ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EDINBURGH SCHOOLS

Samena Dean

Foreword by Arzu Merali

Forward

by **Arzu Merali**

Head of research at the Islamic Human Rights Commission, UK

Samena Dean's report raises serious concerns about the experiences of Muslim school children at the hands of their peers in school settings. Her report is set within the concerns raised by existing data on the rise of Islamophobia in various settings. The 2015 work, Environment of Hate: The New Normal for Muslims in the UK[1] highlights that the experience of Islamophobia in the educational institutions has doubled between 2010 and 2014.

Likewise that report found that Muslims per se were failing to report instances of Islamophobia for fear of further discrimination or of meeting an apathetic attitude from those they reported to. Echoes of these findings can be heard in the responses given by children. The reporting by children of both Islamophobic harassment, attitudes and bullying, highlights the gap between existing anti-Islamophobia policies and initiatives and the lived experiences of children at schools. This work demands further investigation be carried out by the relevant institutions into:

(a) the quality and nature of responses provided to children when they do complain;

(b) the access for children to safe complaint mechanisms in the school setting;

(c) an overview of how widespread Islamophobic and other forms of racist bullying is in Edinburgh schools;

(d) how can existing policies be adapted and made more real for those at the receiving end of such abuse.

Arzu Merali

"With concentrated effort and action, the rising tide of hatred can be stemmed."

Dean's report demands a response from institutions, be they individual schools, local authorities or unions, in checking the rise of Islamophobia and other forms of hatred in Edinburgh schools. With concentrated effort and action, the rising tide of hatred can be stemmed.

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1. S. R. Ameli & A. Merali, *Environment of Hate: The New Normal for Muslims in the UK.* (Wembley, Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2015).

About Islamophobia

Compiled by **Richard Haley**

Chair of SACC

1997: A "New" Word

"In recent years a new word has gained currency... The word is 'Islamophobia'. It was coined in the late 1980s, its first known use in print being in February 1991, in a periodical in the United States. The word is not ideal, but is recognisably similar to 'xenophobia' and 'europhobia', and is a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam - and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims. Such dread and dislike have existed in western countries and cultures for several centuries. In the last twenty years, however, the dislike has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous. It is an ingredient of all sections of our media, and is prevalent in all sections of our society."

- The Runnymede Trust, "Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All", 1997

Closed Minds

"Islamophobia is closed-minded prejudice against or hatred of Islam and Muslims. An Islamophobe is an individual who holds a closed-minded view of Islam and promotes prejudice against or hatred of Muslims."

- Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

What Is Hate Crime?

"Definition - Crime motivated by malice or ill will towards a social group by:

• Race.

• Sexual orientation.

• Religion/faith.

• Disability.

• Transgender/gender identity (Offences (Aggravated by Prejudice) Act 2010)."

- Police Scotland

In January 2017 the Scottish Government announced an **independent review of hate crime legislation**, led by Lord Bracadale and scheduled to take around 12 months.

www.gov.scot/hatecrimelegislationreview

About Islamophobia

Scottish Identity, Islam and Ethnicity

The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2015 found that **41%** of respondents agreed to some extent with the statement:

"Scotland would begin to lose its identity if more Muslims came to live in Scotland."

13% agreed strongly, 28% agreed, 19% neither agreed nor disagreed, 27% disagreed, 12% disagreed strongly, 1% didn't know.

34% agreed to some extent with the statement:

"Scotland would begin to lose its identity if more black and Asian people came to live in Scotland."

10% agreed strongly, 24% agreed, 22% neither agreed nor disagreed, 31% disagreed, 12% disagreed strongly, 1% didn't know.

The sample size was 1288, with fieldwork taking place between July 2015 and January 2016.

- Scottish Social Attitudes 2015: Attitudes to discrimination and positive action, The Scottish Government, 2016
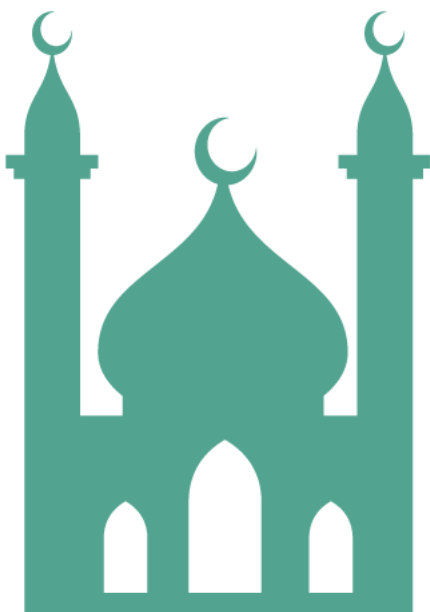
UK experiences of Islamophobia

A 2014 UK-wide survey by the Islamic Human Rights Commission found that **56%** of respondents had experienced **verbal abuse**.

1.6% said they had experienced it "always", 4.8% said they had experienced it "often", 17.8% said they had experienced it "sometimes", 31.8% said they had experienced it "rarely" and 44% said they had "never" experienced it.

