

Building more inclusive school curricula and cultures:

findings and policy recommendations from the Young Lives, Young Futures study

For over a decade in the UK, young people's unhappiness at school has been on the rise, particularly among 14-16 year-olds¹ and there has been a significant increase in rates of absence from school.² In this briefing, which focuses on the English context, we present evidence on some of the causes of the high levels of alienation from school reflected in these trends and evidence-informed policy recommendations that prioritise more inclusive school curricula and cultures.

Findings from Young Lives, Young Futures

Findings from the Young Lives, Young Futures study³ suggest that in the English context a significant driver of school alienation is a curriculum that prioritises academic over more practical learning, along with an exam-focused approach to teaching and assessment. Additional drivers include inadequate support for mental health, special educational needs and disabilities, experiences of discrimination and bullying, and negative relationships with teachers.⁴

While the previous government's guidance for enhancing students' mental health and wellbeing was based on a laudable set of principles,⁵ our research suggests that the potential for schools to realise these is being systematically undermined by exam-focused performance measures. Pressure to prioritise examination results over meaningful learning and their students' wellbeing, combined with cuts to school budgets, has constrained the space for schools to develop and implement policies that would make them more inclusive.⁶ Additionally, statutory guidance on school absences⁷ focuses primarily on enforcement. While the inclusion in this guidance of encouragement to schools to build strong relationships with families to better understand

barriers to attendance is welcome, current policies do not yet sufficiently address the root causes of school disengagement.

A strong message from our data is that school experience itself (and not only schooling outcomes) is a social justice issue. Many young people find school stressful and unenjoyable, with 45% of 15-16 year-olds reporting that they do not like being at school. Those from low-income backgrounds, Black Caribbean and Mixed ethnicities, LGBT students, those with special educational needs and disabilities, and those who say they are unlikely to go to university are much less likely to say that they enjoy school, feel noticed or listened to by their teachers, or receive encouragement from them.

Many also experience discrimination at school: 20% of non-White-British young people report unfair treatment or bullying from peers due to their skin colour, ethnicity or nationality. 45% of those identifying as LGB and 39% identifying as trans report having experienced unfair treatment or bullying related to their sexual orientation and trans status respectively. Nearly one in four young people face unfair treatment from peers based on their size or appearance.

Two interrelated sets of reasons for why schools are unenjoyable and alienating emerged from our data: *curriculum and pedagogy; and systems of support and inclusion.*

Curriculum and pedagogy

The current curriculum's narrow academic focus and exam-driven culture are alienating young people who prefer practical and creative subjects and hands-on learning. Many of those we interviewed found school subjects 'boring' and irrelevant to their interests or career aspirations. They experienced teaching as excessively exam focused and didactic, and exams as a significant source of anxiety. They received a strong message at school that academic routes and approaches to learning are more valued than practical and creative ones. This discourages students from considering non-university career paths, which are vital for the economy and society, and seriously undermines the quality of their school experience. As their interests and values are not aligned with dominant ideas of success, this affects the support they receive, and their sense of belonging and self-worth.

Systems of support and inclusion

The strong emphasis on equating worth with academic test results is part of wider school cultures that leave many young people feeling unsupported, misrecognised and disrespected.

Participants whose wellbeing and behaviour were affected by their difficult upbringings reported often experiencing a lack of understanding and empathy from teachers. They were often perceived as 'bad', disruptive and failures with little hope for the future, leading to their placement in isolation units or exclusion from mainstream education.

Young people with poor mental health and/or special educational needs and disabilities often did not receive adequate support, missing school as a result. Peer bullying and discrimination, compounded by a perceived lack of teacher support, caused some to leave school.

These issues were exacerbated by high teacher turnover and reliance on supply teachers, hindering stable student-teacher relationships. However, some young people recounted treasured teachers who were crucial in



transforming their educational experiences. The research highlights how such relationships can flourish in Pupil Referral Units and other alternative education settings where teachers have more freedom to build caring and supportive learning environments for their students.

Policy recommendations

We welcome the government's plan to develop a broader, more inclusive national curriculum reflective of the diversity of young people's lives. However, to avoid paying mere lip service to this agenda, **schools must be designed to serve the full spectrum of, and not just some, educational purposes, valuing all the ways people can be successful in education and life.**

This requires schools and teachers to be released from the stranglehold of top-down accountability measures and an overly prescriptive curriculum. Although replacing the current school accountability measures with more educationally progressive ones would be an improvement, if such measures remain equally top-down the change will be insufficient. As we know from a wealth of scholarship, any purely top-down system of accountability is likely to have perverse effects, de-professionalising teachers, and distorting practice in directions that are unresponsive to the needs of, or indeed may positively harm, the very communities they are designed to serve.⁸ Instead **the government's top-down approach to school accountability should be replaced by a more developmental and participatory approach based on the principles of intelligent accountability.**

For the same reasons, **decisions on teachers' pay should be disconnected from students' tests results.**

To achieve these goals requires a long-term plan, as follows:

In the first year of the new government:

- Commit to ensuring that all decisions relating to school policy are guided by an **equal valuing of the full range of knowledge, skills, dispositions and post-16 education, training, employment and life-beyond-work destinations** essential for a flourishing economy and society.
- Commit to reforming the government's approach to school accountability in ways that recognise both the harms produced by top-down approaches and the value of **more developmental, participatory**

systems of accountability for strengthening teacher professionalism, the inclusivity of school cultures and, ultimately, student outcomes.

