Muslim Mental Health in Schools

The First Step

MUSLIM MIND COLLABORATIVE

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Source: https://cmrubinworld.medium.com/

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Introduction

While the education sector, rightly, points out the unrealistic expectations and pressures it is under to act as a panacea for all of society's problems, it is also cognisant of the duty and need for a better understanding of, and more bespoke approaches to, the one in twelve children in its care who are of Muslim-heritage.

Studies show transmission of faith and values is higher amongst Muslim families – and latest census data evidences this growing number of young British Muslims, with Islam being the second largest faith group, with the youngest age profile, in the UK. This all pointing to an increasing number of Muslim children and young people with a strong sense of religious identity, holding faith-driven values, in British schools. While this is often used as a tool to whip up moral panic, and existential fear, it is actually cause for celebration, hope and of course opportunity. Coupled with the demographic layout of Muslims, in inner city conurbations, and the implications this has on work-force profile, it is clear that Muslims are integral to the social and economic prosperity of the country. This is in addition to all that we know about meaningful inclusion and its positive impact on social cohesion and individual and collective prosperity. In short, the 'Muslim Problem' that we hear about amongst some factions of the media is in fact a Muslim opportunity; one with wide-reaching and exciting benefits. And schools form the first port of call in doing justice to this burgeoning potential.

Muslim Mind Collaborative, a collective of organisations working to better Muslim mental health, embarked on an ambitious project to take that first step of working with schools to look at how young Muslims are supported in the British education system. Studies show that as well as the structural disadvantages Muslims face – with half of Muslim families living in poverty in the UK – for young people in particular whose sense of identity, belonging and mental well-being is both delicate and evolving, stigmatisation is a significant contributory factor to their mental health. This is pertinent to Muslim children and young people in particular, as they are uniquely navigating their youth against a backdrop of an escalating media climate of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment. We also know that mental well-being is critical to academic potential, as well as other factors that impact educational achievement such as behaviour.

This first step includes a toolkit which looks at improving faith sensitivity and cultural awareness in British schools to help alleviate some of those stigmatising pressures mentioned above. This toolkit is both adaptable and dynamic enough for schools to use in a way that suits them and their communities, including alongside universal tools to better support mental well-being of all pupils.

Source: https://parentsfordiversity.com

Source: https://lens.monash.edu/

Our resources work to present the lived experience of young Muslims to better educate school staff, leaders and fellow pupils, as well as challenge the implicit prejudices and biases that we all posses as imperfect humans, living in the media environment that we do. This will help to create meanginfully inclusive school spaces which erradicate those disadvantages which put minority students on a back foot. Unconscious bias means many schools will often see Muslim families' choices as less legitimate and worthy of attention – a trend which can only be exacerbated by the lack of diversity in teaching more generally – and which does nothing to develop trust and understanding between the trinity of school, home and child that we know is so integral to the prosperity of all. Cultivating a sense of belonging for Muslim children is what grants them a sense of ownership of their education, a stake in their educational environment and better allows them to develop a sense of agency and confidence in their life path. For schools, understanding how faith acts as a lever, motivator and source of inspiration to these children and young people can only positively contribute to schools' aims of improving life-chances and creating meaningful impact.

When a child's whole self is valued, and when those differences are understood and acknowledged in meaningful ways, that means children can apply the same discipline and passion they may to their faith, to areas of their wider personal development. In order to benefit and see the whole child – schools must demonstrate to that child that they value and acknowledge their wholeness.

This report presents some of the contextual factors relating to British Muslims in British schools, as well as some of the rich sentiment, learning and data we have unearthed during the course of this project through our work and dialogue with schools, young Muslims and their families. We hope it will act as a further tool and guide to colleagues in the education sector, so they are able to better understand young Muslims, and create the kind of environments where those children and young people, and their wider communities, can thrive.

1. The Problem
A Perfect Storm of Factors

Source: Freepik

For years, schools have been warning of a mental health epidemic that government, and some in the non-government sectors, are only just catching sight of. Analysis done by mental health charity Place2be found that **one in six**, or up to five children in every classroom, have a probable mental disorder.[1] A figure that has been exacerbated by the well-documented impact of the pandemic. While this is part of a broader trend in increasing mental health issues prevalent within the population at large, both the intensity of the problem, and it's possible implications, mean that mental well-being in schools is an issue of national urgency. While many, rightly, point out the grave cost of not intervening early enough, both to the individual and society – with 50% of mental health problems established by age 14 [2], links between poor mental health in childhood and risk of exclusion,[3] depression, crime, smoking and loss of earnings and employment in later life,[4] there is also a narrative of hope and opportunity when looking at the potential benefits of early intervention and school-focused strategies. Better mental well-being is linked to greater educational engagement and academic achievement. Schools can benefit from prevention of, and early intervention in, mental health problems in children and young people through improved attainment, attendance, reductions in behavioural problems, in addition to happier, more confident and resilient children and young people.[5] With trends in education and pedagogy for a whole-school approach with a whole-child focus gaining policy momentum and focus, it is clear that we are moving towards a greater understanding of, and greater will to, improve the mental well-being of our citizens of tomorrow.

While the scale and severity of the problem can seem overwhelming, at this cross roads of action, where evidence, will and appetite for change is growing, one must not lose sight of the nuances contained within. The nuances in both how we asses and attempt to effectively tackle the snowballing situation in children and young people's mental health. This is particularly true of under-served, and oft-overlooked demographics in mental health, for whom those many nuances are most often ignored, sometimes despite their statistical significance.

1 Place2Be, Place2Be's one-to-one counselling service in UK primary schools: an updated cost-benefit analysis (June 2022)

2 Mental Health Foundation, Children and Young People: The Statistic. Available at: Children and young people: statistics | Mental Health Foundation Last Accessed 05 August 2023

3 Mental Health Foundation, Fact Sheet: Children and Young People's Mental Health. Available at: Fact sheet: Children and young people's mental health | Centre for Mental Health Last Accessed 05 August 2023

4 Gillian Paull and Xiaowei Xu, Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): The potential value for money of early education (November 2021)

5 Public Health England, Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing (September 2021)

Muslims are the second largest faith group in the UK, consisting of a growing 6.5% of the population. Significantly, Muslims are an increasingly diverse community, made up of a number of races, cultures and ethnicities, despite the frequent and erroneous conflation between South Asian culture and Islam. Over a ten year period, between 2001 and 2011, the South Asian share of British Muslims diminished by nearly 6%, with non-South Asian Muslims making up almost a third of the overall British Muslim population – with this figure likely to have increased over the succeeding decade. Due to their considerably young age profile – the lowest of all faith groups in the country – British Muslims make up a sizeable proportion of the school-aged population.[6] Analysis of the last census reveals that **Muslims make up one in twelve school aged children**[7] and early insight from the most recent figures from last year, suggest this number may have increased slightly. So we have an increasingly diverse, and growing, pool of young Muslims in British schools.

Muslims are the second largest faith group in the UK, consisting of a growing 6.5% of the population

Muslims make up one in twelve school aged children

The overlap between increased mental health problems in British schools, and a large percentage of those schools being home to Muslim children, is brought into sharper focus when we look at the data we do have concerning Muslim mental health – the scarcity of that data itself being very telling.