17.8% of respondents had experienced **physical abuse**.

0.3% said they had experienced it "always", 0.7% said they had experienced it "often", 3.5% said they had experienced it "sometimes", 13.3% said they had experienced it "rarely" and 82.2% said they had "never" experienced it.

The sample size was 1148.

- S. R. Ameli & A. Merali, Environment of Hate: The New Normal for Muslims in the UK. (Wembley, Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2015).

Introduction

"I didn't want my children to go through the same things that I did."

Having experienced Islamophobia myself, I didn't want my children to go through the same things that I did. It was scary, isolating, and it made me afraid to go out in public. If that's what it was like for me as an adult, I cannot imagine what the experience is like for a child.

No parent wants their child to experience the hatred of Islamophobia. No parent wants their child to shoulder such abuse due to events they have no part in. All a parent wants is that a safe and secure environment is provided for their child at school.

But when my daughter started experiencing Islamophobia at school, this lead me to question how far spread the Islamophobia is for Muslim children in Edinburgh schools.

In November and December 2016 I spoke with 100 children and asked them to fill in a questionnaire about their experiences. These questions were based on my daughter's experiences at school.
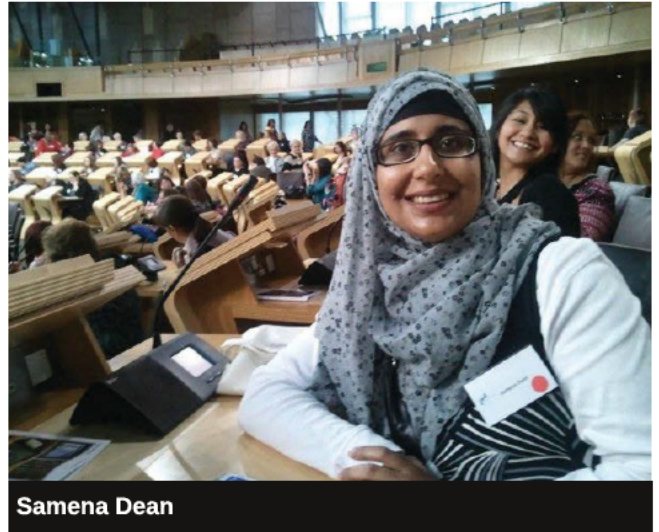
Samena Dean

I am not an academic but as a mum, I was hoping that my daughter's school was just an isolated case. Watching how upset my daughter and her Muslim fellow students were emphasised that something had to be done.

During this study, my younger daughter encountered her first physical and verbal Islamophobic abuse at her school and the psychological effect it had on her was devastating and difficult as a mum to bear.

Approach

I contacted a number of after-school Islamic Studies groups and Muslim youth groups. I explained what I was doing and asked for parental permission to attend some classes to speak to the children attending.

I spoke to the children in groups (with the teacher present) and explained my motivation and asked if they knew what Islamophobia is and they knew. I handed them each a questionnaire. I read out each question out loud and let them ask for explanations as they filled in their answer.

I phrased the questions to find out whether children felt supported by the school when they experienced Islamophobia, as I felt that the onus should be on schools to take a front line approach rather than place responsibility on the child to deal with the consequences of Islamophobia on their own.

I also wanted to know how sensitive schools were towards the feelings of Muslim children when discussing "topical" issues related to Islam, such as terrorism or the burqa ban in France.
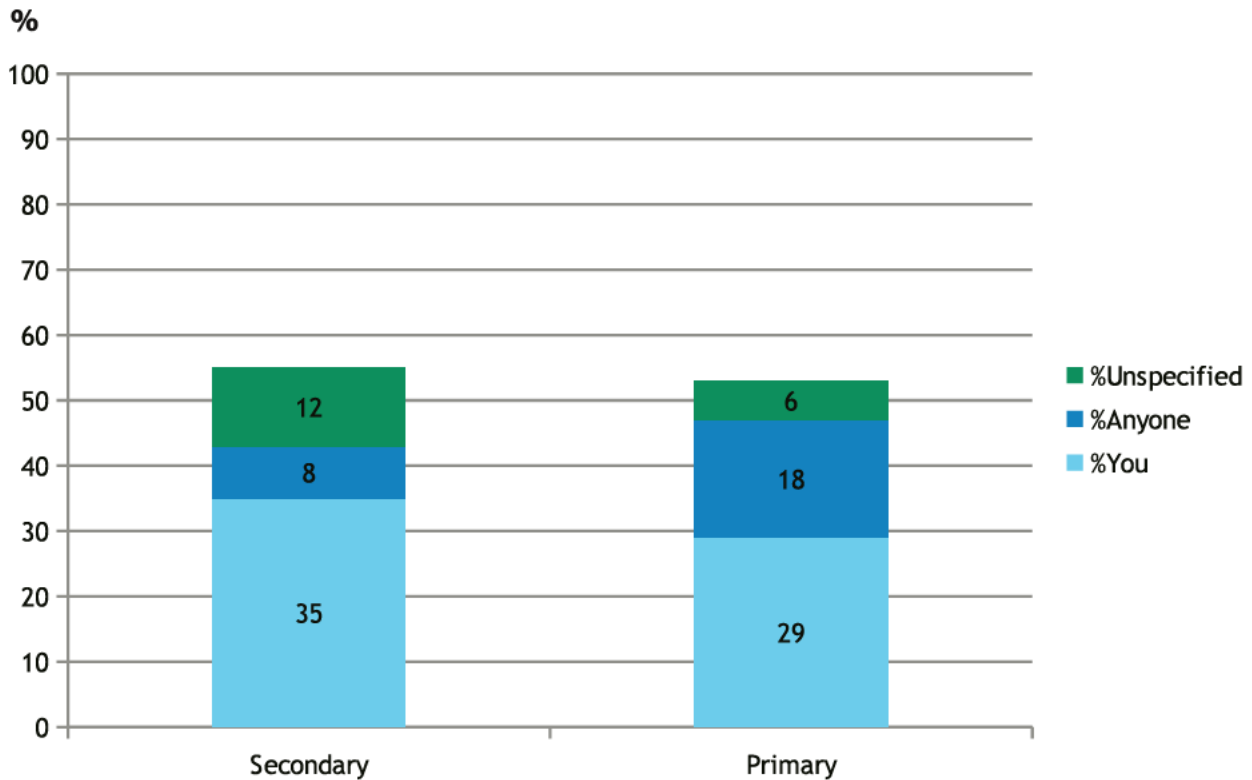
Participants:

