



Guidance for schools with Muslim pupils

19th century prayer rug
Northeast Caucasus

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Introduction

“Success through diversity” is the heart of Ealing Council’s vision, and it is in this spirit that this guidance has been produced.¹ It is *not* a rigid set of prescriptions, and we fully recognise the fact that in almost every instance² the final decision remains in the hands of individual headteachers. Rather our aim is to suggest compromise positions and encourage dialogue between schools and their local Muslim community, at the same time as ensuring the best possible education for all of Ealing’s pupils.

According to the 2001 Census, Muslims form the second largest faith group in the UK.³ The overall percentage of Muslim pupils in Ealing schools in 2006 was 25%. Obviously in some schools this percentage is higher, in others lower, but issues relating in particular to the month of Ramadan can affect all of Ealing’s schools.

This document presents information and guidance for schools on a variety of issues that *may* come up in respect to their Muslim pupils—it should be noted right at the outset that not all Muslim pupils will adhere to the obligations mentioned in this document. The guidance might also serve to advise parents of specific curriculum requirements, health and safety issues and other practical restraints to which all educational institutions must adhere.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Muslim community in Ealing itself is diverse. Muslims from Pakistan can be quite different in their observances from Somali Muslims. The largest Dawoodi Bohra⁴ mosque in Europe is in Northolt, and there are also a substantial number of pupils whose families belong to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.⁵

¹ The guidance was written in discussion with colleagues in the schools service and headteacher and Muslim representatives on SACRE, and has also been sent out to local borough mosques for consultation.

² Exceptions include the legal rights of parents to withdraw their children from religious education and collective worship (see p 9) and sex and relationship education (see p 6), and the proviso in the 1996 Education Act regarding obligatory religious observances (see p 18).

³ In 2001 that amounted to 2.7% of the total UK population.

⁴ A sect of Shi’a Islam.

⁵ For more information on these distinctions, see background information, p 21.

Summary of guidance

| Topic | Summary suggestions | More info |
|--------------------------------|---|-----------|
| Sex and relationship education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Whenever possible it is preferable for male staff to teach boys, female staff for girls. ▪ Avoid holding SRE classes during Ramadan. ▪ Parents <i>do</i> have the legal right to withdraw their children from this subject. | Page 6 |
| Art | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Muslim pupils <i>may</i> not feel comfortable being asked to draw or produce three-dimensional images of humans or animals, and especially not any figures considered messengers in Islam (Jesus, Muhammad, Noah). ▪ There is a wealth of Islamic art forms that can be celebrated, e.g. architecture, calligraphy, geometric representations. | Page 7 |
| Music | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some Muslim parents will not want their children singing Christmas carols, or songs that contradict their faith (e.g. those that call Jesus 'Lord' or 'son of God'). ▪ Although music is not proscribed in the Qur'an, opinions regarding the place of music vary widely in different Islamic sects and cultures. Some parents will believe that all music is <i>haram</i> or forbidden; while affirming that they do not have the legal right to withdraw their children from this statutory subject, parents should be encouraged to sit in on a lesson, and reassured as regards the point above. | Page 7 |
| Dance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It could be a problem after puberty if forms of dance such as ballet, jazz, tango and disco are performed in mixed groups. | Page 7 |
| Drama | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Role-playing as an educational exercise is fine, although some Muslim parents may not want their children to perform in nativity plays or dramatisations involving gods or figures considered as prophets. | Page 8 |
| RE and collective worship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Muslim pupils are allowed to visit all places of worship for educational purposes. ▪ Schools with large percentages of non-Christian pupils should consider applying for a determination that lifts the requirement that the daily act of worship be predominantly Christian. ▪ Parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from both RE and collective worship. They can do this selectively (i.e. parts of the course or selective acts of worship) but this is never the preferred solution. | Page 9 |
| School uniforms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adhering to the uniform code should not be problematic as long as girls are allowed to wear the hijab (if they so desire) and to wear long-sleeved shirt and trousers or long skirt version of the uniform. (For health and safety reasons, the hijab must be of a reasonable length.) ▪ Both parents and pupils understand that the hijab must be suitably secured in relevant situations for health and safety reasons. ▪ The wearing of the <i>niqab</i> (full-face veil) should not be allowed on the grounds that it prevents the school from exercising their duty of care. | Page 10 |
| Sportswear | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schools are encouraged to allow Muslim children to wear tracksuits for sporting activities if they so desire. | Page 10 |