The structural disadvantage Muslims face, and the material impact of this, sees half of Muslim UK households living in poverty and deprivation compared to 18% of the general UK population.[8] As expected, Muslims also face worse outcomes in health and housing - 40% of the Muslim population of England reside in the most deprived fifth of local authority districts, a trend that appears to have worsened over the past ten years.[9] The data we are able to piece together, based on what little we have due to a lack of faith-sensitive data collection, suggests, unsurprisingly, that there is mental penalty to such disadvantage.

Mental health in the Muslim community appears to be more adversely impacted when compared to the general population, and evidence shows that treatment, and pathways to better mental well-being, are further out of reach for Muslim communities in the UK.

Source: https://parentsfordiversity.com

Studies point to higher levels of depression in the Muslim community, for example, which are more chronic in nature[10]. Research undertaken by Better Communities Business Network revealed that of those young people surveyed, 53.8% dealt with anxiety, 49.4% suffered from depression and 48.6% from stress. More alarming, nearly one in five young Muslims said they had harboured suicidal thoughts "many times", an almost equal number said they had done so "sometimes", 18%, and about a quarter said they had "occasionally" experienced suicidal thoughts, 24%.[11]

6 Office for National Statistics, Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021 (Released November 2022)

7 Citizens UK, The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All. Citizens Commission on Islam. Participation and Public Life, 2017

8 William Eichler, Around 50% of Muslim households living in poverty, LocalGov, 04 April 2022

9 Muslim Council of Britain, Census 2021 First Look (November 2021)

10 Andra Szabo and Chris Bridle, Assessment of Equality Impact, Communications and Engagement Report (October 2018)

11 Shenaz Bunglawala, Adriana Meha and Professor Aneta D Tunairu, Hidden Survivors (June 2021)

Racial make-up holds some relevance here too, as Muslims are overwhelmingly from black, minority ethnic and marginalised communities which we sadly know means an increased likelihood of some mental health conditions. Despite this, fewer people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds seek treatment, and overall they achieve poorer results.[12] Muslim youth in particular are also less likely to access CAMHS.[13]

Source: https://www.bbc.co.uk/

As well as the inequalities in wealth and living standards, research shows the cause for this increase in certain rates of mental illness in black and minority ethnic communities is due to bias, discrimination and racism, stigma about mental health, and that they are less likely to have mental health issues identified in the criminal justice system.[14]

In Muslim communities in particular, barriers identified also include misconceptions of mental health, difficulties in communicating with mental health service providers, disinclination in accessing mental health services due to discrimination, and the lack of culturally and faith specific services available.[15]

Research shows this lack of trust works both ways, with clinicians expressing an anxiety over working with Muslim families.[16] Clinicians often have difficulty appreciating faith as important to some Muslims. This mutual apprehension felt by both Muslims, and the mental health system, is exacerbated by a lack of faith-sensitivity training available to mental health professionals.

While these barriers to adequate mental health support for Muslim communities are being addressed by the civic and voluntary sector within the Muslim community – evident in the number of organisations and initiatives that exist to attempt to bridge that gap, there is little policy discussion or enactment at a national level to combat these issues in a more comprehensive, and effective way.

This perfect storm of unfortunate factors – with poorer mental health in schools, a disproportionately high number of children and young people in these schools of Muslim heritage, who are also both more likely to suffer from poorer mental health, and less likely to seek and receive appropriate treatment – means Muslim mental health in schools is a pertinent issue that impacts us all. This is particularly true given the breakdown of Muslims in inner city conurbations, their young age profile and the implications this has on the growth and prosperity of the UK's major cities, where wellbeing and workforce profile is inextricably linked to the size of the Muslim population.

12 Cabinet Office. Race Disparity Audit Summary Findings from the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website (March 2018).

13 [13] Su-En Kam and Nick Midgley, N. Exploring Clinical Judgement: How Do Child and Adolescent Mental Health Professionals Decide Whether a Young Person Needs Individual Psychotherapy? in Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry (January 2006)

14 Mental Health Foundation, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Available at: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/b/black-asian-and-minority-ethnicbame-communities (Accessed 05th August 2023)

15 Inspirited Minds, Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Support in the Muslim Community, Research Report (2021)

16 Rachel Abedi "How do clinicians respond to the faith identity of young Muslims in a London Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) clinical context? An interpretative phenomenological analysis" University of Essex Research Repository. (2021)

This Perfect Storm Of Unfortunate Factors

Mental health epidemic in schools

- Up to **five children** in every classroom suffer from probable **mental disorders**
- CAMHS faces greater demand and fewer resources
- Qualitative data shows that Muslim children in particularly aren't bringing their whole selves to school, and feel the need to **'censor' their Muslim identity**, with the inevitable cost this brings to their mental well being

Muslims make up a significant proportion of school aged children

- **1 in 12 school children in the UK are Muslims**
- In some areas such as Birmingham, some schools have a student body in which **over 80% is made up of Muslim children**
- The concentration of Muslims in the UK's major cities means Muslim mental health has economic significance – this is an issue that impacts us all

Help available and accessible to Muslims CYP comparably poorer

- SLT in schools **disproportionately undiverse** compared to the student population –there is less representation in the leadership of schools; this means Muslim pupil's lived experience is unlikely to be an active consideration
- Research shows Muslim CYP are less likely to seek and gain access to CAMHS
- Research also suggests CAMHS practitioners are anxious about working with Muslim families

Muslim mental health comparably poorer

- **External factors:** Structural disadvantages; **50% of UK Muslims living in poverty**, poorer outcomes in health and housing
- **Internal factors:** **Cultural taboos** concerning mental health, **less awareness** considering conditions and treatment

Being Young, British and Muslim

While we know the pressures young people face include a whole host of issues including societal expectations, social media, academic pressures and more, for young Muslims these pressures take on a different, and sometimes more sinister hue. The context of British Muslim mental health contains further complexity given the very nature of anti-Muslim prejudice, and the as yet legally undefined concept of Islamophobia, and how this plays itself out in public life, the media and other public institutions.

While research shows that transference of religion from one generation to the next, and religious nurture, are strong amongst Muslims,[17] it also tells us that – contrary to popular opinion - this does not impact young Muslim's feelings of Britishness, indeed one ICM poll found that 95% of respondents felt loyal to Britain.[18] Rather, it is feelings of reciprocity and acceptance from majority groups and fellow citizens that impacts young Muslim's sense of belonging according to an extensive piece of research into the subject.[19] It is this stigmatisation, and a worrying mix of increasing discrimination Muslims face, that BCBN's recent report Hidden Survivors also uncovers; "A strong sense of British identity can sit alongside a lived experience for minority groups where discrimination and prejudice, with its damaging prospects for equality of opportunity or equality as outcomes, can weaken their sense of belonging. The resulting 'marginalised' status, where the majority identity is inaccessible and minority group identity "devalued" can portend to problems for the psychological wellbeing of minority groups."[20]

This is particularly stark given the wider media narrative of Muslims as 'fifth pillars', harbouring ill intent, being culturally 'backwards', misogynistic or less accepting or open as others. **Negative stereotypes can also extend to Muslim families and ideas of legitimacy and agency – are Muslim parents' choices undermined or dismissed as less valid, important or admissable, and does majority culture deem Muslim values as less worthy on account of an inability to understand and**

Source: https://mekreview.com/

17 Jonathan Scourfield, J., Roz Warden, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Asma Khan, Sameh Otri. (2013). "Religious nurture in British Muslim families: Implications for social work." International Social Work

18 Lucinda Platt, Future Identities: Changing identities in the UK – the next 10 years. Government Office for Science (January 2013)

19 Sundas Ali Identities and Sense of Belonging of Muslims in Britain: Using Survey Data, Cognitive Survey Methodology, and In-Depth Interviews (April 2013).