- A total of 100 Muslim school children from year P5 to S6:
    - 66 pupils from 18 different high schools
    - 34 pupils from 22 different primary schools

Results

Q1. Have you or anyone at your school experienced any verbal Islamophobia?

- **55% of the 66 high school** respondents said that they had encountered verbal Islamophobia.
- **53% of the 34 primary school** respondents said that they had encountered verbal Islamophobia.
- **35% of the 66 high school** respondents said that they had encountered verbal Islamophobia personally.
- **29% of the 34 primary school** respondents said that they had encountered verbal Islamophobia personally.
- **12% of the high school children** and 6% of the primary school children did not specify the circumstances.
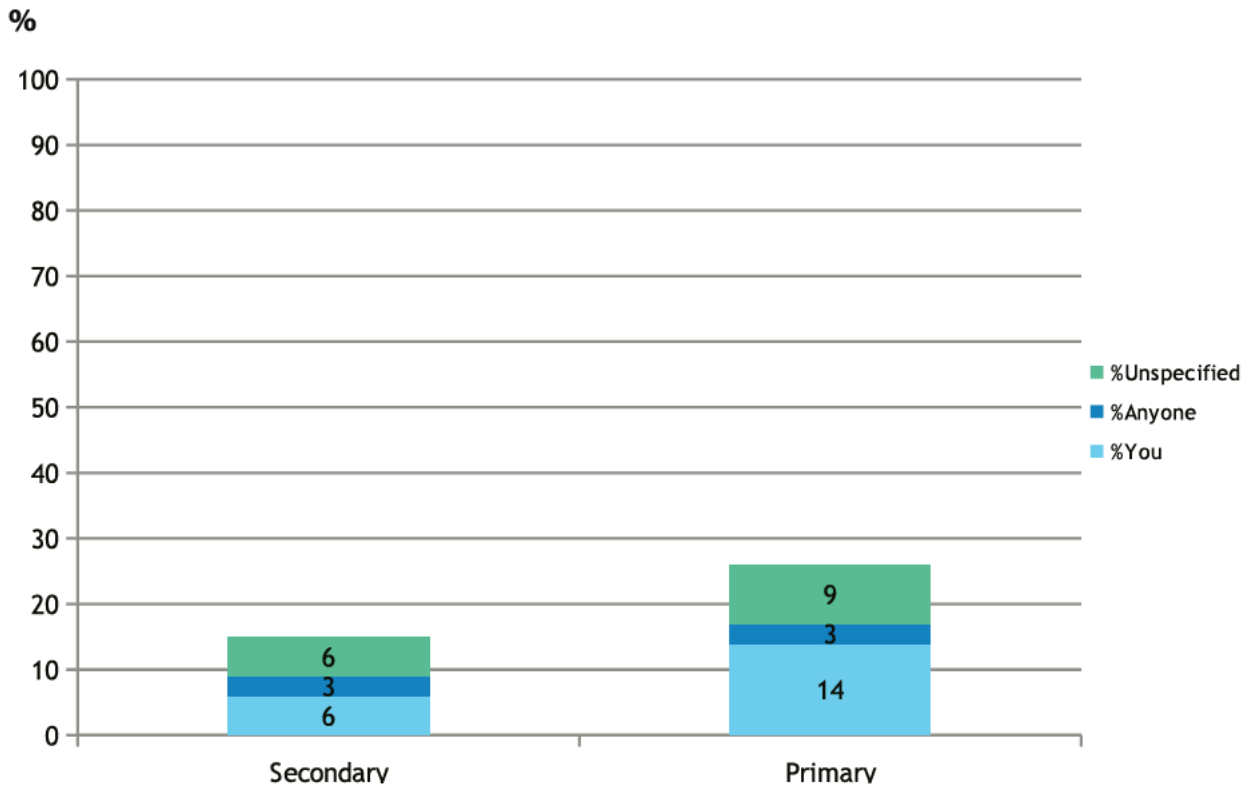
Results

Q2. Have you or anyone at your school experienced any physical Islamophobia?