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Swimming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For health and safety reasons, leggings and full leotards are not permitted in any of Ealing’s pools. However specially made full length lycra suits are available at Dormers Wells Leisure Centre and from on-line sources. ▪ Segregated swimming is rarely practicable, and parents’ expectations should not be raised in this respect. It is important to point out that swimming is a statutory curriculum subject, and they have no legal right to withdraw their children from swimming lessons. However compromises that can be offered include allowing Muslim children to shower in their swimming costumes, and allowing fasting pupils to remain at school during Ramadan. ▪ The availability of individual changing cubicles at Ealing’s pools can be found on page 11. | Page 10 |
| Authorised absence for religious days | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is recommended that schools with significant Muslim populations try to schedule occasional days to coincide with the two Eid festivals, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha. For schools with fewer Muslim pupils, it is recommended that requests for absence for religious observance on these days be granted. The school attendance service encourages Muslim pupils to take off no more than one day per Eid festival, a position supported by the local mosques. ▪ In addition to the above, Shi’a Muslim pupils are likely to request absence for the observance of Ashura (the 10th day of the month of Muharram), and it is recommended that this be granted as an authorised absence. ▪ Shi’a pupils that are members of the Dawoodi Bohra sect (the Northolt mosque) are expected to observe special sermons during the first ten days of Muharram. As regards children leaving school for these sermons, it is recommended that schools allow them to do so if it coincides with their lunch break, or if it means only a minimal absence at the start of the day. Again it is the parents’ responsibility to ensure that the child returns back to school afterwards. | Pages 12 and 18 |
| School meals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schools with a significant percentage of Muslim students are encouraged to ensure the availability of options that are not <i>haram</i> (e.g. fish, vegetarian dishes). ▪ During Ramadan schools are encouraged to provide a packed lunch for those Muslim pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM), which they can take home and eat after sunset. | Page 13 |
| Prayer (<i>salah</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Although not all Muslim pupils will observe this, the five daily prayers are considered obligatory for all Muslims, who are encouraged to perform <i>salah</i> from the age of seven, although they are not required to do so until puberty. ▪ Schools are encouraged to have a designated ‘quiet’ area for prayer (e.g. space in the library). If it is not possible to allow students to perform the prayers at the allotted times, it is suggested that schools allow them to do so at the beginning or the end of the lunch break. ▪ It is obligatory for post-adolescent boys to participate in communal prayer at midday on Friday, but this will most often be observed during Ramadan. If sufficient numbers warranted it, this could take place on the school premises, as long as adequate supervision is available; otherwise schools should honour a parent’s written request to take their child to the mosque for part of the afternoon, with the understanding that it is the parents’ responsibility to ensure their child return to school following these prayers. | Page 14 |
| Fasting (<i>sawm</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fasting is obligatory during the month of Ramadan for all Muslims, male and female, once they attain puberty. However many children will begin to fast before this age. ▪ For the varied ways that Ramadan can impinge on school life, see page 15. | Page 15 |
| School outings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is no valid religious reason preventing Muslim students from taking part in educational visits to other places of worship. ▪ At secondary level, it is recommended that class outings are not scheduled for Friday, when they will conflict with the needs of those pupils who wish to attend the midday congregational prayers. | Page 20 |

Curriculum issues

Sensitivities regarding the teaching of certain subjects will differ from family to family, however the concerns of Muslim parents are most likely to arise in connection with sex and relationship education, art, music, dance and drama. *It should be stressed—as this guidance will indicate—that parents only have the legal right to withdraw their children from sex and relationship education and religious education.* However even with respect to these subjects it is good practice for schools to engage parents in dialogue, pointing out the benefits to their children of full participation, as well as reassuring them with regard to specific concerns.

A lack of familiarity with the British education system, not to mention the English language, can cause some parents/carers to feel isolated from the education process, a situation that can also arise with parents from other communities, e.g. Travellers. In this case it could be useful for the school to encourage parents to come in and view the class in question. Although negotiation about specifics is possible, limits with respect to the statutory National Curriculum should be clearly established, as well as the fact that health and safety issues can never be compromised.

The following are issues that some Muslim parents might bring up with respect to specific national curriculum subjects, as well as suggested points of compromise. Again it should be stressed that, apart from sex and relationship education, parents do not have a right to withdraw their children from these classes. (Guidance regarding religious education and collective worship is dealt with in the following section, p 9.)

Sex and relationship education (SRE)

In general, the concern of Muslim parents is not whether there should be sex education but rather how it is taught. Although the subject is approached in a non-religious context, it is useful for teachers to know that Islam prohibits pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex and same sex relationships. Sex education in general is acceptable, as are the following topics: abstinence until marriage, teenage pregnancy and the repercussions of such, and the dangers of STDs, HIV, etc. Most Muslim parents would prefer that, whenever possible, a male member of staff teach SRE to boys and a female staff member present the subject to girls.

Relevant legislation and guidance:

“The local education authority...and the governing body and head teacher of the school, shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that where sex education is given to any registered pupils at the school it is given in such a manner as to encourage those pupils to have due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life.” (*Section 46 of the Education Act 1986*)

“The teaching of some aspects of sex and relationship education might be of concern to teachers and parents. Sensitive issues should be covered by the school’s policy and in consultation with parents. Schools of a particular religious ethos may choose to reflect that in their sex and education policy...” (*DfEE circular 0116/2000*)

“If the parent of any pupil in attendance at a maintained school requests that [they] may be wholly or partly excused from receiving sex education at the school, the pupil shall, except so far as such education is compromised in the National Curriculum, be so excused accordingly until the request is withdrawn.” (*Section 405 of the Education Act 1996*)

Art

Within the Muslim community there is considerable difference of opinion regarding acceptable forms of art. The ban against the creation of figurative images arose from the stance taken against any form of idolatry. However Muslim art in Persia, India, Turkey and Egypt has a tradition of figurative miniature paintings.

The following would be considered by most Muslims to be acceptable art forms: calligraphy, textile arts, ceramic glass, metal/wood work, landscape drawings and paintings, architectural representations, geometric figures, photography and mosaic art. In order to avoid offence, teachers should avoid encouraging Muslim pupils to produce three-dimensional images of humans or animals, and whereas it would be hard to avoid figurative representations in religious education and other lessons, pupils should not be asked to colour or reproduce images of Jesus, Muhammad or any of the other figures in Jewish and Christian literature whom Muslims consider to be prophets. (Ironically, colouring of already-drawn images—e.g. pictures of Noah and the Ark—will be considered acceptable by many Muslim parents.)