20 Shenaz Bunglawala, Adriana Meha and Professor Aneta D Tunairu, Hidden Survivors, Better Communities Better Network (June 2021)

recognise its own cultural context? Put simply - is Muslim culture seen as foreign and other because we consider majority culture as universal and more 'right'? Implicit biases that devalue and subordinate Muslim culture are pervasive, and their effects far reaching - this is despite Islamophobia not being recognised as a form of racism.

Analysis of digital and print media over a period of twelve months found that 59% of all articles associated Muslims with negative behaviour. 37% of articles in right-leaning and religious publications were categorised with the most negative rating of "very biased" and over a third of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Muslims.[21]

Interestingly, what little research we do have in the area of the science and politics of anti-Muslim hate, and the idea of the 'Muslim problem' points at a projection of, and an almost cultural catharsis of, social anxieties at large. For example media scandals regarding Muslims, which have included areas of public life as far reaching as diet - referring to the various halal meat exposés in newspapers - speak of a wider discomfort in our alienation from the processes of modern day food production which are expressed through this fear or the Muslim 'other', to name one example. When viewed through this lens, it is easier to understand the social hysteria that often occurs in the media which centres on Muslims - particularly when these are exposed as entirely fabricated, for example the Tower Hamlets fostering case, which speaks to a potential social discomfort in contemporary fostering policy and practice. This in itself is something our toolkit explores, so both teachers and older students are able to unpack these complex issues in more insightful and productive ways.[22]

18% of the pupils polled in England have seen other children being bullied for being Muslim.

Department of Education study, 2017

This issue is especially politically sensitive because policy and popular perception regarding 'Islamophobia' is underdeveloped, and there is a prevailing idea that anti-Muslim sentiments are in fact legitimate due to various misunderstandings about the very nature of racism, and an inability to recognise our own prejudices and unconscious bias in how we perceive Muslim identity and culture, particularly historically. This continued stigmatisation of Muslim identity, and growing sentiments of Islamophobia – the cause of 45% of all recorded religious hate crime last year – need to be understood and contextualised in British schooling.[23]

Source: https://www.freepik.com/

Research suggests that the level of hostility Muslim's face is greater than other minority groups, as evidenced in in a report published in 2017, in which 70% of research respondents said that most White British people would mind if a close relative married a Muslim and 44% of respondents said they would mind themselves. The latter figure being more than double compared to other identified ethnic minority groups.[24] A survey run by the Huffington Post found that "More than half of Britons (56%) now regard Islam – the religion generally, as distinct from Islamic extremists – as a threat to the UK".[25] These statistics soberingly mirror the lived-experience of British Muslims, with a more recent report from the EHRC finding that 70% of

21 Faisal Hanif, British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020), Centre for Media Monitoring (November 2021)

22 Nadiya Ali and Ben Whitham, The Unbearable Anxiety of Being: Ideological Fantasies of British Muslims Beyond the Politics of Security, 2018

23 Home Office, Official Statistics, Hate crime, England and Wales, 2020 to 2021

24 Nancy Kelley, Omar Khan and Sarah Sharrock, "Racial prejudice in Britain today", NatCen Social Research, (September 2017)

25 Jack Sommers, "7/7 Bombings anniversary poll shows more than half of Britons see Muslims as a threat", Huffington Post, July 6, 2015

Muslims said they had specifically experienced religion-based prejudice. The same report suggests this trends upwards for younger Muslims,[26] and an ICM poll undertaken in 2015 found that Muslims feel religious prejudice is increasing over time.[27]

Some research also shows that Muslim pupils are aware of these impressions, and subject to Islamophobic bullying in schools. A Department of Education study in 2017 showed 18% of the pupils polled in England have seen other children being bullied for being Muslim – interestingly, with children eligible for free school meals generally more likely to have witnessed anti-Islamic/ anti-Muslim bullying,[28] presumably due to the prevalence of Muslims in more economically deprived communities. Research from the Government's own Social Mobility Commission unequivocally stated that young Muslims living in the UK face an enormous social mobility challenge and are being held back from reaching their full potential at every stage of their lives. In particular the young Muslims who were interviewed felt teachers often had stereotypical or low expectations of them.[29]

The conflicting messages received by Muslim young people is that more is required of them in public life – to 'justify' their existence- yet their presence itself is undesirable and their world view problematic. Thus they are simultaneously visible in their Muslimness and invisible in regards to their perceived value, significance and acceptance in society. This singling and isolating experience can cause further alienation, and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest this cocktail of pressures is detrimental to young people's mental well-being.

While external factors mean that Young Muslims are subject to a greater degree of stigma, scrutiny and hostile messages, the truth remains that Muslim culture creates a springboard for many opportunities for young Muslims – both in their mental health, and their academic, emotional and social potential. Educators would undoubtedly benefit from understanding young Muslim's world, and gaining insight into their social context, culture and motivators. Muslim Mind Collaborative's Muslim Mental Health in School project endeavours to bring this conversation regarding young Muslims, their mental health and their schooling, and the concept of that unlocked potential, to the national conversation.

Source: Timur Weber- Pexels.com

26 Dominic Abrams , Hannah Swift and Diane Houston, Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, Equality and Human Rights Commission (October 2018)

27 ICM, 'What Muslims Want' A survey of British Muslims (December 2016)

28 Sally Panayiotou, Kate Boulden, Sarah Newton and David Andersson, Omnibus Survey of Pupils and their Parents/Carers Research report wave 2, Department for Education (July 2017)

29 The Social Mobility Commission, The Social Mobility Challenges Faced by Young Muslims (September 2017)

2. The Opportunities

Flipping the script: Islam as a positive source in young Muslim life.

Islamic belief and practice is often cited as a source of peace, comfort and a means of coping against adversity for much of the Muslim world. Religious belief also often gives people a sense of purpose, direction and meaning which can have a positive impact on their mental well-being.

This has implications for both mental health and schooling, particularly due to the significant body of literature which demonstrates that religion may influence wellbeing through pathways that are behavioural, psychological, social and physiological. Indeed, there have been some advancements in the mental health sector, where religious coping strategies for depression have been integrated into cognitive behaviour therapy and counselling, for example.[30]

Literature on religion and mental health also identifies 'positive religious coping' as being associated with reduced levels of depression, and the use of an internalised spiritual belief system to provide strategies that promote hope and resilience. Positive self-talk and surrendering to a Higher Being are also both positive traits associated with religion. Muslim are also more likely to use religious coping techniques than most other religious groups in the UK.[31]

Religious practice is often divided into two categories of religiosity; private, or interiorised, and public or exteriorised.