- **15% of the 66 high school** respondents said that they had encountered physical Islamophobia.
- **26% of the 34 primary school** respondents said that they had encountered physical Islamophobia.
- **6% of the 66 high school** respondents said that they had encountered physical Islamophobia personally.
- **14% of the 34 primary school** respondents said that they had encountered physical Islamophobia personally.
- **6% of the high school children** and 9% of the primary school children did not specify the circumstances.
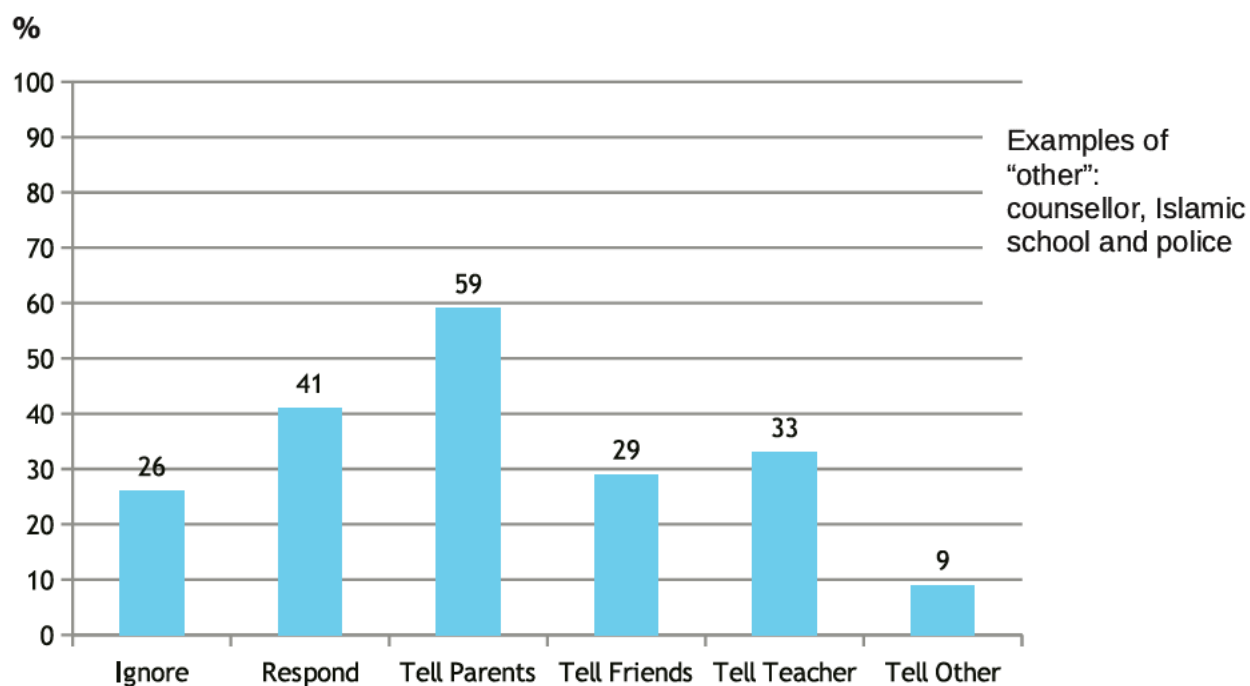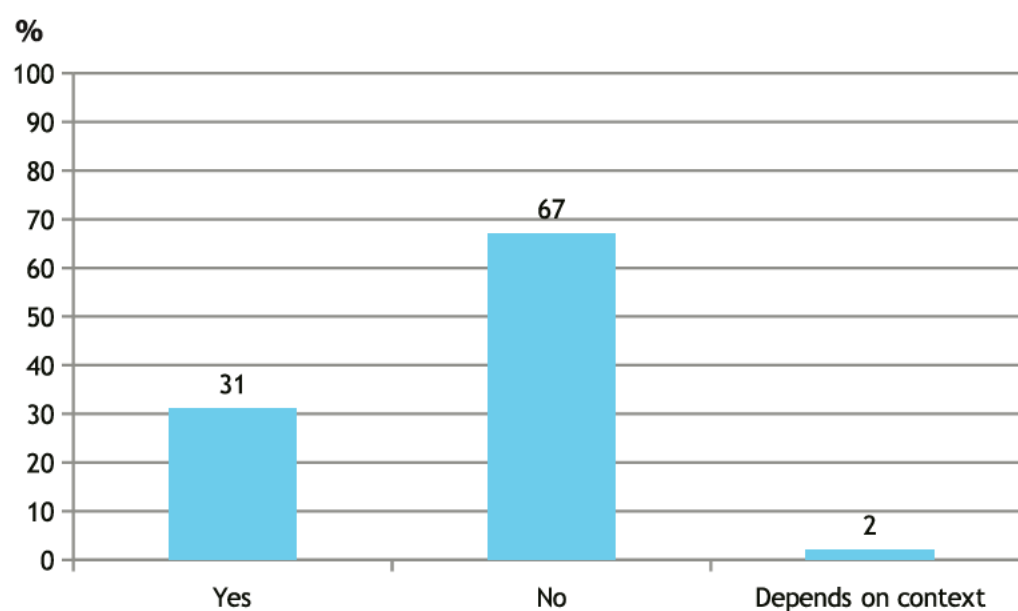
Results

