

improving understanding
shaping the future

Advice for schools

Brief guidance for handling Muslim parental concern

February 2010



bmsd

british muslims for secular democracy

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About British Muslims for Secular Democracy

bmsd brings together a diverse group of Muslim democrats from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. Founded in 2006, we want to challenge perceptions, ideas and current thinking about British Muslims as a collectivity and the issues that affect the wider society. **bmsd** is not a theological group but one that advocates civic engagement and good citizenship. We are not concerned with judging or being judged on the basis of religious practice. If you call yourself a 'Muslim', you are most welcome to be a part of our movement. If you are non-Muslim, we equally welcome your association.

bmsd is about social inclusion, co-existence and harmony. Together we can all make a difference. It is now time to work towards this goal. **bmsd** aims to:

- Raise awareness within British Muslims and the wider public, of democracy particularly 'secular democracy' helping to contribute to a shared vision of citizenship (the separation of faith and state, so faiths exert no undue influence on policies and there is a shared public space).
- Encourage religious understanding and harmony, respect for different systems of beliefs, and encourage an understanding and celebration of the variety of Muslim cultures, values and traditions which are present in British society.

A note to teachers

State schools provide the best environment for the wholesome development of the child.

There young people of all cultures, faith and no faith come together representing the environment these young people will have to face in real life. It is important that they not only understand the diversity that exists but they also respect that diversity as opposed to faith schools where the opportunity of interacting with the other is entirely absent.

At an NUT conference in 2008, a resolution was passed declaring that state schools have the flexibility and the adaptability to accommodate parent's needs and that the state schools are willing to make necessary provisions so that parents do not need to send their children to faith schools.

An argument often put forward for faith schools is that it provides excellent academic attainment. This may be so and often is but even the high achieving schools cannot, by definition, provide the priceless experience of living in a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and multi-faith environment which is crucial for any child living in the diverse world of the 21st century and for social cohesion among the various peoples of Britain. As such, state schools remain an invaluable resource for the betterment of not only the child but of mainstream society as well.

We recommend that each case and concern that is raised by parents should be dealt in a manner that fosters respect and understanding both ways.

Parents and educators need to be aware of cultural sensitivities, and there needs to be mutuality and reciprocity of respect. Too often the traffic has been one way with parents expecting schools to respect their traditions and also expecting never to be called upon to respect the traditions of others, to compromise for the greater good. Ultimately, both parents and teachers share one goal; to provide the best education for children.

Our message for parents

Since the contemporary world has become so globalised, it is inevitable that we will be living in an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith society. The challenge is how we can live with each other whilst upholding respect and being respected at the same time. Integration and trust make good societies. Humans have more in common than differences that are often assumed and sometimes exaggerated. Practices and beliefs that define groups and individuals are precious, but they cannot become the sole basis for policies and politics. CULTURE IS DYNAMIC, not static and set in stone forever. British Muslims are part of a western country with its own history. For too long, British Muslims have experienced disengagement rather than national belonging – partly because of racism, partly because of self exclusion and myths of return. Future generations deserve better.

The school is there for the betterment of your children, the citizens of tomorrow. It is imperative that they are raised as well informed individuals with open minds not closed beings, isolated without regard to or interaction from those immediately around them, or the embedded values of this country. They need to be able to adapt and cope well with the pressures and demands of modern day living, otherwise they will be left behind despite having the opportunity and ability. Significantly, in spite of racism, Hindu and Sikh young Britons are doing significantly better than British Muslims because they are better able to balance their particular ethnic identities and the Britishness that is their birthright.

The Islamic faith sets clear guidelines for comportment within the familial unit and there is also clear guidance on the need to adapt to the environment and society. Some parents see the school as being culpable for the child's behaviour and refuse to recognise and acknowledge their own role and specific responsibility. No school (faith or state) can ever be a substitute for the role parents must play in instilling moral values into their child, such as honesty, fair play and a sense of care. Parents must be ready to play their crucial role in the upbringing of their children.

Working with the school to find solutions to problems and issues will foster a good relationship between families – the agents of primary socialisation and the school – the agent of secondary socialisation. Both must work in tandem and deliver to children an education of solid grounding, entailing varied experiences, full of diverse avenues where the young can discover his/her own understanding of the world, where s/he has that freedom of choice to grow into an independent thinking young person. This holistic approach will lead to a positive environment in which the child can maximise his/her potential and excel in all areas of life. Many educators have over-emphasised Muslimness at the expense of Britishness and the whole child.

