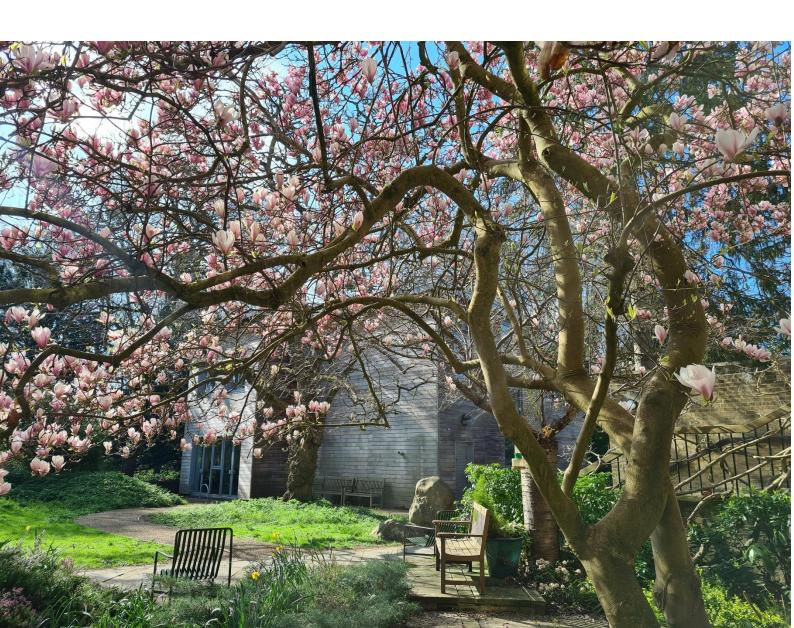# Equity by Design: 'Our Children, Our Responsibility'

Policy and Practice Recommendations for Developing School Inclusion and Reducing School Exclusion in England

Setting the scene: Rising rates of school exclusion in England

Overall numbers of permanent exclusions and suspensions rose rapidly in England before the Covid-19 pandemic and have risen sharply since in contrast to the rest of the UK. The latest figures from the Department for Education show that the rate of suspensions is at an all-time high in England, and the permanent exclusion rate is the highest rate seen since 2006-2007. The high exclusion and suspension rates in England disproportionately affect children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), children who have contact with children's social care, children who are living in poverty, and children from certain minority ethnic backgrounds: Gypsy, Roma, Traveller of Irish heritage, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean (DfE 2024a, 2024b, Daniels et al. 2023).

The Excluded Lives Research Project

The Excluded Lives project, *The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences* (2019-2024), was a four and a half year, ESRC funded, multi-disciplinary and cross jurisdictional project looking at the policy and practice of school exclusion across the UK (ESRC ES/S015744/1; https://excludedlives.education.ox.ac.uk). The overarching aim of the project was to undertake a home-international comparison to understand the contextual and institutional processes that lead to different types of school exclusion (official and 'hidden') and the consequences for excluded young people, their families, schools, and other professionals across the UK (Thompson and Daniels, 2024). The research involved policy analysis, secondary data analysis, and primary data collection through survey, interview, and focus group methods with local authority (LA), school, and alternative provision (AP) practitioners, children, and parents/carers.

In this report we focus on the findings from England, and insights from a roundtable event, to propose that to tackle rising rates of school exclusion in England, policymakers and partners must create a system that is equitable by design and sustained through shared responsibility.

The Excluded Lives roundtable to collaboratively develop recommendations

In the final meeting of the England Advisory Group for the Excluded Lives project, we discussed the need for policy and practice recommendations around developing school inclusion and reducing school exclusion that are realistic, useful, and avoid unintended consequences. To achieve this, members of the England Excluded Lives team worked with partners at the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), and the Local Government Association (LGA) to convene a roundtable event. The roundtable brought together ten leaders from education, community, LA, and violence reduction sectors to discuss the project's key findings and the implications for policy and practice. In advance, the Excluded Lives team shared key points for discussion from *The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences* research project with participants and a wider group of consultees whose comments were fed into the roundtable discussion.