Q3. If you were to/or have experienced any of the above would you: (tick all that apply)

Examples of "other": counsellor, Islamic school and police

Category	%
Ignore	26
Respond	41
Tell Parents	59
Tell Friends	29
Tell Teacher	33
Tell Other	9

Q3 cont. If you were to/or have experienced any of the above would you tell a teacher?

Category	%
Yes	31
No	67
Depends on context	2

Results

Q3 cont. After informing teacher what was your outcome?

Out of 14 respondents who answered yes to the previous question.
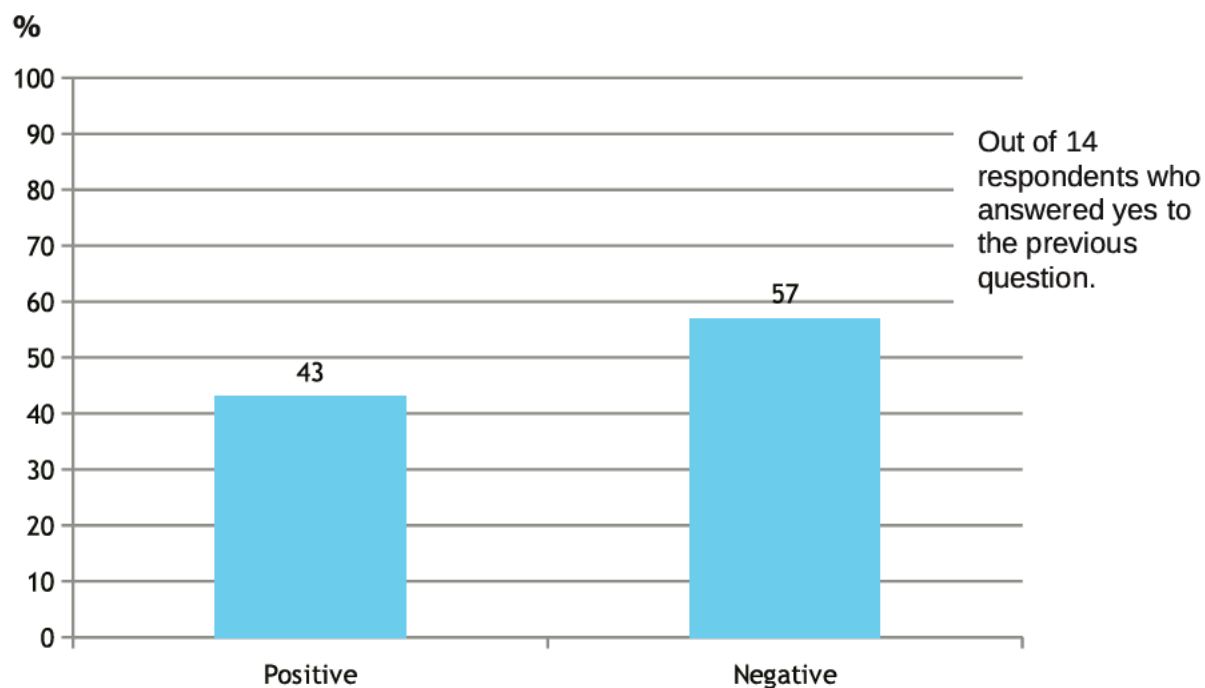
The respondents provided freeform answers (there are some examples on the next page) that were categorised as positive or negative by myself.

Results

Q3 cont. Tell teacher (if yes describe outcome)

The respondents provided freeform answers that were categorised as positive or negative by myself.