Parental concerns

Clothing

- 1) What should schools do when parents ask that their daughters wear:
 - (i) Hijab?
 - (ii) Jilbab?
 - (iii) Niqab?

The first of these female coverings relate to the hair, commonly referred to as hijab even though this term can also refer to a whole collective attitude of modesty. The second refers to the covering of the head, shoulders and chest (jilbab) and the third (niqab) conceals the entire face with the exception of the eyes. There is considerable dispute and present-day controversy regarding each of these female coverings. What is clear is that the wearing of the face veil (niqab) is not a Qu'ranic obligation and that there are divergent opinions about its origins. The Middle Eastern custom of wearing the jilbab is not a consistent requirement in majority-Muslim countries and different traditions interpret the female dress requirements differently. The wearing of these coverings is a matter of personal choice and is sometimes dependent on the individual's family environment and/or cultural background. Many of these traditions pre-date Islam.

It is vital to note that the duty to maintain high standards of moral behaviour is not just incumbent on women; it is the men's responsibility to "lower their gaze." A disturbing assumption has been embedded within some institutions that a "real"

Muslim female must wear at least one of the aforementioned garments. While many adult women who adopt these modes of dress are doing so through informed choice (as the result of personal reflection), we must not ignore the situation for women who are coerced into wearing them.

Covering of the head is a cultural practice that can be found in other faiths and traditions all over the world. Historically womenfolk from the Jewish and Christian traditions also covered their heads but over time social trends have resulted in this custom becoming obsolete. For Muslim women this has become something enforced either voluntarily or otherwise in line with a distinctive visual identity. Global events to a certain extent have been a contributing factor for this relatively modern fashion. During the Iranian revolution of 1979, women started putting on the headscarf in defiance in protest against the 'culture of nakedness' pushed forward by the pro-American Shah.

British Muslims have been caught up in the political web that has been spun by debate and discussion in the Muslim world on an international scale. Muslim countries where there was once choice, are becoming places of subtle and real coercion. Today in Pakistan, the wearing of the headscarf amongst females can be seen throughout even the ranks of the Pakistani Army. The same forces are at work in the UK.

The Islamic requirement in clothing is that of personal modesty, which all schools uphold already. There is no immorality or obscenity in

school uniforms. Where skirts or dresses are the uniform for female pupils, there is the option of wearing trousers too. In most schools in the United Kingdom, some provision is allowed where necessary, for traditional cultural dress to compliment the Western equivalent. Each case in school should be treated on a case by case basis with the objective of furthering school uniformity without compromising personal modesty. It is perfectly legitimate for a school to refuse to compromise on the jilbab and the niqab, both for health and safety and integration reasons. Allowances made to one community and not others feel unfair to children and separate these Muslim girls from the rest, including other, less orthodox Muslim pupils.

Further reading:

www.bmsd.org.uk/articles.asp?id=34

Swimming

- 2) What should schools do when parents say that their daughters cannot go swimming?

Schools need to explain the medical benefits of swimming and the positive effect it will have on their daughter's health. The importance of swimming ought to be highlighted as well as the resulting dangers to life should the child be placed in a situation where loss of life through drowning could have been prevented or avoided if the child had learned how to swim.

Teachers need to listen to the concerns of the parents to foster an environment of understanding. Most often the concerns are that of modesty and this can be overcome by offering parents the option for their daughters to wear the modern Islamic swimming costume that has come onto the market recently for those Muslims who wish for their daughters to be covered.

Since some parents may be offended by mixed shower and bathroom facilities, every effort should

be made to ensure that these such provisions remain single-sex to encourage Muslim girls to take up swimming. If this is not possible extra supervision can be provided but the emphasis should be on the fact that this is a vital part of the curriculum for all British children.

The Arts

- 3) What should schools do when parents object to their children participating in:
 - (i) drama?
 - (ii) music?
 - (iii) art?