The former consists of rites practised alone or in the home, such as daily prayer or reading scripture, while the latter speaks of communal religious activity such as attending mosques or religious celebrations. Both of these religious domains make up the rich fabric of Muslim – including young Muslim – life in the UK. While it is important to note that diversity, one of the key strengths of British Muslims – extends to belief and practice as well as race, ethnicity and culture – global research into Muslim practice demonstrates that there is a continuous thread of religious identity and practice that ties Muslim's together – though this may vary between daily prayer, mosque attendance, obligatory charity, fasting or a sense of affinity.[32] This means Muslims as a cohesive demographic which is seen through both that lens of nuanced similarity, and diverse difference is valuable to public services.

Research tells us that both categories of private and public practice are also associated with better mental health – communal elements naturally provide benefits of community such as social support and reduced feelings of loneliness, but also anthropological literature suggests that participation in rituals can release positive emotions which positively influence mental health. Private religiosity can help to provide an anchoring sense of identity which can help during difficult life situations and transitions, as well as creating strong family bonds and ties.[33] The meaning and purpose created by these cites of religiosity can be an ongoing source for resilience for young Muslims.

30 Ghazala Mir, Ruqayyah Ghani, Shaista Meer and Gul Hussain, Delivering a culturally adapted therapy for Muslim clients with depression (April 2019)

31 Ibid

32 Pew Research Centre, The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity, The Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life (August 2012)

33 Ahmed Ibrahim and Rob Whitley, Religion and mental health: a narrative review with a focus on Muslims in English-speaking countries (June 2021)

Being British and Muslim

Opportunities for schooling

Understanding both the diversity in practice and background of Muslim students, and giving them the space to grow, without imposing limiting views on their cultural heritage, is key to schools getting the best out of their Muslim students. While we have mentioned the statistical significance of young Muslims in British schools, this is inversely mirrored in the diversity of teaching staff. Research undertaken by the National Foundation of Educational Research demonstrated that there is significant under-representation of people from Asian, black, mixed and other ethnic minority backgrounds within the teaching profession, except for in ITT. This is particularly true of senior leadership teams, with 86% of publicly-funded schools in England possessing an all-white senior leadership team, and 60% of schools in England with an all-white teaching staff.[34] Again, while data on faith is conspicuously absent, conclusions we are forced to draw using data on ethnicity alone paints a picture of a stark disparity of representation – where we have a student body that is particularly weighted with Muslim students, the scarcity of Muslims in teaching and senior leadership roles feels more significant.

Diversity in teaching is instrumental in fostering social cohesion, embedding lived experience into the cultural architecture of the school, and enabling students to grow and develop in an environment with visible, diverse role models. Where this is absent or limited, it is important for schools to understand the cultural and faith sensitivities of their student body for whole-school benefit, and to enable schools to draw the best out of young Muslims for the enrichment of all. What often remains unspoken in conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion is the deeply held belief amongst some that it amounts to preferential treatment. This sentiment ignores both the inequalities in society that lead to an unlevel playing field, and downplays the strength and benefits of a diverse world for all. That is - we live in a world where difference exists, and we must be mindful, for the sake of broader society, where these differences mean we have to tailor our approach, and how to celebrate and get the best out of them.

Young Muslims valuing, and feeling pride in their faith identity, cushioned from the stigma in the broader world, will have a positive impact on their learning and general sense of well-being. When we make children and young people feel they must censor themselves, feel ashamed of their home or family life, or mute their identity, it can have the opposite effect – whether that be shame in the way they dress, the differences in their recreational interests, their sense of boundaries and norms, or their use of time in worship or their lifestyle habits.

Throughout the course of our consultation process, one thing we heard from Muslim educators was the sense of release young Muslims felt in being greeted with a Muslim teacher at their school. A popular refrain we heard Muslim teachers quote from their Muslim students was 'You just get me' – the implication being that very often Muslim children feel they are in a system that just doesn't.

We want to help schools feel they can uplift these differences in Muslim young people in a meaningful way, from a place of openness and understanding, rather than shrouding them in shame.

Understanding and utilising faith as a driver, and source of inspiration for Muslim children and young people can benefit schools and their students in key areas such as beahviour and learning.

34 Jack Worth, Dawson McLean and Caroline Sharp, Racial Equality in the Teacher Workforce: An Analysis of Representation and Progression Opportunities from Initial Teacher Training to Headshi, National Foundation of Educational Research (May 2022)

Source: https://www.ncb.org.uk/

Behaviour

Faith as a lever for positivity is particularly relevant in a school setting due to the level of commitment, discipline, empathy and drive Islam can instil in young Muslims. Both the respect and etiquettes Muslims are morally obligated to extend to their fellow humans, and the unique place education holds in Islam. The word ‘Quran’ comes from the root word 'to read' in Arabic, and was one of the first commands in revelation according to Islamic thought. Islam therefore places this unique and critical emphasis on the discipline of learning, and it is given a special space in religious thought. Young Muslims have the potential to apply this to their school environment when that very faith they posses becomes a valued part of their identity.

Faith as a motivator towards compliance, and a means to self-regulate behaviour for certain disciplines such as daily prayer is something schools can benefit from. How is that self-regulation that faith inspires captured by schools to get the best outcome for their students? This begins by acknowledging the positive force faith can play in young Muslim life, and acknowledging the positivity of faith as a means to achieve something great, and for young Muslims to contribute to something greater than them.

Learning

Islamic edicts are compatible with modern approaches to pedagogy and learning. For example, Growth Mindset and the idea of development through learning, enrichment and agency. Also, Muslims are taught Allah (God) is All-Merciful, with the notion of forgiveness and repentance holding key places in Islamic theology. These ideas are entirely compatible with the Growth Mindset notion of failure as a key element of success, and a means of motivating improvement. Additionally, supporting fellow students is reinforced in Islamic scripture. Muslims hold the saying ‘Love for your brother what you love for yourself’ religiously dear; promoting generous, productive and positive mindsets. These latent values in Muslims can be pronounced, and activated in a school setting to achieve greater learning outcomes, and create a continuum between home and school that values the whole child.

The fact is, that the potential Islam and Muslim culture has in schooling is underexplored. A major barrier to unlocking that potential is reductive ideas concerning Islam motivated by unconscious bias. The idea of putting the child at the centre of all we do is predicated on valuing and understating children’s faith and cultural background, and is key to getting the best out of them.

Having analysed the problem, and opportunities concerning Muslim mental health in schools, Muslim Mind Collaborative embarked on a journey with the education and mental health communities to fully understand the needs of schools and their Muslim pupils, with the aim of bringing together the beginning of a valuable, socially and culturally astute toolkit that not only meets schools where they are on their journey towards faith literacy and cultural competency, but does so in a way that is relevant and meaningful.

Crucially, the long term impact on children’s life chances, when their faith identity is valued and appreciated during their most formative years, is something we are yet to see the fruits of. As schools develop truly inclusive spaces that grant children and young people the necessary stake in their educational environment to truly thrive, and the springboard this provides for their later outcomes, it presents a very exciting prospect indeed.