Some examples

"Don't do anything, sometimes respond"

"Did nothing"

"Spoke to them but not much happened"

"Talk to person - got a sorry"

"Told teacher and they didn't do anything"

"I did it before, nothing happened"

"Sorted Out"

"Send to head teacher"

"Head teacher spoke to the boys"

"They got a detention"

Results

Q3 cont. Tell teacher (if no, explain why)

Some examples

"Don't help at all"

"Wouldn't understand, not helpful"

"I don't want to be known as a grass"

"I don't trust teachers"

"They wouldn't take it seriously"

"They may not understand what we are going through as they may not know much about Islam"

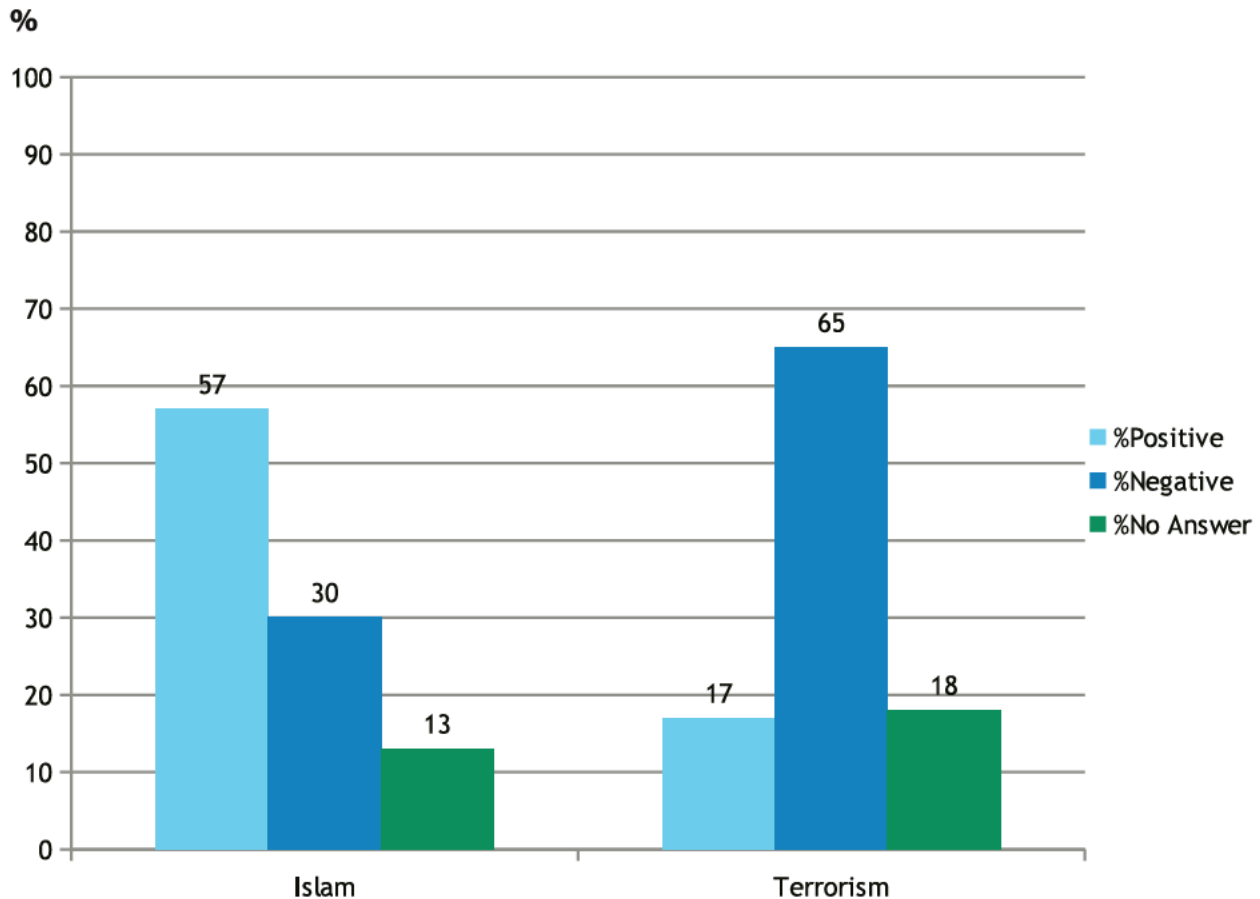"They could be racist themselves and might not do anything about it"

"Anything they do, don't help"

Q4. How do you feel when teachers talk about
a) Islam?   b) Terrorism ?

%

The respondents provided freeform answers that were categorised as positive or negative by myself.

- 57% of the 100 respondents felt positively when Islam was discussed in class. Some said that this was because they felt "proud", "happy" and "good" of their religion.

- 30% of the 100 respondents felt negatively when Islam was discussed in class. Some said that this was because they felt "awkward","embarrased because everyone stares at me" and "uncomfortable".

- 65% of the 100 respondents felt negatively when terrorism was discussed in class. Some said that this was because they felt "scared", "worried" and "angry".

- 17% of the 100 respondents felt positively when terrorism was discussed in class. Some said that this was because they felt "nothing", "ok" and "fine".