Creativity in a person, be they child or adult is considered to be a divine blessing in Islam. To harness natural talent is to maximise on that gift and serve to create good for oneself and for the betterment of others. This talent may not be overtly obvious until it is discovered. Every child must be enabled to release personal creativity. There are many avenues which unleash an individual's capacity to tap into the different forms of intelligence in the human brain. Psychologists believe that there are various types of intelligence: linguistic, spatial, logical, social awareness, athleticism and aesthetic.

History furnishes us with numerous examples of Muslim innovation and heritage in the world today. (www.1001inventions.com). Islamic knowledge, inventions and teachings during Islam's golden age illustrate the pioneering creativity of Muslims through architecture, calligraphy, art, design and other artistic impulses.

Contemporary examples of talented British Muslims include:

Khayaal Theatre Company which is a charitable enterprise dedicated to developing and presenting 'wisdom-oriented performing arts entertainment with the aim of exploring literature, culture,

heritage and the diverse arts of the Muslim world'. By doing so, the theatre company seeks to enhance the strength of community relations and foster better inter community understanding and artistic appreciation. Furthermore, young minds are encouraged to explore their creativity and productive ways of looking at the world by rejecting malevolent alternatives such as crime, disaffection and extremism, all of which are ills in contemporary British society.

Composer, singer and an accomplished musician, Sami Yusuf has sold over a million copies of his debut album 'al-Mu'allim' while his second album 'My Ummah' has exceeded sales of three million copies worldwide. Yusuf is a devout Muslim for whom music and songs are a means of promoting a message of love, compassion, peace and tolerance whilst simultaneously encouraging the youth to be proud of their religion and identity.

Another growing trend amongst the Muslim youth in the UK is that of listening to 'Nasheeds'. These are Islamic-oriented songs which by nature are capellas (a type of music that is vocal, sung traditionally without instrumental accompaniment) accompanied only by a daff which is a large-sized frame drum commonly used in popular and classical music in various parts of the Middle East. While conservative Muslim scholars prohibit the use of instruments with the exception of basic percussion, they have no objection to the Nasheed, particularly since this musical genre is hugely popular because of its simplicity and purity. It is important to remember that there is no specific Qur'anic proscription of music and songs and that as long as this does not promote immorality and indecency, music is not outlawed in Islam.

Today a whole new generation of nasheed artists have emerged infusing newer methodologies and utilising a wider range of musical instruments to express their artistic creativity. Over time there has been a merging crossover of mainstream music with groups like 'Outlandish' and solo artists like Dawud

Wharnsby Ali appealing to wider Muslim audiences at Islamic orientated gatherings and festivals. The American music genre of rap has also attracted modern day Muslim artists who have directed Muslim youth to channel its talent and energy in promoting the pristine message of the Islamic faith whilst steering away from the twin dangers of extremism and alienation.

Similarly, the Islamic Artist, Mohammed Ali has taken graffiti and infused it with the Arabic script of the Holy Qur'an to create vibrant art forms which reflect the energy of urban Muslims living in the West. Recently he took his message of peace to New York where he helped inner city American kids to paint a mural depicting the universal ethical values.

Islam forbids all forms of immoral acts. So schools should not propagate such acts or actions. They are there to provide a wholesome education that is supplemented by the home environment and the wider society itself. A substantial proportion of this education should be devoted to areas that encourage artistic expression. Every child has a right to discover and explore such freedom of artistic expression and individual creativity. There may be some difficult situations – for example visits to art galleries where nudes are on display. There is no reason at all to capitulate to parents who may demand that their child be excused these on ground of morality. These works of European art are part of the heritage of the continent, and also the great Muslim Moghul artistic traditions. Ignorance is not an option. You may want to introduce debates on art in the west and east, the human form or not.

Forced marriages

- 4a) What should schools do if a girl or a boy confides in them that they are being forced into marriage?

Forced marriages are against the teachings of the Islamic faith. Parents who force their children

into marrying do so on the basis of a mistaken cultural rationale. It is also domestic violence and child abuse and should be treated as such by all professionals, not as a protected 'cultural' practice.

Schools should seek guidance from the government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) as a first port of call and generally only involve parents at a later stage. This is a highly sensitive issue and involving parents immediately may only serve to aggravate the situation who would resent the public airing of the family's private affairs. This may also lead to abduction of the child and being taken abroad to facilitate the forced marriage before any intervention by the British authorities can take place.

