et al., 2022; Pennell & Sheehan, 2020). However, our approach to gathering data during and after remembrance events over a number of years is unusual. Questionnaires in 2013 and 2016 provided baseline data about what schools did during their remembrance events, and about what was being remembered. We distributed a 10-question online questionnaire to school leaders in all primary, secondary, preparatory and special schools in three counties in southern England in 2013 and again in 2016. One hundred and twenty-one out of 1034 schools responded in 2013, and 132 out of 1098 in 2016, a 12% response rate both times. In 2017–2018, we conducted interviews with teachers and school leaders (12 primary school and five secondary school), pupils in their final year of primary ($n = 77$) and first year of secondary ($n = 49$) completed anonymous questionnaires, and project researchers visited 14 schools to observe remembrance practices. The interviews and questionnaires elicited teachers' and pupils' thoughts and feelings about the

remembrance events in their schools. While the time frame was necessarily short (Remembrance Day comes but once a year), the approach to observations was broadly ethnographic. Observers participated in or were in the same space as remembrance events, and wrote up fieldnotes on a common proforma as soon as possible afterwards. Smaller tranches of data collection took place in 2019 (short written accounts from teachers and older pupils [$n = 13$]), and in 2020 (five online interviews with teachers captured Remembrance Day practices under pandemic conditions). All data were analysed using a thematic coding approach. Individual team members coded particular segments of the data, and cross-checked with other team members. Analysis occurred across the project team, first examining each component of the data—the questionnaires, the interviews, the observations, the 2019 and 2020 data collection tranches—and then looking across the data as a whole.

Ethical approval was secured from Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee, overseeing in particular processes of informed consent and confidentiality. Pupils completed their questionnaires anonymously; this anonymity was not possible of course with teachers in interviews. We have not named schools and individuals, and as far as possible avoided identifying features, the latter is complicated though by distinctive and localised features of remembrance practices and sites. One key consideration in our research practice was to navigate with sensitivity thoughts and feelings about events that could be emotionally charged, for young people and adults alike. We valued and took seriously what we observed from and what we learned from individuals of all ages. A further consideration was to ensure as far as possible that participants in remembrance events we attended as observers knew of our presence in the capacity of researchers. Schools were asked to make his information available in advance, and we told individual adults and children who we interacted with why we were there. Researcher presence almost inevitably has some effect, but in practice at most events, we observed we were one of a number of adult guests.

Our approach has been one of texturing or 'layering' over time (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003), of adding in different perspectives and angles through our varied data collection approaches in different years, eliciting both child and adult responses at the time and after the event. Data collection over the extended 2013–2020 time period facilitates insights into annual rituals of remembrance not just as one-offs, but as events with much continuity and also, potentially, subtle variations in the rituals and the meanings that participants ascribe to them. Our data reflects the demographic milieu of three counties in the most prosperous region in the UK—albeit one with pockets of intense deprivation—and might not represent the country as a whole. It reflects the perspectives of the schools, teachers and pupils interested and invested enough to participate in our research. We have identified patterns, but do not claim to generalise. The findings that follow draw on a cross section of our data, but especially the rich and varied data from 2017 to 2018. Observations were particularly valuable as a way of encountering remembrance along with teachers and pupils in this particular ritual moment, while teacher interviews and pupil questionnaires were valuable in eliciting their perspectives after the event.

## Findings

### Rituals of remembrance in schools

It is a normal Thursday morning in a large town in southern England when one of the *Remembrance in Schools* research team members arrives at Forest Primary School.[i] The school is

down a cul-de-sac in the town centre past rows of Victorian brick houses and within listening distance of the whoosh of traffic on a main thoroughfare. The school is a Church of England school, but a large proportion of its pupils are Muslim and South Asian. The headteacher surmises later when asked about this that parents of faith would rather have their children in a faith school, even if it is not their own. After signing in, on entering the playground, the school is alive with activity. Children are running eagerly around the playground, encouraging each other to buy a poppy from the temporary table in a covered area. The headteacher is there too, congratulating those who have donated their money and wear paper poppies pinned to their coats. A bell rings to signal the start of registration, and the children are shepherded into snaking lines that disappear into classrooms. The researcher is sent to wait for the headteacher and the chaplain in the school chapel, a polygonal room in the centre of the school. In the moment before the Remembrance Day ritual is to begin, the space is quiet, almost sepulchral. The chaplain arrives and is young and jovial; the headteacher quick to smile and shake hands before nodding to the display case in the corner of the room. There displayed are his grandfather's medals, a picture of soldiers standing together and a fragment of twisted metal.