Music

Opinion regarding the place of music varies among different Muslim cultures. Traditionally, Islamic music has been limited to percussion instruments (i.e. drums) and the human voice. Some groups of contemporary Muslim musicians perform devotional songs they call *nasheed*. Most groups perform using only voice and percussion instruments, a type of music considered to be *halal*—i.e. permissible—by many strict Muslims. However some modern *nasheed* groups add other instruments.

Some Muslims are very reserved in their attitude towards music and may not wish for their children to participate in any kind of music lesson. The school needs to deal sensitively with their concerns, at the same time as reinforcing the fact that music lessons are a required part of the national curriculum. Good practice would be to reassure these parents that their children would not be asked to join in with songs that contradict Islamic belief (e.g. Christmas carols or hymns—although there will be many Muslim pupils who will be happy to join in!) or perform music that could be considered to promote lust, seduction, unrestricted mixing and consumption of drugs, alcohol or other intoxicants. Again, schools could allay such worries by inviting parents to sit in on a typical music lesson.

Dance

There will usually be no problem when dancing is performed in a single-sex environment as a form of exercise, as long as rules of modesty are observed—however this is rarely practical in primary schools. Folk dances taught to single sex groups are also usually acceptable, although some parents—particularly of older pupils—may prefer their children to participate in an alternate form of sporting activity. As a general rule, forms of dance such as ballet, jazz, tango and disco dancing might be considered unacceptable if performed in a mixed environment, an issue most likely to affect pupils in secondary schools.

Drama

Drama or role-playing as an educational exercise is usually acceptable. However some Muslim parents may not want their children to take part in any drama that contradicts basic Islamic principles, e.g. performing in nativity plays or other dramatisations involving gods or figures from the Bible or Qur'an considered to be prophets. Reservations might also arise with performances that involve physical contact between boys and girls, or cross-dressing (i.e. boys performing as girls and vice versa). Again it should be stressed that there will be many Muslim pupils who will not want to be excluded from these activities.

Religious education and collective worship

The Education Reform Act of 1988 stipulates that each state school should provide a daily act of collective worship, the majority of which are to be “wholly or mainly of a broad Christian character.” These acts of worship need not only use material from the Christian tradition as long as they reflect the tradition of Christian beliefs.

The organisation of collective worship rests with the headteacher and governing body. Where there is a large multi-faith mix in the school, or a significant non-Christian presence, the school can apply to SACRE for a determination that lifts the requirement that worship be predominately Christian. In those schools where Muslim children are in a clear majority (majority does not necessarily have to involve the whole school, but may be a class or section of the school) schools can also apply for a determination that the daily act of collective worship be Muslim.

It should be noted that if the school has not applied for a determination and the numbers of Muslim children are too few to warrant an application for Muslim collective worship, concerned parents might wish to arrange with the headteacher to send in a suitably competent person to conduct Islamic collective worship. In such a case neither the school nor LA would be responsible for the cost of such provision, which would have to be covered by the local Muslim community.

Although it is never the preferred solution, all parents have the right to withdraw their children from both religious education (RE) and collective worship. If a parent asks for their child to be wholly or partly excused from attending any RE or collective worship at the school the school must comply unless the request is withdrawn. Good practice however is to use gentle persuasion to point out the benefits of religious education/collective worship which exposes children to a variety of spiritual viewpoints, thus preparing them for life in our modern multicultural society.

A school remains responsible for the supervision of any child withdrawn from RE or collective worship, unless the child is lawfully receiving RE, or taking part in collective worship elsewhere.

Parents do not need to explain their reasons for seeking withdrawal. The DfES recommends that to avoid misunderstanding, a head teacher may wish to clarify with any parent wanting to withdraw:

- the religious issues about which the parent would object their child being taught
- the practical implications of withdrawal
- the circumstances in which it would be reasonable to accommodate parents wishes
- if a parent will require any advanced notice of such issue in the future and if so, how much

The right of withdrawal was established in the Education Act 1944, re-enacted in the Education Reform Act 1988 s9 (3). It should be pointed out that the four mosques in Ealing all provide classes for students, *but that these take place either at the weekend or after school hours*. There is no reason a Muslim child need be absent from class for Islamic instruction during normal school hours.

Dress requirements

Islamic dress code

Muslims are expected to adhere to Islamic dress codes from the time they reach puberty, which in general requires them to dress modestly. In practice this means that clothing should be neither transparent nor tight fitting; in addition, boys are explicitly required to be covered from navel to knee, whereas post-pubertal girls are expected to only expose their face and hands in public.

School uniforms

As long as Muslim girls are allowed to cover their hair (e.g. with a *hijab* or headscarf) and to wear a long-sleeved shirt and trousers—or, alternatively, a long, loose version of the school skirt—there should be no problem complying with school uniform requirements. It is recognised that, to ensure that their safety is not endangered, girls wearing the *hijab* are required to have it suitably secured for work in laboratories, domestic science classes or other relevant situations. In practice, this would involve tucking such items inside lab coats, or, in the case of PE, tucking loose ends inside tops to ensure there is no risk of them getting caught inside sports equipment or accidentally pulled in any way. For the same reason, pupils should be discouraged from wearing the type of hijab that reaches the waist; it should be tactfully pointed out that they are already ensuring their arms are covered by wearing long-sleeved shirts, and that the long hijabs are too much of a safety risk.

The education secretary Alan Johnson announced 20 March 2007 that under a new uniform policy headteachers have the right to ban the wearing of the *niqab*—or full-face veil—on the grounds of “safety, security and education”. The policy says that efforts must be made to accommodate religious clothing, but stresses the importance of teachers and pupils being able to make eye contact.

