



Schools for All?

Young people's experiences of alienation in the English secondary school system

Charlotte McPherson, Sait Bayrakdar, Sharon Gewirtz,
Andrea Laczik, Meg Maguire, Olly Newton, Siobhan
O'Brien, Alice Weavers, Chris Winch & Alison Wolf

February 2023

**Young Lives,
Young Futures**



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank all the young people who gave so generously of their time to participate in the research, and all of our contacts in the schools, colleges and other organisations we have been working with for taking time out of their busy schedules to introduce us to many of the young people who have taken part.

We are also very grateful to Carrie Harding and her team at Kantar Public for their brilliant work on conducting the survey, colleagues at the Department for Education, especially the NPD team, for their help with accessing the sample and the members of our Advisory Panel and Youth and Technical Advisory Groups for fantastically helpful advice and feedback on the design of the survey and interviews and on some of the substantive themes developed in this report.

Finally, we would like to thank Alan Cribb for all of his advice and support throughout the project, including his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report, and Debs Daborn for her wonderful design work.

**Young Lives,
Young Futures**



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary	4
List of Figures and Tables	6
1. Introduction	7
1.1 The policy context	7
1.2 Our data	9
1.3 Our findings in brief	9
1.4 Structure of the report	10
2. School: something to get through?	11
2.1 Young people’s attitudes to school – findings from the survey	11
2.2 Forms of alienation in/from school	18
2.3 Introducing our qualitative findings	20
3. Pushing Squares into Circles: young people’s experiences of curriculum alienation – findings from the qualitative data	21
4. Schooling as a Stressful Experience - findings from the qualitative data	24
5. Recognition and Respect at School	28
5.1 Young people’s perspectives on being noticed and listened to by their teachers and on respect for diversity in their schools – findings from the survey	28
5.2 Unfair treatment and bullying – findings from the survey	33
5.3 Encouragement and support from teachers – findings from the survey	35
5.4 Misrecognition, disrespect and unfair treatment at school - findings from the qualitative data	37
5.5 Young people’s positive relationships with teachers – findings from the qualitative data	39
6. Thriving Elsewhere: young people’s experiences of being in alternative provision, further education and training – findings from the qualitative data	41
7. Conclusions	44
References	47
Appendix: The Young Lives, Young Futures study	51

Executive Summary

In recent decades, secondary schools in England have been subject to successive rounds of reform. The most recent reforms, launched in 2015-16, introduced new GCSE qualifications, a revised grading system and new accountability measures that have reinforced the heavy emphasis on traditional academic subjects and knowledge in the school curriculum. Drawing on data from a national survey of over 10,000 young people conducted in the summer of 2021 and qualitative interviews with over 100 young people carried out between 2020 and 2022, this report highlights and discusses the educational experiences of young people across England, including the potential impact of these reforms on young people's lives. The young people participating in the survey, and many of those we interviewed, belong to the first cohort of students who have spent their entire secondary school career in schools whose curriculum has been shaped by the 2015-16 reforms.

Key findings

- For nearly 1 in 2 young people in England, school is not an enjoyable or meaningful experience, but is rather something they feel they need to 'get through' because of its bearing on their futures.
- Many secondary schools have adopted teaching methods that many young people experience as alienating and stressful, particularly those with creative and practical interests and those who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Being forced to learn subjects of little interest to them, combined with the pressure to make important decisions about their post-16 transitions in a compressed time period, meant that school was highly stressful for many of the young people we spoke with.
- The emphasis on attainment in exams, and particularly in traditional academic subjects like maths and English, was another source of stress for young people whose interests, aptitudes and aspirations did not align with these indicators of educational success in school. Several described this as taking a toll on their mental health and wellbeing, and felt there needed to be more recognition of the pressure young people are under.
- Young people who told us that they were very unlikely to go to university reported significantly lower levels of enjoyment of school than those who said they are likely to go to university.
- Many young people feel unsupported by their teachers at school. Worryingly, our data suggests this is most common among young people with SEND or from backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage. These are groups of young people who often require more support at school. Yet pressure on teachers to get students through exams is limiting the pastoral and additional educational support these, and all, young people can access at school.
- Young people from low-income and minority ethnic backgrounds, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or nonbinary, young people with SEND and those who reported lower levels of mental health and wellbeing were less likely to feel noticed or listened to by their teachers and were less likely to feel that their schools respect and value diversity.

