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RE Today, 2008, 26(1)

Are you sitting (too) comfortably?

By Mark Plater, Bishop Grosseteste University

I wonder what excuse your school gives for not teaching about Hallowe'en? Is it that teachers don't think it an appropriate topic for study with children? Or perhaps you all believe that the LEA doesn't allow teaching on the topic? Are you concerned that parents would complain? Or would you argue that it just doesn't fit with the various requirements of the National Curriculum?

All of the above scored highly on a questionnaire completed by teachers in the 1990s, and I doubt that the results would be much different today. But all of them are just excuses:

- Since most children celebrate Hallowe'en in some form or another, isn't it a most obvious topic to include in the curriculum?
- Is there a single LEA which proscribes teaching about Hallowe'en? I am not aware of any, although several have in the past warned that schools should do so with sensitivity.
- Don't parents complain about a whole range of aspects of school life- but we don't usually let this result in outright rejection of the idea?
- Hallowe'en doesn't fit in with the National Curriculum?... I don't think I'll even bother to go down that route!

The fact is, that for most of us, we are very ambivalent about the festival: yes, maybe we enjoyed it ourselves when younger, and, yes, we recognise that it has become part & parcel of our annual British calendar. But it doesn't sit comfortably with the rest of what we teach in schools: wandering unaccompanied in the streets at night, knocking on strangers' doors to demand treats, threatening unpleasant consequences for the in-compliant is not the traditional assembly message we offer...

So, what are we to make of this strange festival, a hybrid blend of ancient Celtic rites and modern Americanised consumerism? Some have described it as a necessary ritual safety-valve on the pressure cooker of a highly contained and controlled segment of the population, the one day in the year when children are given the upper hand. Others see it as a necessary recognition of the dark side, a passing acknowledgement of strange and malevolent forces which modern Britains prefer to circumvent- except perhaps in popular children's literature. But whatever its cultural function, it is clearly here to stay: like America, where, commercially, it is only second to Christmas, the growth in popular participation and the explosion of seasonal sales in the high street, heralds the power of modern advertising and contemporary consumerism. Perhaps it is prudent to channel this enthusiasm and success into focussed activity in the classroom.

Any casting glance at curriculum materials from the USA and Canada indicates the wealth and potential of Hallowe'en for classroom activities. On the whole however, these do not offer ideas for exploring the religious and philosophical issues raised by the festival. Activities abound for PE, Maths, creative writing, music, arts, crafts and drama, but there is lots more from a British context which could be considered, moral, social, historical, geographical questions: How do various members of society feel about Hallowe'en? How has its celebration changed over the years? What geographical varieties in practice have there been? –the list could go on.

But I'm more interested in the deeper issues which Hallowe'en poses: questions about fear, death, darkness, mystery, psychic phenomena, dreams, premonitions, those issues which were historically inherent within the traditional practices associated with the festival. I'd be surprised if the average primary classroom practitioner was actively exploring all such issues with her children, but I'd like to think that she was at least sensitively raising and exploring the kinds of questions which were paramount in the minds and experiences of the children in her care.