Sportswear

Although many schools also have a uniform for sporting activities, the most suitable sportswear for Muslim boys and girls is a tracksuit; in particular, Muslim girls should not be required to wear short tennis or netball style skirts.

Sporting facilities

Communal showering is an area that will be resisted by many Muslim children. Therefore in the absence of individual shower cubicles, those Muslim children who are worried about this should be allowed to shower when they go home or to wash themselves by other means.

Swimming facilities in the borough do not allow girls to wear full leotards and leggings in the pool for health and safety reasons, however swimming costumes with legs and sleeves made of lycra are allowed. Although individual shower facilities are not available, Muslim children could be allowed to shower in their swimming costume if necessary.

Segregated swimming is not practicable, nor is it always possible to ensure a female attendant during swim classes, and parents should not have their expectations raised in this regard. However good practice would be to compromise on the issue of swimming during Ramadan,

when those fasting might wish to abstain due to the danger of swallowing water; as pools in Ealing do not allow students to observe from the sidelines, in practice this means that fasting pupils will have to remain at school.

Dormers Wells Leisure Centre sells a version of full-length lycra swimwear. Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL) currently manages Ealing’s pools and they are arranging to have the ‘burkini’ available for sale at all of the facilities. Burkinis can also be ordered on-line from a variety of sources (see www.modestclothes.com)

Individual changing cubicles are available as follows:

| Pool | Available changing facilities |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Acton Swimming Baths</i> Salisbury Street Acton W3 8NW Tel: 020 8992 8877 Email: neil.troutman@gll.org</p> | <p>There are no group changing rooms. Both the small and large pools have individual changing cubicles, 27-29 for each pool.</p> |
| <p><i>Dormers Wells Leisure Centre</i> Dormers Wells End Southall UB1 3HX Tel: 020 8571 7207 Email: neil.troutman@gll.org</p> | <p>The changing facilities at Dormers Wells Leisure Centre have recently been refurbished. There are now two large group-changing rooms for boys and girls, with about 10 individual cubicles in each.</p> |
| <p><i>Gurnell Leisure Centre</i> Ruislip Road East Ealing W13 0AL Tel: 020 8998 3241 Email: marie.o'loughlin@gll.org</p> | <p>The changing rooms in Gurnell are due for refurbishment in September 2007. At present there are 10-12 individual cubicles in the women’s changing room, but none in the men’s changing room. If schools want their pupils to have access to the individual cubicles they should arrange this with the school co-ordinator, Valerie Ramsay (020 8998 3241).</p> |
| <p><i>Northolt Swimarama</i> Eastcote Lane North Northolt Middlesex UB5 4AB Tel: 020 8422 1176 Email: keely.shelton@gll.org</p> | <p>There are four large group-changing rooms, two for males and two for females. There are twenty individual cubicles in the upstairs female changing room, but in none of the others. The Northolt pool will be entirely rebuilt in October 2007, and the initial plans include provision for individual cubicles.</p> |

Religious symbols and jewellery

Health and safety concerns regarding religious jewellery are similar to those related to the *hijab*, although, as evidenced by the recent case of a Roman Catholic girl forbidden to wear the crucifix, these are not restricted to Muslim pupils. Some Muslim children wear Qur’anic verses around the neck, upper arm or pinned inside clothes, either wrapped in cloth or contained in lockets worn on a chain. As with the Christian cross or crucifix, the Hindu Aum symbol, or the small symbolic kirpan worn on a chain by some Sikh pupils, safety issues can be addressed and accidents avoided by taping the jewellery to the skin, rather than forcing the child to remove the item.

Attendance

The 1996 Education Act asserts that:

The child shall not be taken to have failed to attend regularly at the school by reason of his absence from the school...on any day exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which his parent belongs. (Chapter 56, 444 subsection 3)

Day absences for religious observation are allowed and are marked as an authorised absence. It is sometimes the case that both Eids will fall within the school term. There are three occasional days available to schools during the year, and in order to reduce the loss of curriculum delivery we encourage school management to plan the use of these days to coincide with major religious festivals, particularly where there are large Hindu, Sikh and Muslim pupil populations. This also reduces the impact on the individual and overall school attendance rates, which are target led. Attainment at primary school is very strongly correlated with the level of attendance; the correlation is also significant at secondary level, but slightly less so.

However occasional days have to be planned some time in advance and while predicting Eid is possible, setting the correct occasional days leave for Eid is often difficult. Schools are also concerned by extended time taken off for Eid, which compounds missed curriculum and a child's attendance rate. Conversations with leaders of different nationality groups within the Muslim community seem to indicate that issues of cultural significance as well as religious obligation determine how much time is taken off from school. The school attendance service encourage Muslim pupils to take no more than one day off during each of the Eid festivals, a position which has the support of local religious leaders.

Shi'a Muslim pupils will most certainly take the day off school for processions and other activities during the festival of Ashura, which occurs on the 10th day of the month of Muharram; they are also likely to be tired from evenings studying at the mosque, an activity which increases in intensity from the beginning of Muharram until the Ashura festival.

Shi'a pupils that are members of the Dawoodi Bohra sect (the Northolt mosque in Rowdell Road) are also expected to observe special sermons during the first ten days of Muharram. As regards children leaving school for these sermons, it is recommended that schools allow them to do so if it coincides with their lunch break, or if it means only a minimal absence at the start of the day. Again it is the parents' responsibility to ensure that the child returns back to school afterwards.

For more information about these religious holidays see page 18.

