

Learning Outside the Classroom

Guidance on Parental Objections to Visits to Places of Worship

Introduction

The issue of requests from parents to withdraw their children from visits to places of worship is a serious matter about which many of us in the world of education, and specifically in religious education, are deeply concerned. It is difficult to know if the incidence of this is increasing but we think it is important to raise it and share some examples of good practice in the hope that we might be able to avert further problems. While objections are raised about visits to a number of places of worship, they are most frequently about visits to mosques, which raises the bigger issue of Islamophobia and how this can be addressed.

The reasons for parental refusal vary greatly and include the cost of the trip as well as religious (and sometimes other) objections. **We would strongly recommend that schools always ask parents to explain their decision**, whilst remembering that parents do have the right to withdraw their children from some or all of religious education, **on grounds of conscience**. This is consistent with guidance issued by the then Department for Education (Circular 1/94, currently under review).

Rationale

It is important to have a very clear rationale available to all parents and others about visits to places of worship. Reasons for arranging such visits include:

- Education is about extending pupils' knowledge, understanding and experience of the world and a visit to a place of worship can help do this
- Religion is a very important factor in society and it is essential that children have opportunities to explore religious practice and belief
- The experience of visiting a place of worship can help children to learn about religions but is NEVER about indoctrination or persuading children and young people to agree with the beliefs of the religion being studied
- Educationists agree that experiential learning is more effective than simply learning from texts and electronic sources
- Pupils usually enjoy their visits and learning is enhanced
- A visit to a place of worship also provides opportunities for pupils' cultural development by enabling them to experience new or different forms of art, architecture and music
- The atmosphere of many places of worship can provide an opportunity for pupils to consider questions about life, religion and spirituality in ways that are impossible in classrooms
- Visits are usually part of a planned curriculum and are integral to the learning that will take place: to miss out on the visit would seriously impact on pupils' progress and understanding. This is particularly important as the curriculum becomes more flexible and creative
- There are always opportunities for cross-curricular learning and many aspects of the school curriculum can be studied through a religious building including the arts, literacy, history, mathematics and design
- The visit is often led by an experienced guide who is able to answer the children's questions and thus they have the benefits of meeting an adherent of a faith that might be different from their own
- The government is supporting Learning outside the Classroom: see www.lotc.org.uk
- The non-statutory National Framework for RE supports visits to places of worship
- Many syllabuses for religious education require that all pupils should visit places of worship as part of the RE curriculum
- Visits can contribute to community cohesion.

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Preventing the problem from arising

There are many ways in which teachers and governors can try to prevent the difficult situation in which a parent refuses to give permission from arising. These include:

- Having a clear policy on which parents and pupils have been consulted, which has been ratified by the governing body and which is supported by all members of the school community. This can be incorporated in your race equality policy or your RE policy
- Using parents' evenings, assemblies and displays to promote understanding of religious and cultural diversity and of previous visits to places of worship
- Being unequivocal in the school's approach to racism, stereotyping and prejudice
- Working with the local community to raise awareness – the local Christian church supporting the visit to the mosque, for example
- Having a period of preparation for the visit so that pupils' interest and enthusiasm are high
- Inviting a speaker from the relevant religious community to come, perhaps with artefacts or posters, to work with the children and answer their questions in lessons
- Inviting a speaker from a religious community to work with governors, parents or staff prior to arranging a visit
- Arranging a day for parents and /or governors to meet members of faith communities and visit a place of worship
- Stressing the purpose of the visit to parents, some of whom might have a distorted view of what will happen – such as expecting participation in others' worship or being coerced or persuaded into accepting beliefs which differ from their own.

Preparing for the visit

Usually visits to places of worship will have specific learning linked to the Diocesan or Agreed Syllabus for RE and it is important for teachers to plan carefully the learning that will take place as a consequence of the visit.

There are many creative methods of teaching and learning that can be utilised to help prepare children for the visit. These include:

- using art to explore patterns, buildings, symbols and shapes
- listening to music
- exploring artefacts - their use, meaning and design
- studying photographs, posters or videos of places of worship to devise research questions
- interviewing members of the community to understand what it means to belong to a religious community.

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During the visit

To help pupils to realise that the building is about people in the present, as well as the past, they will have an opportunity to meet and talk to people who worship in the building.

They will spend some time sitting in silence to appreciate the atmosphere, the splendour or simplicity of the building.

The children will be encouraged to consider key questions in order to encourage respect, empathy and understanding for example:

- What interests you?
- What puzzles you?
- What questions do you want to ask?
- How does it feel to sit here?
- What helps to give it this atmosphere?
- How might this building help people worship?
- What clues are there about how people worship?
- What is similar here to other places of worship?
- What is different here?

Children may be asked to observe design, symbols, colours and objects and to consider their importance:

- Where are objects situated? Why?
- What is this for? Who uses it?
- What books are used? Why? When?
- Who uses this building? Why?
- What posters and notices are there?
- What do they tell us about this worshipping community?

They may: listen to music; listen to a speaker from the faith community; take photographs or video footage - if permission has been granted; draw things that interests them; follow a religious objects trail and make notes and sketch things of interest to them.

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After the visit

Follow-up activities will often be cross curricular and may involve work in English, Art, History and Geography, for example, as well as RE.

Children may discuss key questions about the place that they visited and their experiences on the visit for example:

- What are the essential features of the place of worship?
- Why are places of worship different - even those belonging to the same religion or denomination?
- What do you think it means to the people who come here as worshippers?
- What surprised you?
- What did you find interesting?
- Did you learn anything that links to your own life and experiences?
- If the place were to be demolished and you could take one thing from it, what would it be?

Pupils could:

- Write letters of thanks to their host highlighting the aspects of the visit that interested them – this is an excellent opportunity to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- Use books or other resources to compare with what they experienced
- Use their notes, drawings and photographs to create a display, web site or an illustrated guidebook to the building showing its importance to the worshipping community
- Place such a display in the school, in the place of worship visited or in a local library
- Use the display as the basis for assemblies with parents and other children present
- Recap the words used to describe the atmosphere inside the place of worship and write creatively or poetically about it, how they felt and what they saw
- Produce art or music to convey their thoughts and responses to the visit
- Pupils could produce models or drawings of religious objects and symbols
- Pupils could be set a design task that includes solving a problem – how to make a building accessible for the disabled, or a building to encourage use by the wider community, for example.

For further advice on learning outside the classroom see:

www.lotc.org.uk