As the researcher looks at these artefacts of war, children are ushered silently from their classrooms into the space. The silence is more an intention than a reality; children aged 6–11 years clatter into the room, settling into age-graded rows from front to back, looking around at each other and at the gathered adult guests sitting to one side. In the centre of the room, there is a display created by pupils which is reminiscent of a First World War trench, replete with twisted barbed wire, topped by a dove of peace. Solemn music plays. The ritual begins. The headteacher starts with a welcome message and praise for the pupil participation to follow, establishing a sombre tone. Different children file to the front to read poems, stories and in some cases, letters from long-dead family members who participated in past wars. As the performances take place, the researcher perceives a charged atmosphere in the room caused by the children's engagement in the serious themes of the performances (death, loss, grief, violence and sacrifice), and by the adults aiming to reconfirm the seriousness of the event while also mitigating its emotional impact on the children present. One boy in the front row cries, holding a soldier's cap. A 1-minute silence is observed, and the children manage, just, to hold the silence for this time. The headteacher again says how moved he has been by the thoughtful participation of the pupils. As children begin to squirm and lose concentration, and teachers lean in to whisper encouraging words or admonishments for talking, the ritual comes to its end. The children are ushered back out of the room and into the growing din of the playground.

Remembrance events took place in varied locations within the schools that participated in the project—halls, outdoor spaces in the school grounds, chapels and classrooms. Occasionally they took place outside of the school, at a local church, at a local memorial, in a graveyard or cemetery. Some events were designated optional but most seemed to involve everyone who was at school that day. These were multi-generational events. Pupils were accompanied by adult school staff of all kinds. Some schools invited parents and other members of the local community, including preachers and military veterans. Schools' remembrance events typically comprised talks from a teacher or local preacher, music, singing and poetry or other readings. A silence (the classic 2 minutes sometimes reduced to 1 for younger children) was ubiquitous. Poppies, typically red but occasionally white, purple or black, were worn by many attendees. In primary schools in particular, classrooms, corridors and school grounds were adorned with poppy art created by pupils.

Children and teachers in our data highlighted as central elements of remembrance sites and objects and texts associated with military endeavour and loss; and the observation of silence. These stayed in their minds after the event, speaking to the power of an annual collective ritual,

core components of which, it has been noted, were established soon after the end of the First World War (Gregory, 1994; Macleod & Inall, 2020). They emphasised the significance of a collective act, with common symbols, understandings and intentions, as one teacher put it, 'doing the same as lots of other people across the country'. Filtered through the discussion below are references to being thoughtful, to attention being held. Project researchers′ fieldnotes pick up on a charged atmosphere at the events they attended, something recognised by other researchers as a feature of war remembrance events (Brown, 2012; Pennell, 2020; Winter, 2010).

## Sites of military endeavour and loss

Remembrance events each November in Britain focus on remembering the military, and specifically, the loss of military lives, whether the major national commemorations at the Cenotaph in London or local events, including those in schools. In our data, a striking element of remembrance rituals in schools was their power to connect the broader national rituals of remembrance and local places. Memorials and war graves were the physical centre point of some events, whether located in a village green, in a local cemetery or graveyard or—for some older secondary schools—in the grounds of the school itself. One class from a village primary school joined the community remembrance event, crossing the road to the memorial on the village green. Pupils wrote acrostic remembrance poems. Some were glued to the centre of poppy wreaths which were laid by their authors at the base of the memorial. The headteacher commented to the observer that older residents appreciated the children being there. At this and other primary schools, a community memorial was a focal point of connection with military loss in the locality. In secondary schools, there could also be links both with past pupils of that school who had served in war and with the military of the present. At one suburban fee-paying school with extensive grounds, attendees stood around the school memorial which listed the names of pupils and teachers from the school who had died in conflict. About 150 cadets in full uniform, representing the army, navy and air force, marched past, with arms swinging, commanded by older pupils. Flags were dipped at the memorial and wreaths were laid. At this school, cadet force participation was compulsory from Year 9, explaining the greater numbers here than in other project schools where cadets were part of the remembrance rituals. The observer noted in fieldnotes that this event was very reminiscent of the national ceremony at the cenotaph in London.