School meals

Muslims are allowed to eat meat as long as it is halal, i.e. slaughtered in a specific way. They are prohibited from eating pork products (i.e. sausages, bacon, pork, ham or food containing gelatine derived from pigs) or food prepared with alcohol. Another area of concern is where utensils used in the preparation of non-halal items are also used in the preparation of food to be served to Muslim pupils.

Acceptable meals for Muslim pupils include: vegetarian options, seafood and those prepared with halal red meat and chicken. Harrison Catering Service, used by many of Ealing schools, can provide a halal option if requested, although this is at extra cost to the school. As providing halal options can be problematic (e.g. Sikh pupils will not eat halal meat), it is good practice for schools with a significant population of Muslim pupils to ensure options that are not *haram* ('forbidden'), e.g. fish and vegetarian items.

During Ramadan, schools are encouraged to provide a packed lunch for those of their Muslim pupils who are entitled to free school meals (FSM) and who are participating in the fast. These lunches can be taken home by the pupil to eat after sundown.

It is also worth mentioning here that it is good practice for schools and parent teachers associations to consider the appropriateness of certain social events, such as wine and cheese evenings or fashion shows that might inadvertently exclude parents/carers from some faith or cultural groups. Alcohol is prohibited within Islam, and its presence at a function may make it impossible for some parents/carers to attend.

Prayer (salah)

Of the five pillars of the Islamic faith, the most likely to impinge on school life are the obligatory five daily prayers and the dawn to sunset fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

| The five daily prayers | |
|------------------------|--|
| Fajr | Before sunrise |
| Zuhr | Between sun reaching its full height and mid-afternoon |
| Asr | Between mid-afternoon and sunset |
| Maghrib | Just after sunset |
| Eesha | Late evening |

Each of the five daily prayers (apart from the Friday congregational prayer) can be completed within a space of ten minutes. During summer periods, the only prayer likely to fall during school hours is Zuhr, whereas during the winter months Zuhr, Asr and Maghrib are all likely to occur during school hours. If it is not possible to perform the prayers at the appointed time schools should make other periods available, e.g. 10 minutes either at the beginning or the end of the lunch break. Muslim children are asked to perform *salah* from the age of seven, although they are not *required* to do so before puberty.

Good practice would involve providing a clean room or quiet area (e.g. part of the school library) where students could perform their prayers. It is recommended that all staff members be briefed regarding the arrangements, and that schools seek advice and support from the local Muslim community (e.g. in the absence of available staff, a Muslim parent might provide any necessary supervision). It would also be helpful if individual schools knew the direction of the *qiblah*, i.e. the direction of prayer: when praying in England, Makkah is found in a south-easterly direction, which can easily be determined using a simple compass.

Ablution (wudu)

Muslims are required to wash their face, arms, forehead and feet before praying: a washbasin connected to running water would suffice for this purpose.

Friday congregational prayer (Jumu'ah)

It is considered obligatory for post-adolescent boys—and recommended for girls of the same age—to participate in communal prayer at midday on Friday. Under the terms of the 1988 Education Reform Act, children are allowed to leave school premises to receive religious education, therefore schools should honour a parent's written request to take their child to the mosque for part of the afternoon. Jumu'ah lasts for approximately thirty minutes, so children may be able to use part of their lunch hour to attend. Parents have the responsibility of ensuring that their children return to school following these prayers.

It is also suggested that schools with significant Muslim populations should not schedule any important classes or activities during the time of the congregational prayer. Again it is worth noting that although not all Muslim pupils will want to attend Jumu'ah, the numbers that do are likely to increase during Ramadan.

Ramadan and fasting (sawm)

As the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, the month of Ramadan begins 10 or 11 days earlier each year: in Britain this means that the hours of fasting vary from year to year. However the intention is not to avoid aspects of everyday life, but rather to cope under a set of conditions that increase the importance of the spiritual dimension. It is impossible to predict the actual moment of the sighting of the new moon that initiates the fast, but the approximate start date can be determined in plenty of time to make appropriate arrangements.

Fasting (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of the faith, obligatory for all Muslims, male and female, once they attain the age of puberty; however many children will begin to fast before this age to progressively get accustomed to the fast.

The Arabic word *sawm* literally means ‘to abstain’, and during Ramadan most Muslims are expected to abstain completely from both food and liquid—including water—from dawn until sunset; in addition they are to refrain from petty wrong-doing or expressions of anger.

The Muslim Council of Britain has published some suggested ‘good practice’ guidance on their website, recommending that:

- 1) Schools have a written policy regarding the implications of Ramadan for Muslim pupils.
- 2) Schools offer Ramadan awareness training, with respect to those factors affecting pupils.
- 3) Schools recognise and celebrate the spirit and values of Ramadan through collective worship or assembly themes.
- 4) In recognition of a possible increase in numbers of pupils participating in the daily prayers, facilities for prayer are adjusted accordingly.
- 5) Adequate arrangements are in place to supervise children during the lunch hour.
- 6) Internal examinations are, whenever possible, not scheduled during Ramadan.
- 7) Schools try to avoid scheduling sex and relationship education and swimming during Ramadan.
- 8) Fasting children are allowed to withdraw from over-demanding physical exercise, in order to prevent dehydration.
- 9) If possible, the school avoids holding parents’ meetings in the evening during the month of Ramadan.