3. Our Journey
What We've Learned

Muslim Mind Collaborative embarked upon a journey to survey and consult as widely as possible to produce a resource that brings together the expertise, learning and voice of those at the heart of this debate. Centred on results from the Resilient Me programme, which worked extensively with young Muslims, we wanted to create a toolkit which works to encourage learning, open mindedness, and to challenge perceptions and stereotypes to create truly inclusive school environments.

Roundtable

On the 1st March, Muslim Mind Collaborative hosted a high-level discussion with colleagues from across the education, mental health, academic and research sectors joining our Valuing Every Mind Roundtable. In attendance were prominent speakers who lent their voice and expertise to the cause, demonstrating both the need and will to support schools in mental health and faith literacy, and providing further momentum within the education sector to hone in on this vital issue.

The event was successful in generating conversation, developing key insights and further building our intelligence and understanding of Muslim mental health in schools.

Dr Sania Shakoor, a Chartered Psychologist, Lecturer in Mental Health and multidisciplinary researcher at Queen Mary University of London and trustee at mental health charity Kidscape, provided greater depth and insight into the nuances of Muslim mental health in the UK, reiterating the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of British Muslims, and acknowledging the lack of robust data on this subject area. Dr Sania also spoke of the importance of understanding the prevalence, vulnerabilities and aetiology of mental health amongst Muslim young people, and the pertinence of this to those working within the education and public health sectors.

The vulnerabilities of Muslims include the higher likelihood of traumas within some Muslim populations including from displacement and migration, war and natural disasters. This is in addition to the pressures of acculturation young British Muslims face, adapting to British norms and values, and being subject to prejudice and the potential violence this poses.

Critically, Dr Sania identified a series of measures schools can adopt to mitigate some of these pressures, including:

- **integration and cultural engagement** with heritage culture and culture of the mainstream society
- **enhancing friendship quality and peer support** in schools to support well-being
- **clear policies on faith based discrimination** and creating common values of respect and tolerance
- introducing school teachers to the concepts and challenges of **cultural identity and acculturation**

Nic Ponsford, founder of Global Equality Collective: *"Schools are full of time-poor, brilliant and passionate teachers. Schools would benefit from taking a joint-up intersectional approach, one which destigmatises Muslim identity to create positive pathways for students."*

Sufian Sadiq, Director of Teaching School at Chiltern Learning Trust, highlighted the importance of understanding the relevance and significance of faith in people's lives, despite, and probably more so, due to faith no longer being a mainstream concept in the UK. Sufian also highlighted the nuances between culture and religion - though not entirely interchangeable - and how the former has been shaped significantly by the latter over time in some Muslim majority countries; impacting daily activities and routines around such things as eating, for example. Sufian also highlighted the lack of diversity in education in both faith and ethnicity, particularly in senior leadership. This can lead to assumptions regarding educational approaches towards Muslim children being entirely synonymous with those of their non-Muslim peers, particularly in areas like mental

well-being for which a deeper appreciation of people's background is relevant to the whole-child approach. Sufian mentioned two pertinent examples in therapeutic approaches towards children in schools he had witnessed most recently - one centring on image-making, in which a bereaved child was asked to draw a picture of their deceased loved one, and the other on using music as a form of therapy. Both instructions, though undoubtedly well meaning, ran contrary to the belief and practices of the children in question, rendering the exercises ineffective and futile. These examples highlight how a lack of cultural awareness and disconnect in understanding undermines a whole child approach.

Sufian also spoke about the prevalence of Islamophobia as a trigger for mental health issues and the importance of recognising that in the school system - as well as creating safe spaces for Muslim children and young people to practice elements of their faith during their school day, something that is becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims in school - this includes daily prayer, and the abolition that precedes it. Young people feeling increasingly unable to express a faith that is a significant part of their identity.

Equity in schools must be inclusive of all - and not increasingly marginalising of faith groups. True intersectionality means understanding the oft-missing element of faith in the formation of children's identity - and particularly the importance of faith in mental well being.
Sufian identified training and development of staff - particularly mental health first aiders, and other members of the pastoral care team - in faith sensitivity as a key step towards greater and more meaningful inclusivity.

Survey

Between December 2022 and May 2023, Muslim Mind Collaborative ran a survey of school communities across the UK, to gauge their views on what support is necessary to aid young Muslim's mental health in schools. The survey drew 130 responses, and findings were very supportive of the projects aims.

- **Over 90% of respondents** said they felt a toolkit designed to help schools support Muslim mental health was useful. This correlates with results from a study undertaken by the Centre for Mental Health this year, which found that 9 out of 10 teachers wanted anti-racism training.[35]
- Equally, **over 90% of respondents** said that they felt it was necessary to receive faith and cultural- sensitivity training in their school
- Over **70% of respondents** to our survey, who identified as non-Muslim, said they felt they weren't adequately trained, or were unsure about their ability to address topics relating to Islam or Muslims in their school setting

Revealingly, the survey also attracted a number of Islamophobic entries, ironically illustrating the difficulties in navigating Muslim-centred issues in public life, and the extent to which Muslims can be deemed unworthy of bespoke support and services, despite the necessity of this. It also underscored the need for better education, and understanding on Islamophobia and the value true inclusivity brings to all. Indeed, a strong and supported Muslim community means a stronger, more prosperous economy and social fabric in the UK.

Equally telling, school staff expressed a desire to learn about Muslim lived experience which some identified as young people's thoughts on 'conflicting Western' values, the role of women and intergenerational differences. These are areas that naturally attract media sensationalism and require sensitive discussion and unpacking. The fact that they are at the forefront of our minds when we think of Muslims is one element we need to think about, that we may expect young people to be answerable for media perceptions of their faith, and represent such heavy topics is another. Certainly this raises questions at the crux of the issue concerning Islamophobia and how it impacts Muslim children and young people - whether our implicit biases concerning Muslims impacts and impairs our perception, and therefore expectations of them.

35 Centre for Mental Health, Racial microaggressions in schools: teachers' perspectives and what it means for student (January 2023)

Encouragingly, we received high levels of support for all the formats we suggested to support schools – including INSET days presentations on British Muslims, posters and lesson plans designed to increase understanding on Muslim identity and culture. The overwhelming request from the survey was for CPD towards faith sensitivity, this reiterating the fact that our toolkit, and this wider conversation, is only the first step in a much broader endeavour.

Primary aged children

Muslim Mind Collaborative surveyed over 20 Muslim families and their children, across a spread of geographic regions, to understand their experiences being Muslim in primary schools. The sheer diversity of responses underscored what we already know about schools and their differing points in the journey towards true inclusion and including faith in the conversation, and practice towards equity.

When asked, children could identify elements of their faith that they enjoyed - some saying it was their sense of faith or belief that they most valued about being Muslim, while others identified certain practices. Overwhelmingly young children identified celebrating Eid as one of the things they enjoyed most - illustrating the importance of community to young Muslims, and the sense of joy they cited in their faith identity.

Prayer was a critical element identified by children in their school life - with some children saying they valued being able to pray at school, and others citing it as one of the key things they wished they were able to do.