One member of the teaching staff should also seek special training and/or work closely with the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) so that s/he is best equipped with the necessary skills and understanding of the psychological, social and cultural impact of the forced marriage for each individual child. The member of staff should preferably be someone who is also the school counsellor. In the absence of such an individual, this task should be assigned to a member of the teaching staff who have undergone diversity training in order to prepare themselves for the issues faced.

4b) What policy should schools follow regarding government forced marriage leaflets

These leaflets must be distributed despite intimidation and objection from school governors and parents. In the past there have been reported cases of Muslim parent governors (especially of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin) who have started campaigns to discourage the distribution of such leaflets claiming that the information being circulated was a negative and offensive portrayal of their communities and their specific cultural practices.

By giving in to the demands of these governors, the schools serve to deprive youngsters the information

that is necessary and is their right. When to marry, where to marry, and most important whom to marry is the right of every child according to all religious perspectives, including Islam. Therefore, parental dictates to enforce marital choices upon their children has no Islamic justification whatsoever but stems from archaic cultural habits which need to be resisted.

Learning about other faiths

5a) How should schools respond to Muslim parents who do not want their children to learn about other faiths?

Children who born and raised in the UK live in a multi-faith and multi-cultural environment. Islam teaches respect and tolerance for other faiths. Key Islamic doctrines include the freedom of religion and not to disrespect the beliefs of others so that they may also respect you and your faith.

Muslim youngsters need to acquire a broad spectrum of knowledge, including religious and cultural information about their neighbours so that they can broaden their minds and their understanding as well as develop lateral thinking.

Through interaction with those of different faiths of cultures will they be able to comprehend and appreciate the verses of the Holy Qur'an which implores the believer to explore the earth around them so that you may see the signs of the Divine Creator. These verse from the Holy Qur'an (5:48; 49:13) relates to the multitude of languages and cultures that exist and how this is a manifestation of the bounty and mercy of transcendent Creator.

5b) How should schools respond to Muslim parents who do not want their children to ljoin other pupils in visiting other places of worship?

Once again, gaining insight into other ways of life and other beliefs is a treasure in the sense that it allows greater mutual understanding and serves to

break down the barriers that come into existence with prolonged disassociation and exclusion with the world around you.

Places of worship, irrespective to whichever faith they may be, are hubs of peace, of spiritual reflection and devotional sincerity. Experiencing and learning about different faiths allows the mind to become tolerant and to think of deeper matters. The knowledge of other religions besides your own fosters the promotion of philosophical inquiry and spiritual reflection. All of this is vital to the acquisition of knowledge that will contribute to the child's intellectual development.

Attending other places of worship will not make any Muslim desert their own faith. Visiting places of worship as well as inviting others to your own mosque, church, temple or synagogue is encouraged. Muslims should take heed of the illustrious example set by the Prophet Muhammad. When a visiting Christian delegation came to meet Muhammad in Madinah, he invited them into the mosque. Not only were they warmly welcomed but they were encouraged to pray in the second most holy mosque in Islam according to their own faith and practises.

Sex Education

- 6) What approach should schools take on sex education if Muslim parents object to this being taught to their children?

A well known prophetic tradition is that 'there is no shame in talking about sex'. Sexual matters must not be swept to the side as a result of the cultural inhibitions, parental embarrassment or social stigma. The human body undergoes various stages of changes during its lifetime. There are explicit purposes and reasons why it was created. By refusing to educate children on its bodily and physical functions, parents only serve to alienate their adolescent children. In this situation, youth will seek information from suspect or disreputable

sources when their parents fail to address their preoccupations.

It is far better and more wholesome for children to receive sex education from a reliable source so that they can come to terms with their own bodies and understand about life and the transition from child to adulthood. Teachers can agree to separate boys and girls for these sessions but an opt out would not be in the best interests of the child. Again within single sex schools, debates can be encouraged about sex before marriage, promiscuity, modern society, family values etc.

Evolution Theory

- 7) What should teachers do if parents object to the teaching of the Evolution Theory?

Children should not be subjected to selective education where they are exposed to only one aspect of any subject matter. In order to develop awareness of the world around them they must learn to make sense of history and the present so that they understand the world they inhabit. To prevent a child access to the Evolution Theory, parents deny their child the right to question it, its flaws and it merits not only in relation with their own faith but also in comparison with the faith of others.