Some of the ways Ramadan might impinge on school life:

- Many Muslims who are less than wholly observant at other times will wish to fulfil duties of prayer and fasting during this month, therefore it might be wise not to schedule any outings or after-school events during Ramadan. Children often spend considerable time in the evening praying and studying the Qur’an, so schools should develop a clear policy as regards homework missed during the period.
- Although schools often make prayer facilities available to pupils, school cloakrooms are far from ideal places for *wudu* (pre-prayer ablutions) and therefore pupils may request to return home—or to go to the mosque if there is one close by the school—at lunchtime.
- Post-adolescent boys may wish to observe the requirement that they participate in communal prayers—including the hearing of a sermon—on Fridays.

- During Ramadan most observant Muslims will not eat or drink during the hours of light. Traditionally a small meal is taken after the evening prayer each day, to be followed by a larger meal. A third, *suhur* (predawn meal), is taken in the early morning before the fast begins. This unusual pattern of meals can have an effect on pupils' ability to get homework done and on their sleep patterns, leaving them tired during the school day—although this is much less extreme when the fast is in winter than when it occurs in the longer days of summer.
- Normal evening and morning prayers are extended in a way that may also impinge on homework and sleep patterns. Intensive study of the Qur'an is also practiced during Ramadan and this will involve further time constraints on Muslim pupils.
- Children begin fasting gradually, first half a day, then several days until they grow old enough to observe the whole fast. Many children are anxious to be able to fast and primary school children often will do so at their own insistence and not because their parents require it.
- There are reasons why a person may legitimately not be fasting during Ramadan. The most likely as regards pupils in school are ill-health or menstruation, therefore what is meant as a friendly enquiry on the part of a teacher—as to why a pupil is not fasting—can be a source of embarrassment. Oral medication is not permitted during the hours of fasting, however pupils needing regular medication during these hours are normally exempted from the fast.
- When days of fasting are missed during Ramadan they need to be made up thereafter. In principle, pupils could wait until the next school holiday to do this. However some seem to want to get it over with as soon as possible, so there may be pupils fasting during the weeks immediately after Eid-ul-Fitr (the three day festival that marks the end of Ramadan).
- One of the last ten nights of Ramadan is Laylat al-Qadr (the 'Night of Power'), the holiest night in the Islamic calendar. It is usually celebrated on the 27th day of Ramadan and many Muslims spend the night praying and studying the Qur'an at the mosque. Pupils attending such sessions will find it hard the following day to give their schoolwork the normal amount of attention.

It should not be forgotten that it is part of the religious discipline of Ramadan that fasting takes place in the presence of 'business as usual': that it is not intended to take Muslims out of the every day world, but rather to bring a heightened spiritual awareness into their world. Although it is good practice for schools to make certain allowances and special arrangements (e.g. for prayer) during Ramadan, it is also an opportunity for the whole school to honour spiritual discipline and consider similar examples from other world faiths.

As mentioned previously, although fasting for the entire month does not become obligatory until a child has reached the age of puberty, it is common for children to begin to fast before this age. This may prove of concern for primary schools, for health and safety reasons. An example of a letter that schools might wish to adapt appropriately and send out to Muslim parents prior to Ramadan can be found on the next page.

To all Muslim parents of children in Y5 and Y6

Dear Parents,

Ramadan

I am aware that you and your family are preparing next week to celebrate Ramadan, the month of fasting, and therefore am writing to clarify our arrangements. If you feel that your child is able to fast and you would like them to do so, we can arrange for them to sit quietly and reflect on their fast in the library from 12.20 - 12.45 pm. After 12.45 they will be able to join their friends in the playground, as long as they conserve their energy by taking part in less boisterous activities.

Please complete and return the form below to your child's class teacher before Monday. For health and safety reasons no child will be allowed to fast unless we have their parent's written consent.

Our Eid assembly, taken by Year 5, will be on [date] at [time]. We do hope you will be able to join us.

Yours sincerely,

=====

Name of Child

| <u>PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ON EACH LINE</u> | Yes | No |
|---|------------|-----------|
| My child is not yet ready to fast at school during Ramadan | | |
| My child will fast in school on the following days during Ramadan (Please note which days here): | | |
| My child will fast every day at school during Ramadan | | |
| If your child is taken ill at school or faints due to fasting would you like us to call you? | | |
| If your child is taken ill at school or faints due to fasting would you like us to give them food? | | |

Signed Parent / guardian

Date

To be returned to the class teacher by [date].

Significant Muslim religious days

The following are days on which Muslim pupils are likely to request permission to be absent from school in part or entirely.

Eid-ul-Fitr

Eid is an Arabic word meaning a recurring event, and in Islam it denotes the religious festivals. *Fitr* means “to break” and this particular festival signals the breaking of the fasting period of Ramadan. This Eid is known as the ‘small’ festival, *al-Eid al Saghir*, as it lasts only three days compared with the four days of *Eid-ul-Adha*, the festival of sacrifice.

For a Muslim, it is a day of thanksgiving. Fasting is forbidden and in the morning, Muslims are encouraged to enjoy a sweet snack such as dates. Other practices include bathing and wearing one’s best or new clothes. Thanks to Allah are expressed by distributing alms among the poor and needy and offering special prayers. On this day, gifts are also given to children and loved ones, but it is also a time of forgiveness, and for making amends.

Eid-ul-Adha

The festival of Eid-ul-Adha, also known as the Festival of Sacrifice, is observed at the end of the *hajj* or yearly pilgrimage to Makkah approximately two months and ten days after the end of Ramadan. The village of Mina, a few miles from Makkah, is the site of three pillars that are stoned in a symbolic rejection of the devil, one of the rituals of the *hajj*. This village also plays host to scores of butchers who arrange for the halal slaughter of the sacrificial animals on the pilgrims’ behalf. However it is celebrated by all Muslims, not only those performing the *hajj*, and each Muslim uses the occasion to remind themselves of their own submission to Allah, and their willingness to sacrifice.

