

Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: Evidence from the ‘Young Lives, Young Futures’ study

Young Lives, Young Futures is a six-year ESRC longitudinal study (running from 2019-2025) investigating how England’s vocational education and training system can better support the education-to-work transitions of young people who don’t go to university (currently 51% of 18-24 year olds). 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. The research is being conducted by a team based at King’s College London and the Edge Foundation.

In this response we draw on evidence from the first two waves of data collection, when our participants were 15-16 and 17-18 years old respectively. For further information or to discuss any of the issues presented here, please contact Professor Sharon Gewirtz, the project PI, at sharon.gewirtz@kcl.ac.uk. We do not require this response to be kept confidential.

Our response addresses the following questions:

Section 3: Social Justice and Education

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)?

14. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access and participation for learners with SEND?

15. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above?

Section 7: Assessment and accountability

46. Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

Introduction

For over a decade in England young people's alienation from school has been on the rise, particularly among 14-16 year-olds,¹ and there has been a significant increase in rates of absence from school.² Evidence from the [Young Lives, Young Futures](#) study suggests that a significant cause of school alienation is a curriculum that prioritises academic over more practical learning, along with an exam-focused approach to teaching and assessment.

School experience (and not only schooling outcomes) is a social justice issue

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 and Black Caribbean and Mixed ethnicities, LGBT students, those with special educational needs and disabilities, and those who told us they are unlikely to go to university were much less likely to say that they enjoyed school, felt noticed or listened to by their teachers, or received encouragement from them. On this last measure, less than a third of young people who thought it was very unlikely they would attend university reported that they received encouragement from their teachers. As part of the research, we also compared the responses of students who told us that being able to work with their hands was important to them in their future careers with those who did not select this option. This comparison shows that those who said they want to work with their hands were significantly less likely than those who did not to say that they liked being at school and that doing well at school meant a lot to them.

Many of the young people participating in our study also experienced discrimination at school: 20% of non-'White-British' young people reported experiences of 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 reported having experienced unfair treatment or bullying related to their sexual orientation and trans status respectively. Nearly one in four young people reported experiences of 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**. Underlying both sets of reasons are **pressures emanating from top-down, high-stakes accountability measures** and **inadequate resourcing**.

¹ McPherson, C. 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_4aedd3f1a10548a383d9e514b986fbe1.pdf.

The Children's Society (2024) *The Good Childhood Report 2024*.

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

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>

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 reported feeling constrained and disengaged by the pedagogies they encountered in the classroom and by a curriculum they had no control over and that felt narrow and unrelated to their interests and aspirations. This was compounded for some by the increasingly academically demanding nature of school subjects and exams, leading many young people to feel lost, overwhelmed and behind in lessons. Trying to learn in ways that felt unnatural or uncomfortable to them, and/or about subjects of little interest to them, was a cause of significant stress for many of the young people, made worse by the stress of juggling demanding exams alongside the expectation for them to make important decisions about their futures in a hurry and often with minimal support. These stressors, when combined with the general discomfort many felt in school and/or with experiences of bullying and unfair treatment, took a significant toll on some young people's mental health and wellbeing, sometimes leading to early school leaving or disengagement from education altogether.

Young people receive 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.

This 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.

Systems of support and inclusion

Many young people reported feeling generally unsupported by their teachers or misrecognised and overlooked. Worryingly, findings from our survey indicate that this was particularly strongly felt by young people from low-income and minority-ethnic backgrounds, those identifying with minority sexualities and/or as non-binary or trans and those with SEND. These groups of young people were also the least likely to report feeling that their schools respected and valued diversity. Numerous young people told us they had experienced unfair treatment or bullying in school, including 50% of our survey participants, and many reported that they had received no support from their schools.

Participants whose wellbeing and behaviour were affected by their difficult upbringings reported frequently 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. **High numbers of young people with SEND reported experiencing feelings of anxiety, stress and mental health difficulties and serious barriers to their learning at school. These included:**

not having their learning difficulties diagnosed and recognised; not receiving the support they needed; and being expected to complete courses within a time frame that was unrealistic for them.

In an earlier study exploring the impact of the EBacc, Progress 8 and the 2015 reforms to GCSE examinations on secondary schooling, we found that the intensification of school teachers' workloads produced by increased assessment and accountability demands, coupled with cuts to school budgets, were limiting their ability to teach inclusively and creatively. As we wrote at the time:

Whilst in a lower stakes accountability environment, there would be greater flexibility for teachers to deviate from the mandated curriculum, and hence teach in ways that are more responsive to students' diverse capabilities and interests, the intense pressure to perform within the current high stakes regime substantially limits teachers' freedom of manoeuvre to mitigate the worst effects of the [EBacc and Progress 8] measures.³

These effects included constraints on teachers' capacity to spend time building meaningful relationships with their students, attend to their pastoral needs and devote attention and resources to issues of social and cultural justice within and beyond the curriculum. These same themes emerged in the Young Lives, Young Futures data.

Enablers of more positive student experiences

Many of 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. Our 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. While in mainstream schools, young people had often felt constrained by a narrow curriculum and didactic classroom learning model, in these different settings they often reported feeling more 'at home' and often described a feeling of greater autonomy and choice over what and how they learned. This enabled them to opt for courses that involved more practical learning, or which corresponded more closely to their interests and career aspirations. Some young people also mentioned being able to establish more supportive, mutually respectful and meaningful relationships with teachers in these settings compared to school, feeling that their teachers had more time for them, regarded them as adults and genuinely valued and cared about them. Others mentioned being able to better understand subjects like maths and English because of the smaller class sizes and more hands-on support they experienced in these settings. **While colleges and alternative education and training providers have not been immune to the kinds of accountability demands placed on mainstream secondary schools, in these settings many young people seemed to feel better able to transcend the narrow constructions of education – and educational 'success' – that they had felt so marginalised and constrained by at school.** This suggests that for some young people there is something about the mainstream school curriculum and environment in particular, rather than education and learning itself, that is alienating and excluding.

³ 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>, p. 521.

Policy recommendations

Broad recommendations:

1. We welcome the Curriculum and Assessment Review Group's aim 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.**
2. This requires some loosening of the constraints 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 is likely to 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.⁴ Instead **the current top-down approach to school accountability should be replaced by a more developmental and participatory approach based on principles of intelligent accountability.** For the same reasons, **decisions on teachers' pay should be disconnected from students' tests results.**

Specific recommendations:

We welcome the Review Group's emphasis on taking an evolutionary approach to curriculum and assessment reform to avoid placing undue pressure on those working in education, and its commitment to ensuring manageable and sustainable workloads for teachers and other education staff. To achieve the broad goals we have identified above requires the Government to implement a long-term, incremental plan, as follows:

In the short-term (1 year):

- Commit to ensuring that all decisions relating to curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms 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 school accountability system 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.

⁴ 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.

- 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.
- **Commit to reducing the required content of the national curriculum and the number of exams taken at 16** 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.**
- Establish a **national network of local youth forums for young people with SEND to advise on and support SEND practice.**

In the medium-term (5 years):

- 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. 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.
- Start to 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 the aforementioned robust systems of critical self- and external peer-review are in place.

Laying the groundwork for the long-term (10 years):

- 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 pro-active 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, enabling more young people to study topics they are passionate about, and building more participatory approaches to school accountability, these recommendations will encourage 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 experiences and outcomes, but also to young people being better placed to make valuable social and economic contributions.

This response was submitted on behalf of the Young Lives, Young Futures research team by Sharon Gewirtz, project PI and Professor of Education at King’s College London. For further details about the study, please see the project website here: <https://www.ylyf.co.uk>

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