- Commit to **protecting school budgets** by reinvesting the funds saved from falling rolls into schools. This will help ensure the bedrock of a secure, stable and well remunerated teaching workforce and the manageable teacher workloads that are required if schools are to be properly responsive to the needs of all their students.
- As part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, **consult on how the required content of the national curriculum and the number of exams taken at 16 can be reduced** to free up the space, time and resources teachers need to build relationships with their students and develop curricula and teaching methods that are more fully responsive to the full range of young people in the classroom.
- Amend the DfE's guidance on teachers' pay to **exclude student assessment data from the evidence that can be used to determine performance management and performance-related pay decisions.**

By the end of the term:

- Introduce a new, less prescriptive, slimmed down national curriculum and a reduced number of exams at 16, informed by the consultation undertaken as part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.
- Support **the development and piloting of alternative, more developmental and participatory approaches to school accountability** in a volunteer sample of groups of schools in local authorities and multi-academy trusts, building on insights from existing models and based on intelligent accountability principles.⁹
- Roll out a new accountability system based on lessons from the pilot, in which front-line **responsibility for school accountability is devolved to local authorities and trusts, and the role of Ofsted is reconfigured** as an assessor of the quality of the accountability processes managed by local authorities and trusts, for example, ensuring that all key stakeholders have a meaningful say in the process and that robust systems of critical self- and external peer-review are in place.

Laying the groundwork for the long term:

- Encourage and support schools to use some of the time and resources freed up by a less prescriptive curriculum and the affordances of a more participatory approach to school accountability to **work with their students in designing new educational approaches and support systems.**
- Help build belonging and 'co-ownership' in schools by aiming to harness the energy and ideas of the full range of students, **ensuring inclusivity by being proactive in involving groups historically marginalised in decision-making.** This includes students not classified as high attainers, those previously placed in isolation or excluded, those from low-income backgrounds, and those with special educational needs and disabilities.



Through reducing the pressure of exams, allowing young people to study topics they are passionate about, and building more participatory approaches to school accountability, these recommendations will enable the development of more inclusive school curricula and cultures in which both student and staff wellbeing is taken seriously. Ultimately, they will lead, not only to improved educational outcomes, but also to young people being better placed to make valuable social and economic contributions.

¹ McPherson et al. (2023) *Schools for All: Young people's experiences of alienation in the English secondary school system*. https://www.ylyf.co.uk/_files/ugd/44751f_4aed3f1a10548a383d9e514b986fbc1.pdf.

² In England, between 2013/14 and 2023/4 the proportion of school sessions missed by students rose from 5% to 8% and the proportion of students missing more than 10% of their schooling rose from 14% to 23%. Department for Education (2024) *Pupil absence in schools in England*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

³ Young Lives, Young Futures is a six-year ESRC longitudinal study investigating how England's vocational education and training system can better support the school-to-work transitions of young people who don't go to university (currently 51% of 18-24 year olds). The project is concerned with examining the availability and accessibility of educational and employment opportunities for this group of young people and of resources for helping them make and enact decisions about their futures. The study consists of a 3-wave nationally representative survey of more than 10,000 young people, and qualitative interviews with 123 young people and 75 local policymakers and practitioners from across four local authority areas with contrasting labour market opportunities, social and economic geographies and education and training provision. The study is focused on the 15-20 age group and has a particular emphasis on engaging with the perspectives of young people themselves, including those who are more marginalised and whose voices are not often heard in policymaking.

⁴ McPherson et al. (2023) *Schools for All: Young people's experiences of alienation in the English secondary school system*.

⁵ Public Health England and Department for Education (2015) *Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing: A whole school or college approach*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-children-and-young-peoples-emotional-health-and-wellbeing>

⁶ Gewirtz, S., Maguire, M., Neumann, E., & Towers, E. (2021). What's wrong with 'deliverology'? Performance measurement, accountability and quality improvement in English secondary education, *Journal of Education Policy*, 36(4): 504–529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1706103>.

⁷ Department for Education (2024) *Working together to improve school attendance*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance>

⁸ Cribb, C. & Gewirtz, S. (2015) Professionalism, Cambridge: Polity Press. Virens, D., Vosselman, E. & Groß, C. (2018) Public Professional Accountability: A Conditional Approach, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 153: 1179-96.

⁹ In this context such principles might include:

- The involvement of teachers and other school community members in helping to define accountability expectations and not just in delivering on top-down standardised expectations.
- The involvement of diverse and multiple stakeholders in defining standards and practices of accountability, including voices from within and outside schools and the teaching profession.
- Welcoming variation in conceptions of success and accountability practices such that the set of system-wide universal expectations is slimmed down.
- An external mechanism to check that: universal expectations are being met; the practices of accountability in place adhere to the above principles and high standards; and there are rigorous systems of accountability in place, such as robust systems of critical self- and external peer-review, e.g. from other local authorities and trusts.