On both of the above Eids, Muslims are required to attend the mosque in the morning for the Eid prayer, and the days are meant to be times of relaxation, celebration and for visiting friends and relations.

Ashura

The festival of Ashura, which takes place during the month of Muharram, is observed by both Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, but in different contexts. The Sunni community fast on this day, seeing it as an occasion to remember several events, including Nuh (Noah) leaving the Ark, and Allah saving Musa (Moses) from the Egyptians.

Shi’a, the only major schism in Islam, has a history nearly as long as the religion itself. According to Shi’a historians it began shortly after the death of Muhammad, when the Caliphate—the secular leadership of Islam—was passed to the prophet’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr, rather than to ‘Ali, Muhammad’s chosen successor. (Note: Western and Sunni historians date Shi’ism to the death of Husayn (680 CE)—son of ‘Ali and Fatima, grandson of Muhammad—in the battle of Karbala on the banks of the river Euphrates.) For the Shi’a community, Ashura is held to be the most significant day of the forty-day mourning period for Husayn during the month of Muharram. The battle of Karbala is re-enacted and believers hold processions as a communal expression of grief.

Shi'a pupils that are members of the Dawoodi Bohra sect (the Northolt mosque) are expected to observe special sermons during the first ten days of Muharram. As regards children leaving school for these sermons, it is recommended that schools allow them to do so if it coincides with their lunch break, or if it means only a minimal absence at the start of the day. Again it is the parents' responsibility to ensure that the child returns back to school afterwards.

Eid al-Ghadeer

Eid al-Ghadeer is the day when Shi'ite Muslims celebrate the appointment of Imam Ali as the first leader and spiritual guide of the Shi'a branch of Islam. It occurs each year eight days after Eid al-Adha. Shi'a students would not expect to be absent from school to attend the mosque, but schools might like to take the opportunity on this day to allow them to speak about their faith.

School outings

There is no valid religious reason preventing Muslim students from taking part in educational visits to other places of worship such as churches, synagogues, temples or gurdwaras. Parents of pupils of any religion might object to such visits, however every effort should be made to reassure them by making them aware of the educational rewards of such exposure.

At secondary school level it is not advisable to organise class outings on a Friday, which will inevitably conflict with attendance at the congregational prayers, an observance that is expected of post-adolescent boys. It is also not advisable to organise outings during the month of Ramadan, unless adequate facilities for prayer can be ensured.

Trips that involve overnight stays are permissible as long as the following is observed:

- A detailed explanation of the objectives behind the trip and the format it will take, and a recognition that Muslims might find some venues unacceptable (e.g. brewery).
- Availability of segregated washing and sleeping facilities for boys and girls.
- Availability of non-haram food, e.g. vegetarian or seafood alternatives.
- Availability of suitable facilities for prayer.
- Provision of a compass to determine the Qiblah.
- There is adequate adult supervision.
- Teachers are aware that most Muslim parents would not find attendance at a disco acceptable.

Background information

There are more than a thousand million Muslims in the world and each is an individual with his or her own unique and personal view of the world. Some commonalities may exist on the basis of nationality, age, education and allegiance to specific schools of law or movements within Islam, but we should beware making generalisations about Islam and Muslims. It may however be worth thinking in terms of distinctively Islamic worldviews that are very different from both secular western ways of seeing things and religious worldviews that are possibly more familiar to some of us.

There are considerable gaps between what Muslims generally regard as irrefutable factual statements about the prophet Muhammad, the provenance of the Qur'an, and the history of Islam, and the view of secular western scholars concerning the same matters.

Allah The preferred name for God in Islam. It has no plural form and implies neither masculine nor feminine characteristics.

Islam A word meaning 'surrender' or 'reconciliation', 'Islam' derives from *salm*, which means 'peace' or 'salvation.' Muslims believe that, as the true religion of Allah, all creatures are born Muslims, but that some are led astray, e.g. by false teaching.

Muhammad, the Messenger of God Traditional dates for Muhammad's life are from 570 to 632 CE. As is the case with other prophets recognised by Muslims, they will never say or write Muhammad's name without adding "*Salla-llahu alaihi was sallam,*" which means "peace and blessings of Allah be upon him". However "Peace be upon him" seems to have become an acceptable English format, abbreviated in writing to *pbuh*. It should be pointed out that some Muslims find it offensive when non-Muslims use that expression.

Sunni The largest denomination of Islam. The word comes from *sunnah*, which means the words and actions or example of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunni Islam is the branch that accepted the caliphate or leadership of Abu Bakr following the death of Muhammad.

Shi'a The second largest denomination of Islam. The word is a short form of an Arabic phrase that means "followers of Ali." Shi'a Muslims believe that the descendents from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law Ali were the best source of knowledge of Muhammad's *sunnah* (traditions). They believe that Ali was appointed successor by Muhammad's direct order and that he was therefore the rightful leader of the Muslims, as opposed to the caliphate recognized by Sunni Muslims. This difference has shaped Shi'a views on sections of the Qur'an, the *hadith* (traditions) and other areas of Islam. For instance, the collection of hadith venerated by Shi'a Muslims is centred around narrations by members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (direct descendants of Muhammad), while some hadith accepted by Sunni Muslims are not recognised. Ali was the third successor to Abu Bakr and, for the Shi'a, the first divinely sanctioned *imam*. The seminal event in Shi'a history is the martyrdom in 680 CE of Ali's son Hussein, who led an uprising against the man they considered the 'illegitimate' caliph. For the Shia, Hussein came to symbolize resistance to tyranny.