Pupils and teachers alike deemed sites of memorials and war graves appropriate and affecting venues for acts of commemoration, which focused attention and created an emotive response to loss and death. They were alert to the significance of naming individuals on memorials and graves and thinking about them. Pupils would identify, and sometimes actively seek, a link between themselves and the dead who were named, whether the connection was living in the same place or attending the same school. Secondary school pupils noted in their questionnaires that the naming of individuals from their schools, on memorials and the rolls of honour which were read out in ceremonies, helped establish a feeling of connection with them. A teacher in an older grammar school commented on the impact for current pupils of hearing of their predecessors who had died: 'These were boys who had been in the school... I think [pupils] could appreciate exactly what had happened and what it had meant'.

Pupils could try to create memorial spaces, or try to shape what went on in them. Those in a secondary school established too recently to have its own memorial requested that they could create their own. The teacher we spoke to in that school noted that pupils after a battlefield visit had asked to turn one of the trees in the school grounds into a memorial tree. Modelled on the 'danger

tree' at Thiepval, this became a focal point of the school's commemorative events, with barbed wire placed around it, and poppies added to represent individual lives lost in the First World War. One primary school commemoration we observed took place at a local Commonwealth war graves site. The teacher who oversaw her school's act of remembrance commented that she was happy to accommodate pupils' suggestion of observing the silence by a chosen grave. However, she had not taken up other suggestions, such as dancing, because she was concerned that they would be deemed inappropriate by others present in this public space. If pupils came up with the idea, it was a teacher who approved it, and provided access to resources to make it happen, or rejected it on grounds of what was likely to be deemed acceptable in an out-of-school setting.

The Commonwealth War Graves context was a complex one. The multiple nationalities in this context created a different form of connection with those who died. The pupils we observed seemed to value connecting with an individual not only when standing by a single, chosen grave for the silence, but also commented that seeing all the graves together helped them realise how many had died. The teacher elaborated on what 'many' meant, noting the graves of people from different nations and on different sides in the World Wars, buried in the same place. In Forest Primary School mentioned earlier, the headteacher in his address to the audience during the remembrance ritual emphasised the broader participation of Commonwealth soldiers in the World Wars, potentially reflecting the large South Asian intake of the school. As we go on to explore later, however, a more nuanced approach to remembrance did not stretch to an engagement with the shadows of imperialism or with the discourse of decolonisation.

## Texts and objects of military endeavour and loss

Texts of remembrance events likewise emphasised military loss. Reading of poetry featured in multiple school events, most often the 'They shall not grow old' stanza from Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen*, John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields* and other offerings from the war poets. Explanatory talks from teachers and others similarly stressed military loss and the horrors of war, noting sacrifice and the importance of gratitude to those who had given their life. In response to the rhetorical question 'why are we here today?', noted by observers at multiple events, children were told that the aim was to remember those who fought and died in the First and Second World Wars, with some reference to subsequent conflicts. The poems selected reinforced an emphasis on the First World War Western Front. Our data collection coincided with the centenary of the First World War; this almost certainly led to increased focus on that conflict. Yet, textual messages at events could be complex. In a suburban primary school, a powerpoint accompanying a local preacher's talk contained a slide which depicted text from a Bible verse alongside images of Buddhist temples. The typical stanzas of the war poets were juxtaposed with pupils singing a song, *Peace By Piece*—this song was not specific to remembrance events but the lyrics called for peace and harmony.

The material culture of remembrance rituals uniformly emphasised the military, not least through the symbolism of the poppy. The classic red poppy, others have noted, is typically associated with military sacrifice, both from those who lost their lives in action and veterans who survived (Basham, 2016; Iles, 2008). We observed explanations in talks and videos of the 'meaning of the poppy' as the first flower that started to grow on the battlefields of the First World War Western front. We have already described photos of soldiers and military paraphernalia in display cabinets in Forest School. Military personnel and objects were incorporated in another urban primary school's commemorative event through examples of pupil work which were

shown or read out. Year 1 (age 5–6) pupils drew pictures of medals. Year 6 (age 10–11) pupils wrote about their family experiences from the two World Wars. One wrote of her great-great-grandfather, a First World War fighter pilot of renown locally who was shot down in battle. A second described a former Nazi soldier great-grandfather on one side of her family, and a Polish immigrant great-grandfather who ended up fighting for the allies in the Second World War on the other. A third had Polish grandparents who were captured by the Russian army and escaped. The pupil work selected for the event gives prominence to military experience, yet the 'who' that was being remembered becomes ambiguous in stories of migration and what had been enemy nations in conflict combining in one family. Schools in our project reflected a broader trend in the sphere of public remembrance of emphasising family stories. This trend, it has been argued, has the potential to produce a partial, parochial, view of global conflicts, while also potentially glorifying war through an emphasis on everyday heroes (Pennell, 2018). The use of family stories we saw, however, cannot be labelled simply as glorifying war or the victory of one side. Rather, these stories often framed remembrance in a more ambivalent way.