At the start of the roundtable, key findings from the research were presented and partners were given an opportunity to ask any clarification questions. We then facilitated a group activity where individuals were asked to reflect on key areas for change, as well as things that are working well and could be built upon. Forty-six potential key areas for change were identified and ranked in terms of perceived importance. Scores were aggregated and twenty-three statements were nominated at least once as being important. The top five ranked areas for change were then discussed by the group. Through this discussion the overarching goal of progressively working towards building 'systems that are equitable by design' was identified and has informed the recommendations set out in this report. The things that are working well and should continue to be strengthened were collated after the meeting and are reflected in this report. A follow-up meeting was held with the roundtable participants to further refine the recommendations.

Findings presented at the roundtable

In the presentation at the roundtable we considered our research findings that school exclusion and social exclusion are complex, multi-dimensional, and intertwining processes, and explored the impacts of school exclusion for children as well as their families. We presented evidence of the negative medium- and long-term consequences of school exclusion on labour market outcomes, health outcomes, and mental health and behavioural outcomes (Madia et al. 2022; Obsuth et al. 2023; Neaverson et al. 2024). We also presented data from interviews with children and parents/carers, outlining the impact of school exclusion on:

children's sense of self, belonging, learning, and safety; familial relationships and parental identity; parent and child health and wellbeing; and parental employment (see also Zhang et al. 2024 for a discussion of the financial costs of exclusion).

We explored different system level factors identified in the research that may be influencing the higher rates of school exclusion in England (see also McCluskey et al. 2024), including:

- National policy prioritising school performance and pupil behaviour in ways which can disincentivise inclusive practice.
- High-stakes accountability systems leading to perverse incentives to exclude.
- The consequences of a narrow focus on an academic curriculum.
- The fragmentation of the education system in England and an unbalanced distribution of power and accountability.
- Increased pupil need, under-resourcing of key services, and insufficient training and knowledge.
- Limited early intervention.
- Siloed working.

Having set out system level factors that may be facilitating exclusion, we then reflected in contrast on examples of positive ways of working that may lead to lower exclusion rates, including:

- Schools who view the outside community as an active part of the solution and build positive relationships with parents/carers, rather than adopting a neutral or even deficit view of the

family/community and their children and seeing them as the problem.
- Examples of wraparound support for pupils at risk of exclusion that occur where there are strong links between schools, local services and teams, including between, for example, schools and Alternative Provision (AP) providers, LA and AP providers, schools and LA teams, and schools and health services.
- Schools that adopt, or are informed by, relational approaches.

In concluding the presentation, we set out four themes that the findings from the research suggest are crucial to developing policy and practice recommendations for reducing school exclusion (see also Tawell 2025):

Policy and language
Key to reducing school exclusion is the development of a shared vision based on inclusive principles. In developing recommendations, we need to be alert to unintended consequences and avoid policy contradictions. This requires close attention to the language in policy and guidance documents. We also need to focus on getting the balance right between standards and inclusion, attainment and wellbeing, and competition and collaboration (Tawell et al. 2020).

Enabling structures
Linked to 'getting the balance right', we need to identify and redesign structures that currently impede inclusion, and work to redistribute resources in order to meet pupil need.

Collaboration
School exclusion is a multifaceted issue which schools cannot resolve in isolation. Reducing exclusion requires services working together, sharing information and ideas, and holding shared responsibility with schools.

Inclusive school cultures
Developing more inclusive practices in schools will require inclusive leadership, and schools to focus on fostering belonging and safety through, for example, relational approaches.

In the roundtable, we built on these ideas to develop the recommendations set out in the following sections.

Ways forward to building 'systems that are equitable by design'
Through the roundtable and follow up discussions and comments, we collectively identified four key areas that should influence a theory of change for developing systems that are equitable by design. These four areas address the system level factors identified in the research that may be influencing the higher rates of school exclusion in England.

1. Shared vision
To have a shared vision, participants identified that schools, services, and policymakers need to develop and use a shared definition of inclusive, relational practice supported by a common vocabulary which is used consistently across policy areas and in practice. There also needs to be a shift from the current policy focus on 'the right to exclude' to a position based on 'the right for all to be safe'. This position will enable the needs of

the other pupils and teachers, as well as the individual child, to be acknowledged and met, thereby ensuring the safety of all parties and supporting their sense of belonging.