Students from 4 schools did not answer, saying that terrorism had not been discussed at their school.
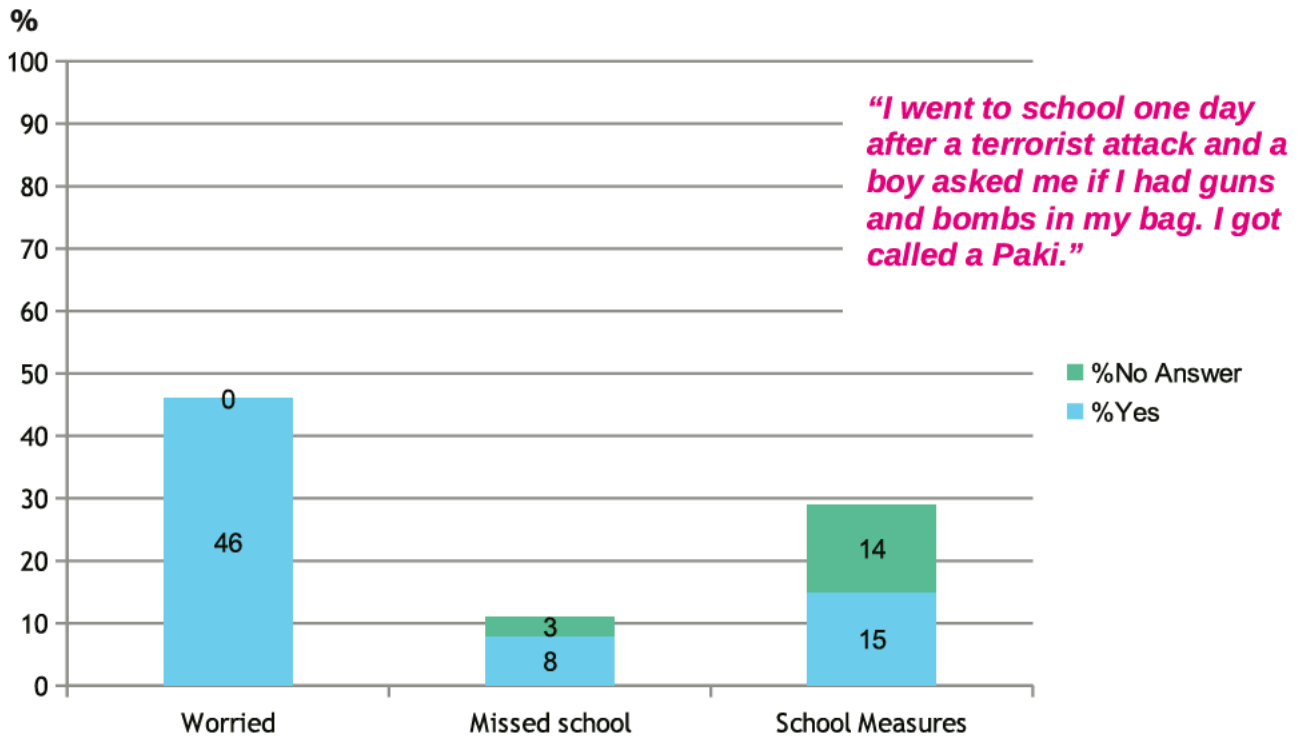
Results

Q5. After a terrorist attack:

a) Were you worried about going to school?

b) Did you miss school?

c) Did the school make any special measures?

"I went to school one day after a terrorist attack and a boy asked me if I had guns and bombs in my bag. I got called a Paki."

Chart (% on y-axis, 0–100):
- Worried: %Yes = 46, %No Answer = 0
- Missed school: %Yes = 8, %No Answer = 3
- School Measures: %Yes = 15, %No Answer = 14

Legend:
- ■ %No Answer
- ■ %Yes

Special measures taken by schools

"They make sure you are OK"

"They talk about it"

"Were making people aware of the situation"

"Some teachers talked about what happened in Paris to raise awareness"

"They ask if you are comfortable talking about things"

"Open discussion to the class not just me"

Q6. Have you ever been fearful of going to school because you are a Muslim?

"Because everyone relates Islam to bad things like terrorism and killing."

■ %No Answer
■ %Yes

"People in my class say I am a terrorist and punch me."