Ahmadiyya *Ahmadis* (Urdu, *Ahmadiyya*) is the collective name given to the two distinct groups—the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement—comprised of followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), a Muslim from the Punjab who proclaimed himself *Mujaddid* (reformer/renewer), asserting that he fulfilled Christian and Islamic prophecies regarding a promised Messiah (in Islam, the Mahdi). Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad termed his movement the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat (*jamaat*, ‘community’). The original Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat split into two separate groups after his death, known respectively as the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement for the propagation of Islam. These groups vary in their interpretations of Ahmad’s teachings and claims; they also differ as regards who should have succeeded Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and how such a successor should be chosen.

The Ahmadi version of Islam has been controversial to mainstream Muslims since its birth. Most Muslims have not accepted Mirza Ghulam Ahmad’s claims and some do not consider Ahmadis to be Muslims at all, citing, in particular, their view on the finality of Muhammad, ascension and return of Jesus⁶, and concept of jihad⁷. The Ahmadis however argue that their beliefs *are* in accordance with Islam, and use arguments to support them from the Qur’an, Hadith and opinion of Islamic jurists.

Dawoodi Bohras The Dawoodi (alternatively ‘Daudi’) Bohras are a (mainly) Gujarati-speaking Shi’a Muslim sect that traces its ancestry to the Shi’a sect known as the Ismailis. Their allegiance is to the leadership of the 52nd Dai, or leader of the sect, Dr Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin. The Dawoodi Bohras are a very closely-knit community who seek advice from the Dai on spiritual and temporal matters. They are encouraged to educate themselves in both religious and secular knowledge, and believe that the education of women is equally important to that of men. Today there are approximately one million Dawoodi Bohras, the majority residing in India and Pakistan; however there is also a significant diaspora across the world, and the largest Dawoodi Bohra mosque in Europe is in Northolt.

Islamic law Islam does not separate religious and secular spheres of life, so Islamic law extends to matters that many non-Muslims regard of little importance, e.g. which hand one uses for eating (the right). Islamic law (*Sharia*) teaches that all human actions fall into categories: *fard*—obligatory (*wajib*—obligatory by extrapolation); *mustahabb* or *mandub*—not obligatory but recommended; *mubah*—neutral or permitted; *makruh*—not forbidden but discouraged; and *haram*—forbidden.

The two major legal sources of jurisprudence in Islam are the Qur’an and the *Sun’nah*, which are acts and statements of the Prophet found in collections known as *Hadith*. Further legal rulings have been derived from the Qur’an and *Sun’nah* by *qiyaas* (‘analogy’). Where nothing relevant about a situation can be found in the Qur’an and *Sun’nah*, Muslims look to *ijma*, the consensus of the community (*ummah*) and to *ijtihad* (‘striving’), which is the application of basic principles to specific cases.

⁶ They believe that, contrary to mainstream Islamic belief, Jesus was crucified, but that he survived the cross and was later revived in the tomb. He is said to have gone to Kashmir in search of the lost tribes of Israel, where he eventually died of old age

⁷ Ahmadis believe that *jihad* can only be used to protect against extreme religious persecution, and that historically Muslims have used *jihad* as a tool for political opportunism.

There are four *madhahib* (singular *madhahab*) or schools of law in Sunni Islam; Shi'a Muslims have their own, which account for some of the differences. Individual Islamic groups differ as to which community is looked to for consensus (*ijma*). In addition Sunni Muslims and some Shi'a believe that the age of *ijtihad* (original thought) is over, whereas to the majority in the Shi'a community it is of great contemporary importance. As with all religions, there are believers who are more or less devout and more or less knowledgeable; whereas some Muslims living in western societies will make compromises that are wholly unacceptable to others.

It is a principle of Islamic law that anything that leads to that which is forbidden (*haram*) is itself forbidden. Some Muslim parents may believe that doing music and dance in primary school will only lead to healthy physical and mental development, but there are likely to be others who might fear that it will lead to an enthusiasm for rock music and discos later in life. Another principal of Islamic law is that the intention in doing or refraining from something is very important and can sometimes be the decisive factor as to whether something is allowed or forbidden. However, even good intentions cannot justify that which is explicitly forbidden.

Acknowledgements, resources and references

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Resources for teaching Islam

The Muslim Council of Britain has produced an excellent resource pack for teaching Islam at primary school level. The pack is loaded with books, posters, videos, religious artefacts and other teaching materials. They cost £250 each, and can be ordered from MCBDirect, The Muslim Council of Britain, P O Box 57330, London E1 2WJ (0845 2626786). A pack with resources for secondary schools is in development. For further details or to order a pack, contact: booksforschools@mcb.org.uk

General references

A brief introduction to Islam, notes from a school professional development session presented by Roger Butler in Ealing.

Towards greater understanding: meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools, published by the Muslim Council of Britain and available to download from their website (www.mcb.org.uk)

Understanding the Educational Needs of Muslim Pupils, Muslim Welfare House Trust, www.mwht.org.uk.

Issues related to faith, and issues related to faith and culture, guidance produced by Bexley SACRE, (http://www.bexley.gov.uk/service/education/combating_racism/pdfs/appendix_e.pdf)

Official guidelines on meeting the religious and cultural needs of Muslim children, Birmingham LEA, (http://www.islamfortoday.com/birmingham_lea.htm)