
When the Class Goes Without You: Parental Choice and the Child in the Middle

“Visits to places of worship can be some of the most valuable opportunities children have to encounter beliefs and communities beyond their own. Yet I have worked with schools where parents have withdrawn children from such visits, particularly visits to mosques.

On one occasion, a child was incredibly distressed. Her friends were going on the visit and she simply could not understand why she was not allowed to go. More recently, I heard of parents asking a school to withdraw their child from anything involving discussion or mention of Islam.

Parents in England have the right to withdraw their children from some or all religious education and collective worship, and schools must respect that. However, that right does not extend to removing a child from every part of the curriculum where religion might legitimately arise, such as history or citizenship.

But even where withdrawal is permitted, there is another question we sometimes overlook: What is the impact on the child?

A child left behind while classmates visit a mosque, synagogue, gurdwara, temple or church may feel excluded, embarrassed or confused by a decision they did not make. Schools therefore need to manage withdrawal sensitively, protecting the child from feeling punished or being expected to explain or defend their parents’ decision.

The starting point should always be conversation. Schools can explain what the visit involves, reassure parents that learning about a religion or belief is not the same as participating in it and make clear what children will and will not be expected to do. Sometimes understanding the purpose of the visit may be enough to address a parent’s concerns.

Where a child is still withdrawn, alternative provision should be meaningful and the language used around the child carefully considered. Most importantly, the child’s feelings should be heard.

Education should introduce children to a world beyond their own experience. Visiting a place of worship does not ask a child to adopt another person’s beliefs. It gives them an opportunity to understand those beliefs, meet the people who hold them and learn how to live confidently and respectfully alongside difference.

Parental rights matter, but so too does the experience of the child who watches their classmates leave without them.”

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