That said, pupils typically emphasised in their questionnaire responses the dominant narratives communicated through the texts and objects at their school events. Nearly all referred to military deaths (soldiers dying 'for us', 'for our freedom') as the focus of acts of remembrance. A few noted 'everyone that died' (with reference to civilian deaths and deaths on the 'other side'). Occasionally pupils wrote of the wider impact of these losses: 'what happened when families were torn apart', 'how lonely all the wives were'. Sadness at loss and gratitude for military sacrifice were dominant themes in the visual and spoken texts of school events, and the majority of pupils reflected these narratives back. Yet a minority saw something else, describing the military stories and objects they saw or heard about as 'cool', 'exciting', 'jubilant', 'fun'. An association of the military with glamour and adventure sometimes came through. Only one pupil referred to acts of killing on the part of those who fought and died—'they killed many to save many more'.

## SILENCE

A period of silence featured in all remembrance events that were documented. It was the focal point of rituals, with everything else leading up to or following it, timed so that the silence would start at 11 AM precisely. In 2017–2018, 11th November fell on a weekend, so the school Remembrance Day events could not synchronise in real time to the national commemorations. We were told of commemorations in other years involving tuning in through radio or television broadcast to the chimes of Big Ben in London.

To describe the 'silence' of remembrance as a literal silence would be inaccurate, as there was never a complete absence of noise. It was more a deliberate act of being as quiet and still as possible. In the school setting, this was behaviour which was perceived by the adults we heard from as unusual, and *learned*. During remembrance events, we observed reminders to keep hands out of pockets, teachers placing fingers on lips and younger pupils looking round at older pupils and adults in the room or outdoor space and copying their actions or stance. At one large urban primary school, all pupils gathered in the playground, lined up in class groups. They jiggled with the cold, some coughed, some looked around at other class groups, but most had their heads down in a collective act of self-control. The observer noted traffic noise, the wind and bird-song; the deliberate act of being quiet allowed noises not usually noticed to come into focus. One of the class teachers said to the observer afterwards that some pupils had moaned about being out in the cold and standing still, but was pleased that despite a little discomfort they 'had engaged'.

Despite the lack of absolute silence, the act of being as still and quiet as possible was powerful. The headteacher at the urban primary school that held its silence in the playground commented: 'they take it seriously and rise to the occasion because they see a point in it'. The Last Post featured at most of the events we observed, either played live or as a recording. Pupils described it as a beautiful, evocative, starting point for the silence which directed their thoughts. Yet conveying atmosphere, thoughts and emotions in relation to the silence in words has been difficult for the students and teachers in schools and project researchers alike. Observers noted something unusual, compelling and moving in their field notes, perhaps hinting at the 'liturgical' quality of the silence emphasised by Winter (2010, 4). Facial expressions of adults often suggested that they were moved. Pupils in their questionnaires commented on affective dimensions of the silence. Some described feeling 'emotional', 'moved', 'a bit tearful'. Others described being 'calm', 'tranquil', 'peaceful'. Comments from teachers and pupils alike touch on the silence being atypical and a disruption of typical routine and modes of behaviour in the school setting which afforded limited opportunities for collective calm and reflection. In addition to its portability and flexibility, perhaps it is the disruptive nature of the silence which marks it as powerful for those involved.

The nature of the reflection and thought engendered by the silence is similarly elusive. Communal silence, it has been suggested, can foster both a sense of community and connectedness, and of individual subjectivity (Wood & Tribe, 2016). We know something of how pupils were asked to behave and act, and what they were advised to focus on. We know less about what went on in individuals' minds. Most pupils who offered comments on their thoughts during the silence noted thinking about those who died—mainly soldiers—in 'The War' (sometimes stating which one, but often not). They reported feeling pride and gratitude alongside sadness about the loss of life. Some implied a more complex range of thoughts and emotions, echoing Imber and Fraser's (2011) findings. Pupils commented on being 'confused about what is the point of war', 'annoyed that wars happen and how we can't sort conflict out without war', 'frustrated', 'angry … because the war started', 'worried … because it might happen again'. Despite some variation in thoughts and feelings in our data, individual children could perceive a common focus: 'I thought and reflected a lot and I think everyone else thought the same thing'. We are not alone among researchers in noting children's sense of connection to others in a commemorative context (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2022). What we cannot tell is how far that assumed connectedness in thinking actually extended to others there.

