



The Centre  
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## Hair is not just hair – What can schools do about hair discrimination?

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Hair, regardless of colour, is a grey area. While racial discrimination is illegal under the Equalities Act 2010, it does not explicitly reference hair. As a result, schools' approaches to hair policies appear at best uneven and at worst discriminatory.

Just this year, school hair policies were thrown into the spotlight as pupils at Pimlico Academy staged a boycott in response to the school's new guidance on student appearance. This specifically banned hair that "may block the view of others", which pupils widely understood as being about afro hairstyles.[1] This of course is not a new issue.

In 2020 Ruby Williams successfully took action against the Urswick School after being repeatedly sent home from school due to claims that her afro did not comply with school rules. Under the school's appearance policy, pupils were told that "afro style hair must be of reasonable size and length".[2] Fulham Boys School also faced a backlash in 2017, with a mother taking them to court after her son was told that his dreadlocked hair didn't comply with uniform and appearance policies. As a result of the policy, the young boy was banned from school and taught in isolation.[3] The school uniform policy stated that "hairstyles should be tidy and of a *conventional* nature, no extreme haircuts including sculpting, shaving, dreadlocks or braiding are allowed".

The mother won a court battle, with the school admitting that the policies had 'indirectly' discriminated against him. However, his mother chose to send her son to another academy following the incident. Despite this incident, the school also confirmed it would continue to uphold its uniform and appearance policy while remaining committed to serving "boys from all different backgrounds and cultures".[4] Unfortunately, research tells us that these incidents aren't isolated. For example, more than ½ of Black children surveyed in England and Wales have been sent home for wearing their hair natural or in a protective style, while ¼ of Black adults had a negative experience in school related to their hair.[5] I faced hair discrimination at work when I first went in with my hair in its natural form. At the time, I was told it wasn't professional as it was "too big" and that I should make my hair more professional for

my next shift. The whole experience was quite demoralising and turned the job from something I enjoyed into an experience where I felt judged and out of place.

I can't even imagine what impact hearing this as a young person would be— essentially hearing that in your natural form, you are not accepted. What does it say to Black children in schools where they are taught about the importance of British values such as tolerance and individual liberty, but these ideals aren't applied to their differences? What message does this also send to his or her white schoolmates?

At this point, you may be thinking, “but hair is just hair”. But hair is not just hair; it is much more than that.

For many people, how they present themselves, including their hair, represents who they are or how they want the world to see them. Beyond that, for many Black people, our hair represents our culture and our heritage, with hairstyles such as braids dating back at least 5000 years. Having braids, cornrows, or a faded haircut is professional and ‘conventional’ to us. In allowing schools or workplaces to continue to ban such hairstyles, we continue to problematise them and perpetuate the idea that black hair is unacceptable.

#### So what can be done?

In the US, 11 states have adopted the CROWN Act, which “prohibits race-based hair discrimination, which is the denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including braids, locs, twists or bantu knots.”.[6]

Under the law, Black women and men cannot be denied employment opportunities because of their natural hair. Black children cannot be prevented from going to school or accessing education because their hair doesn't conform to (indirectly) discriminatory appearance policies.

The UK could adopt similar legislation. However, schools and workplaces don't need to wait for this to be enforced by law. Instead, they can adopt the Halo Code.[7]

Put simply; the Halo Code is the UK's first Black hair pledge that schools and workplaces can sign. Under this pledge, schools promise to “welcome Afro-textured hair worn in all styles including, but not limited to, afros, locs, twists, braids, cornrows, fades, hair straightened through the application of heat or chemicals, weaves, wigs, headscarves, and wraps”. Schools also commit themselves to embracing Afro-hairstyles and acknowledge it as an essential part of their cultural, ethnic, racial and religious identities.

Once schools sign up for the pledge, they have a simple appearance and dress code that incorporates and celebrates Black hairstyles and encourages schools to think carefully about the implications of policies on pupils from different backgrounds.

Committing to this pledge is not a silver bullet – we need legislation too – but it is a vital step towards preventing discrimination and celebrating diversity.

## References

- [1] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/pimlico-academy-student-protest-afro-hijab-b1825186.html>
- [2] <https://legal.equalityhumanrights.com/en/case/stopping-school-using-discriminatory-hairstyle-policy>
- [3] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-45499584>
- [4] <https://www.mylondon.news/news/west-london-news/fulham-school-told-pupil-cut-15143531>
- [5] <https://www.dove.com/uk/stories/about-dove/untangling-hair-discrimination.html>
- [6] The CROWN Act stands for Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair
- [7] The Halo Code was created by the **Halo Collective** in December 2020