- 45% of young people identifying with minority sexuality categories and 39% of those identifying as trans reported unfair treatment or bullying by peers based on their sexual orientation and trans status respectively. Almost one in every four young people reported being treated unfairly by their peers because of their size or style (including how they look). It is concerning that these experiences are so prevalent in schools, especially given what we know from other research about the long-term scarring effects of bullying and discrimination on young people's physical and mental health.
- Young people who had left mainstream school for alternative education provision or vocational education and training were mostly thriving in these different educational settings, often for the first time. This suggests that there is something specific about the mainstream school environment that is off-putting to young people, rather than education and learning in themselves.
- In these different settings, young people described having more meaningful and supportive relationships with teachers and a feeling of greater autonomy and choice over what and how they learned.

Conclusions

There are over 3.5 million young people in secondary schools across England. This report suggests that for those whose interests, aptitudes and aspirations do not align with traditional academic subjects and trajectories, the narrowing of the curriculum and greater emphasis placed on exam performance poses worrying questions about the inclusivity and accessibility of contemporary schooling. In addition, our report points to the prevalence of wider school cultures that are experienced as discriminatory, unsupportive and alienating for many young people, particularly those from low-income and minority backgrounds, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or non-binary and young people with SEND. These cultures are not exclusively the product of the new school curriculum, assessment and accountability climate, but we know from previous research that the accountability pressures teachers are under, coupled with resource constraints, shift priorities away from and severely limit opportunities for schools to develop and implement policies that would make them more inclusive, welcoming spaces for the diverse student populations they serve.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to develop new approaches to the design of school curricula and accountability processes that are based on a broader conception of the purposes of - and what it means to be successful in - education and that are more responsive to the diversity of young people's experiences and perspectives. These new approaches will require the participation - alongside teachers and other key stakeholders - of young people, whose voices have for far too long been ignored in decision-making at all levels of the education system.

Finally, there is a pressing need to create more resources, space and time for teachers to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with their students. Such relationships would be rooted in whole school practices that reflect the diverse identities and concerns of learners and help tackle, rather than side-line, the social and cultural injustices that can make schools such alienating places for so many young people. This needs to be a priority for policy, given the serious implications of an absence of supportive relationships with teachers and inclusive school cultures for young people's experiences of school, their engagement with education more broadly and their longer term physical and mental health and wellbeing.

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 1: Attitudes towards school (Your Life, Your Future, 2022)	11
Figure 2: Attitudes towards school (Next Steps, 2006)	12
Figure 3: Differences in attitudes towards school by free school meals (FSM) status	12
Figure 4: Differences in attitudes towards school by ethnicity	13
Figure 5: Differences in attitudes towards school by gender	13
Figure 6: Differences in attitudes towards school by sexual orientation and trans status	14
Figure 7: Differences in attitudes towards school by SEND status	15
Figure 8: Differences in attitudes towards school by SEND type	15
Figure 9: Differences in attitudes towards school by mental health status	16
Figure 10: Differences in attitudes towards school by predicted GCSE attainment	17
Figure 11: Differences in attitudes towards school by self-reported likelihood of going to university	17
Figure 12: Differences in attitudes towards school by whether young people selected 'working with my hands' as important in their future work or career	18
Figure 13: Recognition in the school environment by FSM status	28
Figure 14: Recognition in the school environment by ethnicity	29
Figure 15: Recognition in the school environment by gender	29
Figure 16: Recognition in the school environment by sexual orientation and trans status	30
Figure 17: Recognition in the school environment by SEND status	30
Figure 18: Recognition in the school environment by SEND type	31
Figure 19: Recognition in the school environment by mental health status	31
Figure 20: Recognition in the school environment by predicted GCSE attainment	32
Figure 21: Recognition in the school environment by self-reported likelihood of going to university	32
Figure 22: Recognition in the school environment by wanting to work with hands	33
Figure 23: Unfair treatment at school	34
Figure 24: Who young people receive encouragement from	35
Figure 25: Encouragement received from teachers by different diversity characteristics	36

Tables

Table 1: Distribution of key characteristics in the survey sample	51
Table 2: Education, employment and training (EET) status at time of interview	53

1. Introduction

Drawing on data from a national survey of over 10,000 young people and qualitative interviews with over 100 young people, this report highlights and discusses the educational experiences of young people across England during their last years of compulsory education, with a particular focus on those who do not enjoy school. According to the research findings we present in this report, a substantial proportion of young people - nearly one in two - fall into this category.

The perspectives and experiences of young people are often troublingly absent from education policy decision-making. The research on which this report is based is seeking to help address this absence.