Recommendations

- *Develop clear and shared definitions of inclusive and relational practices.*

This would require a commitment from schools, and other services including health and social care, to set out their aspirations and progressively realise 'Equity by Design: Our Children, Our Responsibility', reviewing their progress toward inclusive, relational, and collaborative practice. Inclusion can be seen as the process that enables belonging in schools (Mulholland 2025). Schools and partnerships should be encouraged to define inclusive practices locally and nationally, avoiding one-word gradings of inclusion. They should define associated values and goals, and regularly review practice against this definition involving staff, parents/carers, and pupils in evidencing progress. The aim should be to move away from a blame culture and adopt a strengths-based approach that shifts the focus from blame to responsibilities.

- *Equity embedded in policy language and discourse.*

National and local government should develop, define, and consistently use policy language at all levels and across departments that reflects 'Equity by Design' and takes account of implications for practice. They should also enable challenge and evaluate the impact of policy language and discourse. The terminology used currently differs between organisations and services leading to misunderstanding,

confusion, and children's needs not being supported consistently and families and practitioners being confused and uncertain. To help promote the concept of 'Equity by Design' nationally, Ofsted and Department for Education communications should adopt 'our children, our responsibility' as a core principle.

- *Enshrine the right for all school members, children and adults, to be safe.*

Ensuring the safety of all must lie at the heart of our shared vision for 'Equity by Design'. As set out earlier in this report, school exclusion can have harmful impacts on children and their families. Often decisions to exclude are taken in the name of safeguarding the other pupils and staff in the school. Our proposal to focus on 'the right for all to be safe' enables appropriate action to be taken to safeguard others, while also acknowledging that the child exhibiting harmful behaviour requires support and safeguarding from existing or potential harms. Policy wording alone is not enough and this right must be coupled with sufficient resource and training for schools and other provision and services to be achievable.

2. Shared responsibility

The workshop participants recognised that schools cannot carry all the responsibility when problems arise. Where schools experience a lack of wider support combined with high stakes accountability, they inevitably experience overload and staff burnout. This leads to them not being able to meet the needs of all the children and young people in their care. If systems are to be equitable, schools, LAs, services, and national policy must prioritise inclusive

practice to enable shared responsibility and support. There should be consideration of a 'duty to include' and a 'duty to collaborate', equivalent to the safeguarding duty. These duties would extend to all parties including schools, AP providers, LA teams, and Integrated Care Boards.

The concept of 'our children, our responsibility' lies at the heart of shared responsibility. Moving to a system that is equitable by design will take time and priorities for action will vary. Schools are tackling a variety of demanding challenges internally and across their communities as they aim to provide for all their children and support their staff. By committing to progressive realisation of that shared vision schools and services can start from where they currently are and the challenges they face in their local contexts. This understanding can help them to lead change locally, supported by policy commitment nationally. The aim should be to ensure all children feel they are valued and belong, and staff feel their work is supported and valued. This includes recognising that every child needs appropriate provision and taking a system wide approach to inclusion does not expect every school to meet the needs of every child. Rather schools need to be enabled to work in partnership with children and families and with trusts, LAs, AP, Further Education (FE), other services, and funders to find suitable placements that enable engagement and learning.

Recommendations

- *Broaden accountability to include and incentivise both high expectations and inclusive practice.*

The education system in England needs to develop a shared responsibility that is strengths-based as an active ingredient in the progressive realisation of 'Equity by Design'. This should be reflected in policy including in the Ofsted/Department for Education creation of report cards that refer to inclusion.

Genuinely representative stakeholders at all levels should jointly develop a national inclusion framework for all partners (e.g. Department for Education, schools, education settings including AP, LAs, trusts, Ofsted) to support self-evaluation, which can be used and adapted to take account of local contexts and needs with national, regional, and statistical neighbour benchmarks.

- *Shared definition of anti-discriminatory schooling.*

All partners should also take joint responsibility to develop a shared definition of anti-discriminatory education. Schools across phases, AP, and FE providers should review their cultures and practice against this definition in order to address racism, discrimination, and structural bias, supporting and evaluating 'belonging' for all children. Inspection frameworks should include specific consideration of discrimination by talking with staff and children at all levels and from all communities. Training on raising awareness of, and tackling, all forms of bias and discrimination should be explicit in all teacher and leadership development. A language guide to anti-discriminatory inclusion and belonging should be created and widely used to support training, practice, and evaluation.