## DISCUSSION

The rituals of remembrance we observed and learned about in schools derived power from their connection with remembrance events past, and with the performance of versions of them by earlier generations (Gregory, 1994; Wright, 2020). They could be conceived of as 'top down' cultural transmission of invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983) which from 1919 were approved by the King himself, encouraging engagement with a set of shared values presented as historically continuous through their annual repetition (cf. Aldridge, 2014). This does not foreclose the possibility of new ideas and approaches becoming attached to them. The First World War centenary period witnessed critiques of dominant narratives of remembrance emphasising the Western Front over other theatres of conflict in a global war, and military experiences of war over civilian ones. Attention was drawn to those remembered more often than not being white, Christian, men who fought in the trenches. These debates were very much in the public domain during our data collection and therefore might have influenced some of the attempts to nuance

aspects of these narratives which we have noted. What we did not see explicitly in our data was the polarisation and overt antagonism over war remembrance, and particularly the poppy, which recur in the public sphere and are rehearsed annually in print, broadcast and now social media (Aldridge, 2014; Andrews, 2019; Iles, 2008). We also did not see explicit reference to critiques of earlier remembrance and memoralisation practices, such as that pertaining to unequal commemoration of non-Europeans, despite its founding principles of equality of treatment in death, on the part of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (2021). It is likely that older pupils and teachers at least were aware of these controversies, but they did not appear to impact in an explicit or visible way on remembrance events in schools.

Rituals of remembrance have been critiqued in recent years for producing hegemonic messages and stifling debate (Christoyannopoulos, 2023; Jeffery, 2015; Pennell, 2018). Similar critiques were offered in the decades immediately following the First World War (Gregory, 1994; Wright, 2020). Particular narratives are dominant in our data: military sacrifice and loss, of mainly British white male soldiers, and a duty to respect and remember. The dominance of such narratives has been noted by others investigating British remembrance activities in recent years (Basham, 2016; Danilova & Dolan, 2020; Imber & Fraser, 2011; Kidd & Sayner, 2018; Pennell, 2018, 2020). We, in keeping with these other studies, observed that particular behaviours and emotional responses at remembrance events were deemed correct and legitimate. This is to be expected in a context where a system of shared meanings is tied to a sense of others' expectations. These were emotionally charged events, with mnemonic 'sticking power' (Winter, 2008, 6). To an extent we found, as Kidd and Sayner (2018, 12) did, that 'ritualised memory discourses are difficult to disrupt'. School remembrance rituals are in this sense an exercise in imagined community (Anderson, 1983), reifying a sense of common national identity that is articulated both in a sense of timeless ritual practice and martial symbolism, and in a feeling of being part of a unified national whole, moving and feeling in ritual unison. The experience of this imagined togetherness, or 'fictive kinship' (Winter & Sivan, 1999), can be profound.

We also saw the potential for more nuance than this. Part of this nuance is found in the ambivalence and questioning that we have seen in our data. As noted in our findings, particularly in the questionnaires, pupils did not reject outright expected narratives, but noted in addition to these the lure of armaments, of the drama and glamour of war, or alternatively feelings of anger, confusion and fear. They emphasised the sacrifices made by those who died while fighting, but some questioned whether the fighting should have happened at all. Some aspects of remembrance rituals, most notably the silence, offer scope for individuals to attach to them their own memories, thoughts and emotions (Brown, 2012; Gregory, 1994), and therefore potentially to think outside of standard narratives and motifs. However, some teachers in interviews stated a desire to help pupils ask questions rather than promote a particular view of remembrance. This might suggest that a particular view of remembrance is dominant, and also that, in the context of an annual ritual like this, questions might be difficult to ask. Part of the nuance, or at least the potential for nuance, lies in silences in our data, in the ambiguities or multivocalities of ritual practice and what those involved might find difficult to articulate or express.

There is a danger of assuming passivity on the part of children engaged in remembrance rituals (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2022; Pennell, 2020). The potential to become implicated in meanings established within the community that comes together, or to lose critical thought in the affective intensity of the moment (Brown, 2012), is balanced against the potential for children as the carriers of social memory to nuance, interpret differently, adapt and effect change (Habash, 2013; Leonard, 2014). We wish to avoid, as far as is possible, rendering unthinking engagement on the part of children in commemorative acts a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Pennell & Sheehan, 2020,

22). Children are not unthinking recipients of dominant narratives and passive participants in rituals, yet what they can do to shape events is undoubtedly constrained. Older generations act as the gatekeepers of and passers-on of collective rituals of remembrance (Winter & Sivan, 1999). In the school setting, adult staff members typically shape the format of the act of remembrance, building it around the typical elements of silence, remembering of deaths in combat and poppies. They develop and reproduce traditions attached to the school and/or the local area. Pupils had roles in all project schools; singing, planting plastic poppies, laying wreaths, being silent. They planned elements of some remembrance events and made suggestions, but teachers decided whether these suggestions could be put into practice.