This is part of an age old debate between philosophers, beginning in the twelfth century when Ibn Rushd (Averroes) from Muslim Spain raised the question that the ultimate truth can be arrived at by both human logic and spiritual faith. This double commitment to reason and revelation is what distinguished Islam in the heyday of Muslim civilisation. In Europe, over time this perpetual debate was settled some 300 years ago in favour of human reason taking precedence over faith. While much of the contemporary Islamic World has taken the polar opposite view, there is a growing tendency amongst Muslims to return to the golden rule pioneered by Ibn Rushd and endorsed by

the Holy Qur'an. For this reason, growing Muslim scholarship now also supports some aspects of Darwin's Theory of Evolution. The debate is an on-going one and relates to wider issues about the role of religion and politics in society. In the school context, this debate should not be repressed but explored where it is practical.

Friday Prayers

- 8) What provision should schools make for Friday prayers?

Provisions for Muslim Friday congregational prayers should be made according to two basic principles. Firstly, that it is for those pupils who wish to pray bearing in mind that not all Muslim children will participate. And secondly, that Friday prayers must not interfere with the pupil's studies and lessons.

Teachers are advised not to yield to the following parental demands:

- Allowing the pupils to go out to a mosque (which may not be nearby) for the full duration of the khutbah (sermon) and prayers, which normally takes up to an hour
- The school to set aside a dedicated separate room for the weekly Friday prayers
- Permitting an outside Imam (Muslim preacher) to lead the Friday service

We recommend that Muslim pupils be allowed to pray together if they express a collective wish to do during their regular lunch break so as not to interfere with the normal school programme. Since such prayers and sermon will be conducted in a school environment, they can be truncated to less than half a hour thereby not unduly affecting the school's routine.

bmsd appreciates the restriction of the schools with regards to space and suggests that the Muslim pupils be allowed to use an existing indoor sports arena or similar facility provided that the Friday

prayers do not exceed the allocated break time or adversely affect the school programme.

Child's absence from school

- 9) What is the educational response if parents want to take children out of schools for extended periods of time?

Many schools nationwide now have adopted the policy of allowing ten days annual leave. This time can be taken for cultural festivities and/or as holiday time as not all families are able to afford time away during peak season which coincides with the school summer holidays.

In the absence of such policy or if parents wish to exceed the allowed day annual leave (which is at the school's discretion), parental requests must be submitted to the school in writing.

Where parents deliberately fail to do this, then schools should treat the case as they would if the child has played truant. Under current legislation, parents are held accountable and subject to fine and/or imprisonment if they intentionally prevent their children from attending school. Again cultural understanding has resulted in children missing out on school and sometimes disappearing altogether from eth roll, no questions asked. This is a gross violation of the child's rights.

Eid Festivals

- 10) What should schools do if parents want them to recognise Eid twice a year?

The ten day leave policy as described in the question above would accommodate the demands of parents wishing to recognise Eid, the twice a year religious festivity, as a special Muslim holiday. While these two days for religious celebration present no problem for schools, there is persistent uncertainty in the British Muslim community as to when Eid is celebrated. Some Muslim groups will

determine that Eid takes place a day earlier, while others declare that it is a day later. The best policy is for schools to seek relevant information from the families and to make sure that there is some recognition and celebration that is shared by all the other children.

Gender segregation

11) How should schools respond when parents want gender segregation?

During their lifetime, the children will inevitably interact with people of both sexes. Children need to be educated about gender equality and to be taught to respect the opposite sex. Islam itself does not promote gender segregation and does not endorse the modern trends of public sexual segregation. In the central mosque in Mecca men and women pray together; so it is in many Shia mosques and among Sufis. Mainly ultra-conservative Muslims promote such fads which have no basis in the Holy Qur'an. For this reason, particularly in multi-cultural Britain, children must be socialised and educated that social interaction with the opposite sex cannot be avoided. Where Muslim parents insist on un-Qur'anic gender segregation, there is a distinct risk that their children will not be able to cope effectively when they leave school and enter their adult lives. It is therefore in the interests of all children that they regard social interaction with the opposite sex as normal and natural.

Endorsements

This booklet of advice is endorsed by the following organisations:

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