

Guidance for 'Faith Encounters'

at Oak Farm Junior school

Introduction

Here, at Oak Farm Junior School, we appreciate the importance of developing good relationships between schools and a variety of belief communities. We aim to ensure high quality learning for pupils by bringing the authentic voice of a believer into the classroom- either within or outside the school. In order to safely and successfully do so, we follow the guidance provided by the NATRE (National Association of Teachers of RE) Code of Conduct from their guidance document ('Religious believers visiting schools'), which states that:

Members of belief communities taking part in the life of the school, including visits to places of worship, should:

- be willing to share their own experiences, beliefs and insights, but avoid:
- criticising the experience and insights of others and
- imposing their views on 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;
- 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;
- be willing to respect and value the beliefs of any pupils and adults in the school when they are 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 – the 'golden rule' of the conduct:

'If a member of another religion or belief 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?'

Visits to places of worship

A visit to a place of worship should be a hugely enriching experience as part of RE, as a way of bringing a faith to life. Visits also make a significant contribution to pupils' SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural) development, including giving them an understanding of British Values.

When considering and responding to confirms, Oak Farm will refer to and follow the guidance given by the SCC.

"Many schools have asked for guidance on how to proceed with visits following terrorist attacks and unrest. Whilst it is natural that some parents may feel anxious about their children taking part, it is essential that schools continue to stress the benefits that such activities bring. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is essential that bridges between faiths and communities are strengthened and we increase our understanding and empathy for each other. It is very possible that the children currently in our schools will live their whole lives with some form of active terrorist threat. As far as possible, we need to maintain learning outside the classroom and carry on enjoying the activities we value. It is the right of any parent to withdraw their child from any visit and alternative provision must be available for such children at school. It is, however, up to all of us to decide how we can best maintain day and residential journeys."

SCC Strategic Risks Departmental statement, June 2015

Visits allow pupils to see that places of worship are not just a building but also a living community of believers, giving pupils a 'feel' of the faith and a sense of the 'spiritual', and ensuring that pupils take more away from the visit than just facts about beliefs, practices and artefacts. Visiting a place of worship can also be a multi-sensory experience involving sight, smell, touch, hearing and even taste. This helps pupils of all abilities to absorb and retain their learning. It might be that the visit comes at the beginning, middle or end of a unit of work in RE: this context is important for both the school and host communities.

A visit might include:

- engaging activities that include a combination of listening, doing, talking, questioning and recording, in age-appropriate ways
- activities designed to enhance specific schemes of work
- a tour of the place of worship
- handling of special objects
- interviews with members of the belief community

Teachers will remain responsible for the pupils throughout the visit and will behave as an active participant by leading questions etc. Teachers will also be responsible for redirecting a session, in the unlikely circumstance that it becomes inappropriate for the visiting children.

Handling parental concerns

In accordance with the 1998 School Standards & Framework Act, it is the right of any parent to withdraw their child from Religious Education (either all, or part). If a request is made concerning withdrawal from a visit, alternative provision will be made available for such children at our school. This being said, we will aim to reassure parents of the educational purpose of the visit, sharing with them how it will enhance their child's learning in RE, so that parents can make informed decisions about withdrawal.

During RE visits and experiences:

- pupils will not be taking part in worship, but may be observing it;
- there will be no form of proselytising or evangelising;
- one of our teachers will be leading the visit and working in partnership with the host community;
- any requirements to wear a head covering or remove shoes is an outward token of respect for others' beliefs and sensitivities.

We understand that there are some particular elements of visits that may cause concern for parents and will endeavour to fully inform them when children may be dressing up, acting out or trying food and drink, in the trip consent letter and give them the opportunity for their child to opt out of any of these aspects of the visit

Parents will be notified of *all* scheduled RE related visits or experiences in either a letter or on Oak Farm's fortnightly newsletter.

Welcoming visitors to schools

Welcoming guests from different faiths into our lessons, as with visiting places of worship, pupils will be engaged in the task of learning. Visitors from belief communities are valuable because they can really help to bring such learning to life, bringing an authentic and authoritative voice into the classroom and offering pupils opportunities to question believers directly. This may be informative, help develop understanding, and may also challenge pupils to reflect on their own commitments or perspectives.

We emphasise that:

- the purpose of all visits as part of RE or collective worship is educational, not to evangelise or proselytise;
- a member of staff will be present with the visitor during the session;
- parents will be informed of what such visitors are in school for, in the hope that they will support the educational aims of the visit and appreciate the potential benefits to pupils;

Code of conduct:

As teachers of RE, we follow The Religious Education Council's code of conduct, which states that:

Respect persons: Irrespective of their religious or non-religious beliefs, everyone should be treated equally out of respect for their dignity as a human being. This is as true for visitors from belief communities as it is for pupils.

Value reason-giving: Schools are places of critical engagement and respectful, vigorous debate where no belief is above the requirement of reason-giving. Pupils should be encouraged to think skilfully about, and to take responsibility for, the beliefs that shape their behaviour and attitudes so that they continue in or change their own beliefs through lifelong critical reflection.

Practise reciprocity: The Golden Rule, "treat others as you would like to be treated", is a principle which is widely shared across human communities. When handling beliefs in school, teachers should treat other religious and non-religious beliefs as they would like their own beliefs to be treated in the same circumstances.

Accept contestability and value self-awareness: Beliefs are always contestable; the teacher should recognise that they may be controversial and should frame their language accordingly. This entails a willingness to be self-aware, particularly in relation to the way in which the teacher's own beliefs impact on his or her approach to teaching and learning.

Be open: Appropriate openness about what a teacher believes can be a professional asset. This means being prepared to answer questions about and talk about his or her own beliefs when that is appropriate (an important professional judgment) in a way that enables pupils to develop in their own learning.

Promote fair and accurate representation: Where people of diverse beliefs meet, there is opportunity for both conflict and co-operation. To promote cooperation, teachers should treat diversity as an opportunity to work with others in the shared task of achieving excellence in teaching and learning. Teachers should strive for fair and accurate representation of religious and non-religious beliefs by drawing on sound scholarship and by including a range of authentic voices.

Model life-long learning: In a culture where open debate and hard questions are encouraged, teachers will often find there is much that they do not know. Professionalism in these circumstances means being open to the discussion moving into challenging territory and being willing to learn.

Promote balance: The search for truth is central to education. When dealing with a controversial issue, you should encourage consideration of a balanced range of views, even if you find this uncomfortable on occasion.

REC Code of conduct for teachers of RE, 2009

Specific guidance for members of belief communities

Every member of a faith community who is visiting our school for a purpose related to the teaching of RE, will be requested to read, understand and agree to the boxed principles on page one of this document. Both the visitor and the teacher present at any sessions will complete an evaluation form. A record of any agreement or evaluation forms will be kept by the RE coordinator.