% Fearful
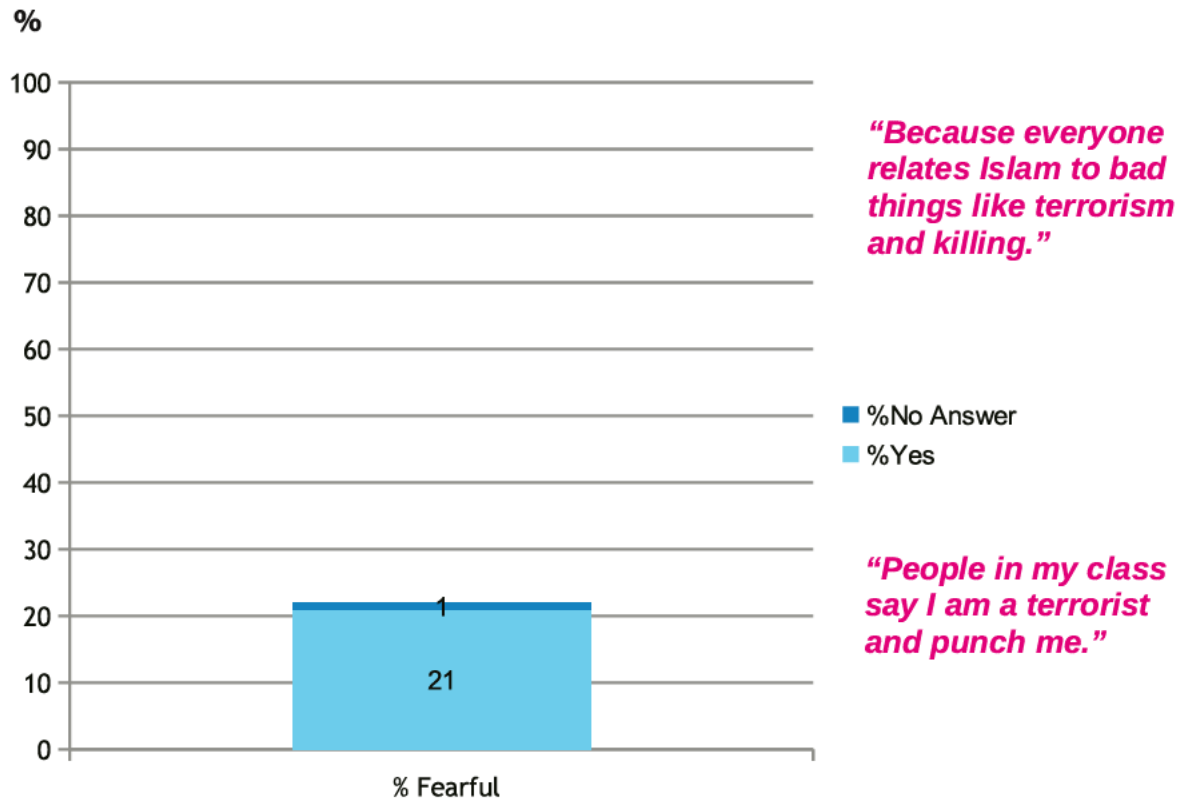
Glasgow, 7 July 2007
Photo: Gareth Harper @ Flickr

Paris, 8 January 2014
Photo: Highwire @ Flickr

Results

Q6 cont. Please explain if yes

Some examples

"Everyone give me dirty looks"

"I wear hijab and I feel I get judged a lot and people don't like it when I wear it"

"I feel like people are going to be mean to me"

"Scared of abuse and getting attacked"

"Peoples reactions"

"Because what happens on the news"

"Because you get called names"

"What people might think of me as I wear the hijab"

"They would be bully me and say 'Go back to your country'"

"I was scared if I might get attacked"

Results

Q7. Please list any incidents that have occurred in your school?

Some examples

"Me and my friend get called names like terrorist, paki, bombers, ISIS, Allah huakber and once they pretend to throw bombs. They also shout build a wall."

"I have 13 separate incidence which are a hate crime my school dont do anything about it."

"People in my class punch me and say I am a terrorist and have been aggresive to my friend and they punch him."

"A girl got her hijab ripped off."

"I got called a terrorist and people were asking me if I had a bomb under my hijab and if I was going to kill them."

"Someone uploaded a photo of me and my friend behind our back and it read Allahu Akbar."

"A boy in my class tried to take my hijab off."

"Blamed for 9/11. Called a terrorist. Been shouted 'Allah Akbar' at. Whispered about when having discussions about Islam and Terrorism."

Concluding Remarks

"It was heartbreaking to listen to some of the testimonies."

When I first started this, I never expected the number of children who suffered from Islamophobia to be as high as this.

It was heartbreaking to listen to some of the testimonies, especially the stories of the physical abuse. I came across Muslim children wanting to change their identity, accepting the label of "terrorist", and fearing carrying out their religious obligations publicly.

The stories shared by the children really highlighted to me the psychological pressures Muslim children face whilst carrying out normal day to day activities such as going to school.

It was also particularly worrying to hear of the accounts from the children where schools did not respond to incidents of Islamophobia, or where the children did not feel that the school's response was appropriate.

I hope that this leads to a recognition of the scale of Islamophobia in Edinburgh.

I also hope that publishing these results will lead to a deeper understanding of how Islamophobia is affecting these young Muslims.

Finally, I hope this encourages wider society, councils, unions, and schools to challenge Islamophobia in all its forms.

If you would like to discuss the issues raised in this booklet with the author, you can contact her via SACC:

enquiries@sacc.org.uk

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EDINBURGH SCHOOLS

Samena Dean is a youth worker, community activist and a full-time mother of three and has been working with the Edinburgh Muslim community on Islamophobia for a number of years.

Arzu Merali is one of the founders of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, UK and heads its research section.

To request more copies of this booklet (FREE), email SACC at:

enquiries@sacc.org.uk

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togetheragainstprevent.org

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Scotland Against Criminalising Communities
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