Likewise, the hijab was mentioned both by children who considered their ability, and acceptance, in wearing hijab at school as the main strength of that school, and others saying they wish they were more able to at school.

95% of the children that responded to our survey said they would like both their teachers and friends to learn more about Islam, highlighting the potential of further, potentially student-led, work in this area. When asked, children said they wanted their schools to learn more about the basics of their faith, certain fundamental practices like prayer, which was again a popular response, as well as religious rites around eating, values, family and cultural practices and celebrations such as Eid.

> **"Once we learnt about Eid at school. I really liked it. I wish they taught us more"**
>
> Muslim Mental Health in Primary school survey respondent.

One child expressed a preference for her school to learn that Islam is a 'peaceful' religion, once again stressing the unfortunate need to counter dominant narratives and stereotypes concerning the faith.

Source: https://www.alayn.co.uk/

Consultation of Muslim Young people, facilitated by YoungMinds

Source: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/

YoungMinds facilitated a Muslim Mind Collaborative workshop with young Muslims between the ages of 11 and 14, with the aim of hearing their positive experiences in school, those areas where they felt schools could do better to support their mental well-being, and what they wanted to say to school leaders across the country. Our six young Muslims brought some key insights to this project, and brought some really interesting debates to the table.

Unsurprisingly, young Muslim participants identified feelings towards their schooling that are universal to young people more broadly, such as academic pressures sometimes impacted their mental well-being, feeling frustrated by certain subjects they felt less inspired by or interested in, and inconvenienced by smaller practicalities of schooling. These broader issues that are not atypical of young people's experience of their schooling were echoed by a few members of the group.

Another commonality between young Muslims in the group was being made to feel different, and in one case an 'outsider' due to their faith background, and another saying they were made to feel 'weird' because of it. Members of the group felt this varied according to the demographics of their school – one participant said his experience improved from primary to secondary due to the increase in number of Muslims, and multiple members of the group also identified feeling more able to speak to their Muslim teachers regarding issues pertaining to their faith and values – though some members felt there weren't enough Muslim teachers in their school.

Another area that young Muslim participants felt could be improved was curricular content in religious education pertaining to Islam and Muslims, where they now felt less time, importance and formality was given to the subject compared to other faiths being studied.

One participant felt the wider inequalities in society impacted their school experiences - in particular in relation to opportunities. This participant said they were discouraged from taking drama due to the wider lack of opportunities for actresses that wear the hijab, despite their fondness for the subject. There were also, sadly, some instances of Islamophobia from peers identified by at least three young contributors – including references to 9/11 – which the young people identified feeling angry and hurt by.

These experiences correlate with the wider literature we have on this subject regarding feelings of belonging in schools, Islamophobia and potential unconscious bias.

Instances where teachers – Muslim and non – had been accommodating to their faith choices seemed to have a positive impact on the young people, and these anecdotes were remembered with fond enthusiasm – for example a non-Muslim teacher making an allowance for one young person to sit out of the heat during Ramadan, and another non-Muslim teacher allowing a young person to be excused from the lunch room also during Ramadan. Another example that a young person said they appreciated was a Muslim teacher allowing them to pray in their classroom, amidst a broader culture in this school which was less accommodating of prayer.

A definite positive correlation between teachers knowledge and understanding of Islam, and their ability to express these moments of compassion and insight was identified, and all the young people who contributed expressed a desire for their teachers to learn more about Islam, and try to understand Muslim culture better.

Young Muslim girls also mentioned they felt a sense of pride in their hijab as an outward symbol of faith, which speaks of a potential for schools to acknowledge this as a source of positive, affirmative identity that is beneficial to young Muslims.

It is clear that young Muslim participants felt their schools ability to understand, acknowledge and accommodate their faith choices – prayer, fasting, dietary requirement of halal, and dress - was important to young people, and positive experiences centred on times that was seen and appreciated, and feelings of frustration and upset were caused when this wasn't the case. This reinforces the case for a toolkit such as ours, which helps schools to do this in sensitive, reflective ways which are encompassing of schools as a whole.

Top tips, and recommendations young people at this focus group had for schools and their leaders encompassed practical considerations, changes in school culture and ethos and mind-shifts in approach and thinking:

- Quiet and dedicated prayer space
- Usable bathrooms for pre-prayer ablution
- For there to be a wider school culture where young Muslim's commitment to prayer is understood and valued - so they're trusted enough to pray, time allowances to be understood, but also for that to be done in a non-stigmatising way ; potentially a silent pass
- For schools to learn and understand more about Islam, in particular young people felt they wanted people to understand what isn't permissible for Muslims, so there is less taboo around this subject
- For Islam to be given equal weight in efforts towards diversity, equity and inclusion and for this to be done in a less tokenistic, more meaningful and impactful way
- Schools helping to create a more accommodating culture around Ramadan time, and understanding the rites and practicalities around fasting
- Dietary accommodations in the canteen
- Events and talks on all faiths that encourage learning and sharing of background and culture in a more democratic way
- Student led educational activities on Islam
- Smaller reflective spaces to discuss the pressures relating to being a young Muslim
- More informal opportunities to discuss Islam and educate people on religious differences

The young Muslims who contributed to these discussions did so with passion, enthusiasm and care for their schools and their faith. The session made evident the need for schools, and wider culture, to understand the language young Muslims speak in their values and their priorities as young believers.

Source: https://mustangnews.ne

3. Our Solution

Muslim Mind Collaborative – Muslim Mental Health in Schools, a Toolkit

The end result of our months of evidence gathering, literature reviews and consultation process is a streamlined toolkit which is purposefully adaptable and multifunctional. It seeks to meet schools where they are on their journey of faith sensitivity and cultural awareness, with the overall aim of relieving stigmatisation and the inevitable mental load this carries.

Resource	Aims	Content	Rationale/evidence
INSET day presentation for teachers on Islam, British Muslim culture and the role faith plays in schooling **Comes with accompanying notes that can be used as a follow up to the INSET session, or independently as stand-alone briefings for teachers or mental health first aiders and other pastoral care staff, which replicates the information in the presentation**	- Provide insight and understanding of Islam and Muslim culture amongst teaching and pastoral staff - Debunk myths and stereotypes, destigmatise religious practice - Provide culturally astute insight into young British Muslim life - Create space for discussion and reflection - Create greater understanding and empathy between teachers and Muslim pupils	- Introduction to Islam, Muslims and British Muslims - Young British Muslims – a new culture and sense of belonging - Islamophobia and Unconscious bias - Young Muslims in their own words - Being Muslim in School – the opportunities; behaviour, learning and mental health - What we need to ask ourselves as educators - Being Muslim in school - the practicalities - Incorporating the young Muslim voice - Concluding activities, reflections on creating truly inclusive school spaces	As well as the overwhelming number of requests we received through our survey, and throughout this project, for CPD on faith sensitivity for teachers, there is further research which demonstrates the demand for anti-racism training.[36] The format and content of this resource is innovative and provides a frank and canny insight into young Muslim life, while also giving school leaders the opportunity to learn and rethink their version of inclusion.

