

Religious Believers Visiting Schools

Guidance and a Code of Conduct

Introduction

Schools do well to welcome believers from different faith communities to make a contribution to learning. Religious believers can make a powerful impact in RE and collective worship in schools when they visit. Spiritual and moral development and religious learning can be stimulated most effectively through encounters between people of faith and school children of all ages. Teachers have good reason to be grateful to people of faith, often volunteers, and usually unpaid, who are willing to play a part in school life. This guidance and code of conduct is offered to give help to schools and religious visitors to make the most of the opportunities available, and to avoid some of the pitfalls which are sometimes encountered.

The guidance is offered by the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE), and concentrates on the interface between education and faith communities. NATRE is the subject teacher association for teachers of RE. It is envisaged that this guidance will be useful to head teachers, governors, RE teachers and religious visitors to schools. Some schools may wish to invite potential visitors to read the code and indicate their acceptance of it, or to write a school policy based upon it. SACREs might consider issuing it to schools as part of their official guidance on RE and collective worship.

Principles and good practice

Schools should welcome religious visitors and respect their faith and contribution to pupils' learning. It is good practice to plan visits jointly, to pay travel and other expenses, to welcome visitors with refreshments and to evaluate the visit together.

Schools are educational communities. Religious visitors are guests in the community, and whether they are frequent guests ('almost members of the family') or one-off visitors, it is helpful to bear in mind the ethos, purpose and aims of the school. For example, for a Christian, visiting a church school may be a different kind of opportunity from visiting a local authority school.

Schools are committed to the needs and interests of all their pupils, and they are plural communities. The school may include members of different faith groups, pupils from non-religious or secular families, and (within Christianity or other faiths) different denominational allegiances. Religious visitors need to think through what they have to offer to all pupils. The sharing of insight, experience, belief and practice is appropriate. It is never appropriate to impose on members of the audience.

Parents have the right to know what is happening in school. Parents of different faiths, different denominations and of no faith are, quite reasonably, concerned about the religious input their children receive in school, and clarity of information from school to home needs to be maintained all the time.

Children have their own integrity too. It is a fundamental principle that religious education work and collective worship experiences should respect the attitude and perspective of each child.

It is also important that the school ensures current legislation relating to child protection procedures is covered and implemented with regard to visitors to the classroom, collective worship or assembly hall.

The code of conduct offered here is elaborated in the notes that follow. It is important to read the notes, because a code such as this is necessarily written as concisely as possible.

The Code of Conduct

Religious visitors taking part in the life of a school should:

- be willing to share their own experiences, beliefs and insights, but avoid (1) criticising the experience and insights of others and (2) imposing their views upon pupils in any way;
- be familiar with the school's aims, ethos and policies, and plan their involvement in the light of the aims and curriculum at the school;¹
- seek to use engaging teaching and learning methods that involve the pupils actively, and to communicate at appropriate levels for the age-group(s) concerned;²
- make clear to pupils who they are, who they represent, and what their aims are;
- be willing to respect and value the faith of the pupils and adults in the school when it is different from their own;
- develop ways of speaking to pupils that communicate their open approach, avoiding any hidden agenda to 'convert' or proselytise.

A key question to help visitors reflect on their approach:

If a member of another religion visited my child's school and contributed in the same way that I have done, would I, as a parent, be happy with the education given?

¹ It is more effective to take part in the regular programme of teaching and learning, rather than make an isolated or one-off contribution to the curriculum.

² The two most common problems for pupils when visitors make a classroom visit or in collective worship are that they listen to a lengthy monologue, with more or less attention, and that they can't understand: the material presented is often too hard and sometimes too easy, and the language used is over the pupils' heads or sometimes patronising. Visitors who avoid these pitfalls will be more effective.

Schools' responsibilities

As already stated, schools have responsibilities to brief visitors in advance, to plan and evaluate jointly, to meet agreed expenses, and to make visitors welcome.

Schools should take responsibility for the curriculum and the school's collective worship at all times: it is inappropriate for this responsibility to be handed over to religious visitors. Thus activities such as interviews, question-and-answer sessions, sharing experience, or talks introduced by the teacher, are obviously appropriate, while activities in which the teacher takes a merely observational role are not appropriate. Generally, religious visitors should work alongside teachers at all times: the responsibility for the pupils, including their protection and health and safety, rests with the school.