3. Collaborative infrastructures and systems

Participants identified that building equitable systems will require collaborative infrastructure models that promote joined-up working between wider services, schools, and families. Policymakers and partners must redesign the structures that currently impede inclusion and redistribute and redirect resources through analysis of data locally and nationally to give more equitable and targeted funding, including for SEND and early intervention.

Recommendations

- *Local area collaborative infrastructure models.*

In order to tackle what we identified as the somewhat fragmented middle tier, policy development should encourage and enable trusts, schools, AP, FE, LAs, Local Inclusion Boards, and Family Hubs to form local partnership 'Inclusion Groups' based on collaborative working and the sharing of learning with joint accountability for decisions. The remit of these 'Inclusion Groups' would be to collaboratively identify local needs and to reconfigure where responsibilities should lie to address and meet these needs. By doing so they will be able to determine provision for individuals and decide on the overall approach and its implementation.

These Inclusion Groups should enable LAs to support and challenge schools/trusts as well as empower headteachers and other partners to request action. They should also develop family hubs and other co-location models and work with local communities and third sector partners. Their work should be informed by regular area 'Inclusion

Reviews' and they should report back to partners annually. Additionally, the role of education should be strengthened in local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and partnerships.

- *Investment for equitable and targeted funding.*

National and local government should work with all partners in the sector to develop investment and funding decisions based on evidence informed, targeted, and equitable principles. These principles should include the prioritisation of early intervention, geographical and demographic need, and equity of status between vocational and academic routes.

4. Cultures of inclusion

Participants described the need to develop cultures of inclusion in schools and wider services. We know schools want to be inclusive in their practice, but external factors and limited resources can militate against this. Developing more inclusive practices will require a focus on inclusive school and wider system leadership, with staff and children in schools fostering and experiencing a sense of belonging and safety.

This sense of belonging needs to become an integral part of normal practice not an add on. This will involve supporting schools to explore how they can adopt inclusive and relational practices, as well as developing more diverse and inclusive curricula and assessment, fostering inclusive leadership, and providing equality, diversity, and inclusion training and support for all practitioners.

Recommendations

- *Inclusive curriculum and assessment.*

National government and schools should ensure that the curriculum and its assessment offer flexible and broad pathways that are accessible for all learners. These pathways should be designed to lead to positive outcomes including high quality vocational routes leading to employment. This requires skills being valued and linked to meaningful qualifications and better school, FE college, and AP cooperation and collaboration.

- *Positive school cultures.*

Staff at all levels should be enabled to work together to contribute to a positive culture and ethos. This will involve fostering positive relationships, understanding the context of families and communities, including cultural and racial dimensions, and analysing behaviour policies and inclusive practices in relation to special educational needs (Cullen at al. 2020; Davies & Henderson 2021).

Training from Initial Teacher Education/Initial Teacher Training to the National Professional Qualification for Headship should address inclusive and relational practice and its implications for teaching and learning, behaviour policies, and pastoral care, as relevant to the context, role, and stage of professional development of staff.

Needs should be addressed through a range of evidence informed approaches that fit the local context and aim to mitigate exclusions and develop feelings of safety and belonging for all members of the school community. These may include strengths-based approaches, trauma and attachment informed support, peacebuilding, preventative practices, fostering inclusive cultures, relationship building, and restorative practices.

Conclusion

The challenge for schools in England and the current Labour government in its policy development is how to address issues of equity and inclusion in schools in a period of multiple pressures on school leaders and staff, their pupils, and available resources. These pressures are reflected in high and rising levels of exclusion that disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalised children and their communities. It could be argued that the same pressures lie behind falling school attendance (Place2Be, 2024) and the crisis in SEND funding. Addressing inequality in education requires a radical rethink that shifts the focus from accountability on school academic performance to accountability for the inclusion and wellbeing of the child in balance with achievement and attainment. We believe that '*Equity by Design: Our Children, Our Responsibility*' contributes to this essential process.

We know that the development of equitable schooling is an on-going process, and the elements needed to achieve its progressive realisation will continue to evolve. Schools committed to such an approach face varied challenges and work in different contexts. They need to build from where they are and through partnership develop increasingly inclusive practice and an increased sense of belonging for all. They also need to engage in productive dialogue with schools who do

not prioritise equity and inclusion for all. For these reasons we want to continue a dialogue with partners and welcome comments, challenges, and feedback to help us move to children, wherever they are, being 'our children, our responsibility'.

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