Source: https://www.familycentre.org/

36 Centre for Mental Health, Racial microaggressions in schools: teachers' perspectives and what it means for student (January 2023)

Resource	Aims	Content	Rationale/evidence
PHSE model lesson plan on Islam and Muslims – primary school **The importance of respecting others**	- To meet the statutory objective, under new RSE guidance for primary schools, as part of the 'Respectful Relationships' theme, which states that secondary school pupils should know "the importance of respecting others, even when they are very different from them (for example, physically, in character, personality or backgrounds), or make different choices or have different preferences or beliefs." - Introduce concepts of 'difference' within a faith context and what that means for Muslims - Introduce basic concepts regarding islam and Muslims	- Teaching slides which provide instruction, context, grounding and details of further information (details of lesson objectives, learning outcomes, a timed lesson plan) - Fun and dynamic starter activity ; Common Connectors, a practical and hands on way to foreground the importance of similarities and differences between people and what makes us unique and special in a way that is meaningful to young children - Highlight the importance of respecting religious diversity in creating and maintaining healthy and happy relationships - Story time 'Aisha's Eid' and reflective, engaging activity suited to primary aged learning	Two student facing resources, these will provide greater depth on the subject of Muslims and Islam, and the necessary time to create a safe space in which these issues can be discussed in more productive ways. There is a general lack of resources which celebrate difference in terms of faith, so these lesson plans, teacher guides and PowerPoints will be a helpful addition to the teaching community. This will be helpful in many contexts – whether Muslims are a minority or majority in their respective school settings. Research in one study demonstrated that Muslim children are less content with the religious aspects of their school, compared to their Christian counterparts.[37] Representation of their faith is a natural way to bridge that gap, and the student-facing element of this toolkit will help schools to do that in a well-informed way. Research shows time and time again that creating inclusive academic environments is what inculcates a sense of belonging and helps students to perform optimally, socially, academically and emotionally.[38] Greater education and non-sensationalised information on Islam will also help to destigmatise and break down barriers between cultural and religious identities leading to a healthier sense of self-identity.

37 Leslie J. Francis, David W. Lankshearand Ursula McKenna, Comparing the attitudes of Muslim and Christian year 5 and 6 students within four Anglican primary schools in Wales (February 2021)

38 Delaram A. Totonchi, Valerian J. Derlega, Brynn E. Sheehan and Ralitsa S. Maduro, Muslim students' socioemotional and academic adjustment: the role of college experiences and Muslim identity centrality (January 2021)

Resource	Aims	Content	Rationale/evidence
PHSE model lesson plan on Islam, British Muslim culture and the importance of challenging stereotypes – secondary school **Negative Stereotypes: Islamophobia and its harm to all of us**	- To meet the statutory objective, under new RSE guidance for secondary schools, as part of the 'Respectful Relationships' theme, which states that secondary school pupils should know "how stereotypes, in particular stereotypes based on sex, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability, can cause damage (e.g. how they might normalise non-consensual behaviour or encourage prejudice)." - Define harmful, Islamopobic stereotypes and their impact - Debunk the underlying assumptions of these - Highlight the importance of religious diversity in creating and maintaining respectful relationships - Inviting pupils to explore how faith is productive to personal health, society, and citizenship	- Teaching slides which provide instruction, context, grounding and details of further information (details of lesson objectives, learning outcomes, a timed lesson plan) - Know why stereotypes are damaging and how they operate - Explore how it might feel to be stereotyped through exploration of case study - Know what Islamophobia is and learn how the media perpetuates Islamophobic stereotypes - Understand more about the science behind the racism and prejudicial thinking that leads to stereotypes - Reflecting on the need to project stereotypes through poetry and self reflection - Learn about challenging stereotypes – including Muslim narratives of resistance and creating a comic strip based on inverting narratives for empowerment	
Identifying Islamophobic Bullying Poster	- Informing, educating and creating a visible denouncement of Islamophobic bullying	- What it is - Why it occurs - What it looks like - What you can do about it	To create inclusive educational environments where Muslim children and young people feel seen, heard and accepted it is important to use collective spaces to assert values such as taking a stand against Islamophobic bullying through posters such as these. Students could also use this poster as a guide to make their own as a class activity

Resource	Aims	Content	Rationale/evidence
Model anti-bullying policies regarding Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice	- Helping schools to clearly define and tackle bullying which is Islamophobic in nature - Provide policy and cultural context of anti-Muslim hate and Islamophobia	- Clauses to include in wider behaviour, anti-bullying policies which define Islamophobia and propose institutional responses to it - Details of wider contextual information on islamophobia	Given the broader confusion around the term, on a national and political level, this will help schools to adopt a universal definition, and therefore combat any prejudice, bullying, discrimination or hate aimed at Muslims. It will also provide school leaders with the broader context of anti Muslim hate and interrogate thinking in this critical area

Source: Freepik

4. What Schools Can Do

Muslim Mind Collaborative is acutely aware that this toolkit and report represents only the first step in an imperfect journey towards inclusion for all. Our research, and ongoing dialogue with the education sector determined that for happy, productive schools, it is important for leaders to understand the cultural and religious context of their students. School represents a shared space for people from a number of different backgrounds, to grow and learn together, co-operatively from a place of mutual understanding and trust. Leaders that facilitate this from a place of openness, honesty and integrity will cultivate the most productive and content school cultures and environments. This may take a little out-of-the-box thinking, and some mental retraining.

While this is just a first step in that journey – we have identified some things schools may need to do to challenge thinking, practice and policy in their schools to achieve truly meaningful and positively impacting changes.

Source: https://www.globalschoolalliance.com/

Thinking

There are some questions for leaders to consider around inclusive schools for faith communities in particular

- Does my school or classroom make space, and consider the needs, of all children, including those of faith?
- Is inclusivity being seen entirely from a majority perspective? Is it seen as a cumbersome, tick box exercise?
- Is it being nurtured from a place of openness, understanding and humility? Is it helping people to grow and understand or reinforcing hidden prejudices?
- Are we understanding our own views, perspectives and values within a cultural context? Do we understand culture as pervasive and all encompassing, something that includes us and our world view, and is not just the reserve of minorities, i.e. do we recognise our own limitations in thinking?
- Do we recognise diversity in terms of faith as well as race and culture?
- Are we homogonising Muslims in our approach? Or recognising intracommunity diversity?
- Are our perceptions of Muslims rooted in wider/media narratives? Have we interrogated our perceptions of Muslims, given the white noise of Islamophobia that we exist in?
- Are we delegitimising certain people, or beliefs, due to our existing views, or due to influence from wider narratives regarding what is legitimate and worthy of attention and time? Are we treating parent groups as equally legitimate?
- Are we disentangling our disparate experiences with individuals from our perceptions of groups as a whole? Are we holding on to individual, negative experiences with people and projecting those onto a whole based on our underlying perceptions?

- Have we stopped to reflect upon what any prejudices we may carry might reveal about ourselves? Do we question the 'hunches' and knee jerk presumptions we have, and interrogate their causes and implications?'
- Are we able to withstand intellectual discomfort and challenge our thinking on what's deemed 'default' or 'natural'? Have we thought about how these presumptions might make us unquestioningly hold our views as superior, and others as inferior or less knowing?'

