Model Anti-Islamophobia Bullying Policy Statement

This Model Anti-islamophobia Bullying Policy Statement document is designed to be included as part of your school's anti-bullying policy and broader understanding and commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion.

It is an example of one of the documents, or considerations, that schools need to make to ensure schools are able to define, and tackle, racism in all its forms.

Schools can use this example to create a statement, or include in their existing policy, in a way that reflects the needs of the children and young people they work with, and aligns with their other key organisational policies, procedures and standards.

It is part of a broader toolkit created by Muslim Mind Collaborative which works to increase faith sensitivity and cultural awareness in schools to better support Muslim mental well-being. The full toolkit can be accessed via muslimmindcollaborative.co.uk

The purpose and scope of this policy statement:

The purpose of this policy statement is to help schools:

- define, recognise and tackle bullying which is Islamophobic in nature
- ensure they set a precedent that Islamophobic bullying, like all racist bullying, is not tolerated
- Provide information to all staff, volunteers, children and their families about Islamophobic bullying and how it can be prevented

Background:

While there is currently no official definition of 'Islamophobia', the All Party Parliamentary Group for British Muslims' definition is as follows:

"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."

While the term 'Muslimness' may appear strange, its' use is due to the ongoing 'racialisation' of Islamic identity, which means it is subject to the kind of devaluing and subjugation, as a culture, that other marginalised cultures, communities and identities face. This definition also recognises the breadth of Islamophobic sentiment: a fear and hatred which means a whole variety of acts, identities and practices can be subject to discrimination by virtue of their association with Muslims alone. For example, in the UK, South Asian, and specifically Pakistani, culture becomes synonymous with Muslim culture in popular imagination. This means things that are deemed 'Pakistani' are deemed 'Islamic' and by extension, things that are associated with broader South Asian, non-Islamic culture,

might be subject to anti-Muslim sentiment due to their perceived association with Islam and Muslims. This further exemplifies both how illogical and misinformed anti-Muslim hate is.

This APPG definition, which was the work of extensive consultation, has been adopted, endorsed and embedded in political parties, local councils, Muslim communities and academia.

Islamophobia is also difficult to tackle institutionally due to broader misconceptions around it as a form of prejudice. While we often hear that denouncing an ideology or belief system, rather than a racial make-up, cannot be a discriminatory act that puts anyone at a disadvantage, this theory overlooks the fact that Islamophobia bears all the hallmarks of racism – as previously mentioned – a subjugation and devaluing of a culture. It also plays out structurally in the same way – with Muslims facing the kind of disadvantage that has led to poorer outcomes in health, housing and income.

Islamophobia also contains characteristics of racism in how it denies Muslims individualism and humanity. This is evident in both media depictions of Muslims – and a continued 'othering' of them – as well as how Muslims collectively are held accountable for, and stereotyped by, crimes committed by individual Muslims. While it is often said, it bears repeating that crimes that are associated with Muslim in popular imagination – including for example terrorism – are carried out by a negligible minority of Muslims, yet they have become how Muslims are seen and defined. This is also true of other crimes for which statistics are inflated, and media stories sensationally fabricated, creating a perception of 'Muslimness' as dangerous and deviant. The privilege of being seen and treated like an individual, is often not extended to Muslims who are often carrying the burden of representing an entire faith group.

Studies into Islamophobia attribute wrongful characterisation of Muslims as rooted in, and therefore providing a reflection of, social anxieties of the day. This in itself is not alien to the education sector, which is often subject to the same kind of projection of fear and social concern. This means Islamophobia can be a source of great reflection, learning and growth for us on a micro and macro scale.

Anti-Muslim hate is also unique in how it especially characterises Muslims as fifth pillars, treacherous and working against national interest. This is despite studies showing British Muslims feel an affinity, and loyalty, towards their British identity. The accumulative impact of both these factors means Muslims often bear the overt and implicit burden of suspicion which can make them feel conspicuously judged, mischaracterised, surveyed and under extreme pressure to prove belonging and loyalty.

In the context of schooling, there are additional perceptions regarding the Muslim family and conceptions of what's deemed legitimate parenting choices, positions and value systems, which often fall on cultural lines. The idea that majority culture is natural and default, and that anything outside of this in an increasingly secular culture is unnatural and

in particular 'unknowing' is common unconscious bias. This emotional and intellectual wall impediments real and meaningful relationships between school, family and child. It is both exacerbated by and fuels implicit prejudices which deem Muslim culture as primitive and underdeveloped, and therefore denies families agency, and is part of the reason there is a disconnect between children's ability to express themselves at school.

Research shows that faith transmission between one generation to the next is strong in Muslim communities, and while this does not mean that that values and the practices they spurn are consistent across generations – or indeed from one Muslim family or child to the next – what it does mean is that typically faith plays a significant role in a young person's life. Understanding the nuances contained in this means that we are less likely to project stereotypes and cause further stigma and harm.

This ongoing stigmatisation is particularly difficult for young Muslims who, as well as navigating the sensitivities of adolescence will also face undue pressure due to these public perceptions of their religious heritage and identity. While studies show Islam is often a source of comfort, peace and means of resilience for young Muslims, external pressures can lead to internal conflict.

School contexts can mean these pressures are intensified, particularly given where they sit on the public and private spheres of young people's lives. Often schools can make the mistake of not recognising faith as a legitimate category of difference in their DEI work and beyond. This can lead children and young people to feel their faith identity is a burden and impediment to true integration and belonging. It also means schools are not getting the best out of their Muslim students, and efforts towards a whole-child approach become null and void.

Islam can be a great source of motivation for young Muslims, and true insight into it can be used to the benefit of schools and their wider community. It provides a sincere drive for achievement, a moral framework, ethical guidance and a support blanket, as well as a source of inspiration, means for self-regulation, discipline, compliance and understanding oneself in the context of, and committing to, something greater than them. In order to get the most out of their Muslim students, schools would benefit from learning and developing an impression of Islam outside of restrictive stereotypes and sensationalist media narratives. A better understanding of Islam, and Muslim families, can also create the kind of continuum between home and school which we know helps young people to thrive.

These contextual issues bear reflecting on when creating inclusive cultures in schools.

Muslim Mind Collaborative suggested Definition of Islamophobic bullying for school settings:

When bullying targets Muslims because of their faith, or makes reference to Islamic identity or culture, it becomes Islamophobic bullying, and it is as unacceptable, and should be treated in accordance with, any other type of racist bullying.

What does Islamophobic bullying look like?

Stereotyping: when people assume all Muslims have certain characteristics this is Islamophobic; there are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world - about 23% of the world's population are Muslim and they consist of many different races, cultures, languages and practices.

Islamophobic slurs, comments or name calling: when people use negative or aggressive language to refer to Islamic belief, practices or culture. This could be face to face, or online. Difference should be celebrated as it is what makes our schools such great places to be.

Discriminating: This can be intentionally leaving someone out or alienating them on account of their Islamic faith. Our schools are strongest when we think and act inclusively.

How schools can deal with this

It is important for schools to deal with Islamophobic bullying in the same way they deal with any other kind of racist bullying to ensure they are sending out a clear message, consistent with the Equalities Act, that faith is a protected characteristic.

It is important to have appropriate definitions enshrined in school policy, and communicated explicitly to the wider school community, and through a culture of inclusivity.

For further information and feedback email edu@muslimmindcollaborative.co.uk