Schools should be clear in guiding and assisting religious visitors to make an appropriate contribution to the curriculum or the programme of collective worship.

Schools should support pupils from a particular faith community who wish to practice their faith in voluntary time at school. Outside visitors to such groups have a special importance, and a special responsibility. A Bible study and prayer group for Christians, a Satsung group for young Hindus, a room set aside for Islamic prayer or a Shabad Kirton for Sikhs are all appropriate ways for schools to show the value they place on pupils' commitments, and appropriate contexts in which to welcome visiting believers.

Audiences and appropriateness

There are three contexts in which religious visitors might participate in school life:

- collective worship;
- the curriculum (including RE);
- voluntary groups, such as a lunchtime Christian Union, or Islamic salah.

Each context is distinct, and requires a suitable approach.

In collective worship pupils are offered opportunities for spiritual and moral development, including opportunities to join in with worship. Visitors might present ideas and experience from their faith, making clear the value of these ideas and experiences within the community, and asking pupils to think about them from their own point of view. In leading prayer, no assumptions should be made about the commitments of the pupils: no religion advocates compulsory worship! Some teachers introduce prayer by offering pupils a choice between the role of participant, and the role of observer.

In lessons, including RE, pupils are engaged in the task of learning. Religious visitors are valuable because they bring an authentic voice of faith into the classroom. This may be informative, help develop understanding, and may also challenge pupils to reflect on their own commitments. Visitors will want to think carefully about the educational aims of the session(s) or contributions that they offer.

In voluntary, extra-curricular groups, some pupils may wish to share their faith through a regular meeting or club outside curriculum time. Pupils, teachers, parents or visitors may take a lead in organising this. If such groups are clear in their purpose and open in their agenda and their invitation to all to participate, then they have the function of enabling believing pupils to share their faith in school. Visitors to such groups are participating in the life of the faith community, on school premises. This special opportunity should be taken seriously, and should be arranged with appropriate liaison between visitors, voluntary pupils' groups and senior staff in the school.

Appropriate communication

When believers who visit schools are ineffective it is usually because their presentations are too difficult or too easy for the children they address. To be an effective visitor, believers need to set the level of their presentation to match carefully the aptitudes and age of the group they work with. Going 'over the pupils' heads' or 'talking down' to them is all too easy. Effective communicators will:

- plan carefully
- discuss the input with teachers in advance, and be open to teachers' suggestions
- take account of the differing abilities of the pupils
- use a variety of teaching methods and styles, including those which elicit a response from all the pupils
- select content carefully, avoiding the temptation to try and get the whole of their faith across (for example, teaching six-year-olds all there is to know about Jesus Christ in a 35-minute session!)

Issues for discussion

Visitors to school are often welcomed and shown around the physical environment. It is just as important to 'show them round' the educational environment; the potential problems that they may face are then more easily avoided.

These are issues which need special discussion and attention:

- If a religious group is evangelistic or has missionary objectives, how will these objectives be kept separate from collective worship and curricular RE?
- How will parents get to know about the religious life of the school? What contribution will they make to shaping the experiences offered to their children?
- What steps can be taken to enable pupils to know what is being offered in voluntary activities supported by faith communities? How can hidden agendas be avoided?
- What can schools do to offer balanced opportunities for pupils to meet and share the lives of religious believers?

Conclusion

The guidance and suggestions given in this short leaflet need to be applied with care in each school. The guidance often strikes a note of caution, but it should not be forgotten that religious believers are a rich and exciting resource for schools. Much wonderful RE, and many inspiring acts of collective worship or assemblies, result from the visit of a person willing to share his or her faith. From the point of view of NATRE, schools are encouraged to welcome religious visitors whenever possible, and communities of faith are encouraged to contribute to the curriculum and collective worship some of the treasures of their living beliefs.

Correspondence is welcomed at: NATRE, 1020 Bristol Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6LB, Tel: 0121 472 4242, Fax: 0121 472 7575, E-mail: enquiries@retoday.org.uk

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