While we know there is no one size fits all-approach to inclusivity, we know in almost all instances it requires interrogative thinking and in some cases, intellectual discomfort. It often requires cultural humility, and allowing our perceptions to be demystified, broken down, and rebuilt again based on a fair and open assessment.

Source: Freepik

Practice

Studies show that faith transmission is high amongst Muslim families – this means young Muslims are more likely than other faith demographics, to hold the religious values of their parents. We also know this includes a diverse range of that practice, and that young Muslims will interpret this in a diverse way too. Practically, as studies also show, we know that many Muslims hold certain practices dear. We would encourage schools to consult their student body on what these practices look like, and how schools can accommodate this so that young Muslims feel both seen, valued and most productive in their school environment. Some suggestions include

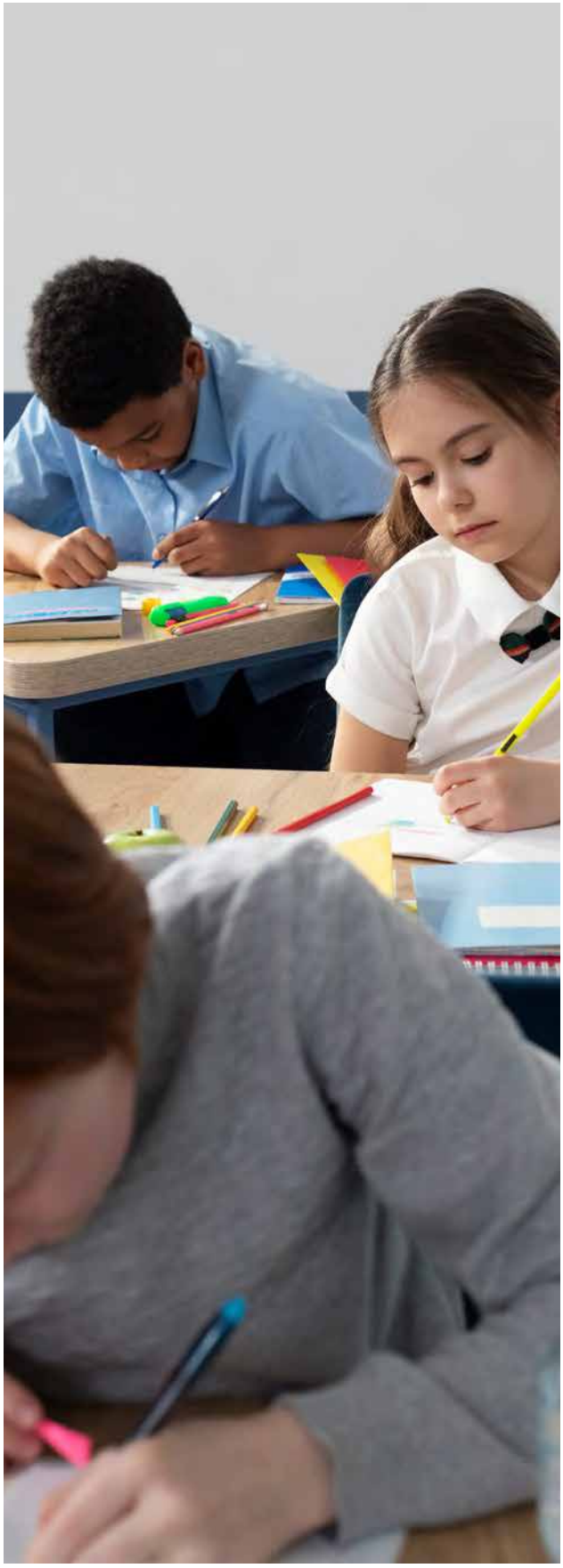
- Creating prayer spaces and accommodating ablution/pre-prayer washing
- Accommodating, and being more accepting of, modest iterations of dress
- Acknowledging different religious times and festivals such as Ramadan and Eid
- Creating an Islamophobia policy which clearly defines and helps to combat anti-Muslim hate
- As Muslims practice a whole spectrum of belief within Islamic theology, some young Muslims will refrain from certain acts such as listening to music, drawing images of sentient beings, engaging in mixed-gender friendships and relations. Whilst this is not a norm of majority culture, it is important for schools not to stigmatise these nor force children and young people into things they are not comfortable with, or which conflict with their values
- Many Muslims will endorse family values and more traditional/orthodox views on sex and relationships. It is important for schools to create safe spaces for respectful discussions on these issues where they may arise – in PHSE or RSE

Policy

Engaging with school leaders, and colleagues in the sector, we have naturally been fortunate enough to gain insight into key policy changes that have benefitted schools and their Muslim children, some of these include:

- Identifying where Islamophobic bullying might be specifically named in the schools **anti-bullying policy**
- if the school **collects data by religion**; how the school can monitor take-up of well-being activities by students of different faiths
- planning **a faith-based young people's voice committee** where students can offer their own observations
- how as a school we might **facilitate the sharing of experiences** of people who have supported Muslim students
- considering the **school dress code** and how it is implemented in practice, and could it be changed to be more inclusive
- what can the school do differently to make sure **Ramadan is celebrated** and understood in a positive light in the school community
- considering where Muslim students currently **prepare for pray and pray together**, and how this could be improved, perhaps in consultation with parents/ students.

Muslim Mind Collaborative acknowledges the dynamic and hive-like nature of our rich education sector, and therefore the need for this to be part of an ongoing debate regarding inclusivity, identity, belonging and the key act of shaping our next generation of citizens. Therefore we encourage schools to reach out to one another for ideas in best practice, and innovative thinking in this field. As an ongoing journey that we are on with future generations and iterations of British Muslims, we have a lot of hope and aspirations for the shape that this journey will take.



Source: Freepik

Acknowledgments

Muslim Mind Collaborative's Muslim Mental Health in Schools project is one-of-kind in both its ambition, reach and breadth. Both the dialogue we have created, and the rich sentiment, information and data we have unearthed is incredibly valuable and has the potential to create real positive change in the classroom and lives of young Muslims.

First and foremost we wish to thank the Muslim children, young people and their families who offered an insight into their lived-experience that was both the driver and inspiration for this key piece of work. In addition, the school staff who contributed theirs, and demonstrated an ability to both contribute and learn from this project.

This work would not have been possible without the will, insight and expertise of colleagues from across a range of sectors. It has been an honour and privilege to work with them to see this first step come to fruition.

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A special thanks to the exuberant Nafisa Rahimi and Sarah Yataghane who helped to engage Muslim families in our work.

As we've mentioned, this toolkit and report is a first, but critical, step our journey towards true equity. It is something that both ourselves, and schools and their communities, must build upon to achieve educational environments that are inclusive and pave the way for all students to thrive, irrespective of their background or the prejudice they may face outside the classroom.

Muslim Mind Collaborative continue to be open to build upon and consolidate this foundation, and we look forward to working with all stakeholders to do the same.

Sabah Gilani OBE

Founder & Director of Muslim Mind Collaborative

Get Involved

To access the full toolkit and find out more about Muslim Mind Collaborative – visit: muslimmindcollaborative.co.uk

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