Rituals of 'remembrance in schools are accompanied by a normative sense not only of what it was appropriate to focus on but also of appropriate actions and behaviour which are shaped by historical practice'. They comprise deliberate actions, with instructional intent. Rituals developed in the interwar years can be conceived as education for the adult population, inducting a new cohort of voters into responsible citizenship (King, 1998). This argument could be extended to children at the time, and in the present. Rituals of remembrance in schools are framed didactically. Pupils were prepared in advance. They were informed about the World Wars and why acts of remembrance took place in lessons or assemblies prior to the main commemorative event. Teachers told them how to behave appropriately—to be silent, to stand still, to be thoughtful, to move carefully and slowly (Haight et al., 2021). The behaviour expected during rituals of remembrance was scaffolded beforehand through explicit instructions and explanations. It was learned during the event itself through observation of others, and through repetition of ritual acts and ritual symbolism which would become increasingly familiar over successive years.

Finally, from the vantage point of 2023, a critical engagement with remembrance and its implications in terms of contested national identities and national pasts is notably absent from these rituals. Significant popular and scholarly debate has emerged in the years since our data collection about decolonisation in general and about the need for a more critical reckoning with British colonial history in particular (Lotem, 2021; Sanghera, 2021). While the absence of this critical questioning is explained in part by the time frame of the research, decolonisation discourse is certainly not new (Said, 1990). Timing does not fully explain a lack of attention in our school sample to reconciling with the darker aspects of British history and national identity. Beyond more established themes such as the folly of war or the unnecessary casualties of the First World War, schools did not raise critical questions about remembrance as an act of reconciling with the entrenched legacies of colonialism that shape contemporary British society. Internationally, remembrance and memorialisation practices have attempted to incorporate elements of reparation and reconciliation, in contexts as diverse as South Korea and Romania (Choi, 2019; Levick, 2022). Some of this might even occur in British schools beyond the scope of our data collection. Evoking the notion of a reparative approach to the past (Bhambra, 2021; Táíwò, 2021), remembrance rituals may potentially represent a productive context in which to reframe how schools engage with the complexities of British history and national identity (Levick, 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

Our contention in this article has been that rituals of remembrance may indeed have the effect of reproducing discourses of war-normalisation that conflate military values and nationalism with morally 'good' values for children as citizens. Our findings also suggest that school-based rituals of remembrance may in their current form foreclose possibilities of more radical counter-narratives

which address decolonisation. A different, reparative approach could potentially challenge the forms of social memory that are encouraged through rituals of remembrance. It could challenge the framings of national identity which, notwithstanding opportunities for nuance, remain dominant in the rituals as they are at present.

However, pupils—and teachers—are not passive participants in ritual processes. Rituals of remembrance in schools provide a contested, at times ambivalent space where dominant discourses are reinforced alongside ambiguities of practice and thinking that may encourage the emergence, in small ways, of counter-hegemonic narratives about war and its remembrance. We have made the argument that small and even seemingly insignificant counteractions of teachers and children within the context of ritual practice can nevertheless help to give a more nuanced shape to the meaning of the acts taking place. What remains to be seen is the potential for creating discursive and ritual spaces where more explicit forms of active participation, including resistance and refutation, might be encouraged and legitimated. Schools are the one site for remembrance in which children are the majority and as a final thought we return to the positioning and role of children in these rituals. Is there a danger that even a reparative approach could become another invented tradition which is handed down, another imagined national identity which is conflated with a set of assumed shared values and morally good qualities? Children's positioning in and contribution to any changed approach to annual remembrance rituals will need to be taken seriously, and schools will remain a key setting for examining this.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We confirm that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

De-identified project data can be viewed on request. Under the terms of participant information and consent gathered at the time, it cannot be re-used for other research.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Empirical data collection has been approved by Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee with processes informed by the Oxford Brookes and BERA research ethics codes of practice. UREC registration numbers L13088, 171126, 191338 and L20236.

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## ENDNOTE

[i] All names are de-identified.

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