1.1 The policy context

In recent years, the UK government has signalled its intent to create greater parity of esteem between the traditional academic pathway out of school (i.e., the A Level to university route) and vocational pathways, with vocational education and training now sitting at the centre of the Government's plans to address youth unemployment and skills shortages (DFE 2018, HM Treasury 2021). However, somewhat incongruously, a series of secondary school curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms, introduced in 2015-16, have simultaneously reinforced the heavy emphasis of traditional academic subjects and knowledge in the school curriculum (Neumann et al. 2016).

These reforms have included the introduction of new GCSE qualifications that were designed to be more academically rigorous, a reformed GCSE grading system to enable 'greater stretch' at the top end of the scale and new school accountability measures that place particular emphasis on attainment in academic subjects framed as 'core' – English language and literature, maths, the sciences, history or geography, and a foreign language. Maths and English play an especially prominent role in the assessment of school performance as they are double-weighted in Progress 8, the 'headline' accountability indicator for schools (DfE 2016a).¹

The stated aims of the reforms were to raise the performance of English secondary schools in international league tables and 'restore rigour' to the secondary school curriculum (DfE 2015, 2016b). Leaving aside the contentious questions of whether these aims are desirable and have been met, our own previous research, and that of others, has shown how these reforms – inspired by a conservative educational agenda², and building on the reforms of previous governments – have resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum, squeezing out opportunities for young people to study creative, technical and vocational subjects and reducing the practical components in the teaching of practical subjects, such as PE and drama (Maguire et al. 2019, Neumann et al.

¹ Progress 8 is a measure of the average progress students make in each secondary school from year 6, at the end of primary school, to the end of year 11. The measure has been widely criticised, primarily because it does not take into account socioeconomic differences between schools and therefore penalises those with disadvantaged intakes (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, 2019, Prior et al. 2021), yet it carries a lot of weight in schools. A low Progress 8 score can trigger an Ofsted inspection, a school closure, its forced conversion into an academy school, or the sacking of a headteacher (Roberts 2019). In some schools student progress measures are also used to determine pay awards for individual teachers (Neumann et al. 2016).

² This is an ideological agenda that sees the primary purpose of the secondary school curriculum as the transmission of elite culture. While this agenda has informed the education policy of Conservative governments since the 1980s, it was pursued with renewed vigour by the Government Minister, Michael Gove, during his period of office as Secretary of State for Education from 2010 to 2014 (Jones 2019). The particular version of elite culture Gove sought to place centre stage was an Anglo-centric one, epitomised by his call for more teaching about 'our history' (meaning British history), the reinstatement of 19th century English writers such as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy into the curriculum for English, and a decentering of 20th century US texts such as *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *Of Mice and Men* (Gove 2011).

2020, Gewirtz et al. 2021). In a survey of 1800 secondary school teachers we conducted for the National Union of Teachers (now the National Education Union) when the reforms had just started to bed in, our respondents expressed concern that many of their students were being forced to study subjects they weren't motivated to study and didn't enjoy (Neumann et al. 2016). 75% of the teachers reported that students in their schools had a reduced number of GCSE subjects to choose from, with creative subjects, in particular performing arts subjects and design and technology, and vocational subjects³ identified as ones most likely to have been removed from the curriculum. 82% of the respondents reported a decline in exam entry rates in creative subjects⁴ in their schools and 84% reported a decline in vocational subject entry rates.

An overwhelming majority of the teachers we surveyed in this earlier study told us that their classes were increasingly focused on test preparation⁵ and had become less interactive and student centred. They expressed particular concern about the impact of the new, more academically demanding, GCSEs and the double-weighting of maths and English in the Progress 8 measure on lower attaining students and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Some teachers also criticised the ethnocentrism of the new GCSEs, especially English (Neumann et al. 2020). In addition, our survey data, alongside complementary qualitative data collected in three case study schools, highlighted teachers' concerns about the impact of exam pressures on their students', and their own, mental health and wellbeing. Teachers characterised the new GCSEs as demanding a uniform, 'once-size-fits all' approach, which meant that many felt unable to teach in ways that were meaningful, inclusive and accessible to the diverse range of students in their classrooms, especially those who were unable to perform well in written examinations. They also commented on how workload pressures and expectations around student attainment, in the context of wider cuts to school budgets, were significantly reducing the amount of time they could spend interacting with the young people they teach and providing pastoral support.⁶

While these reforms were focused on the Key Stage 4 curriculum, which is meant to be studied by students aged 14-16 in school years 10 and 11, they have had a knock-on effect on the curriculum for younger students in many secondary schools, which, in an attempt to raise their performance in Progress 8, have lengthened Key Stage 4 from two to three school years. This means that Key Stage 3, the time students spend at school studying a broad range of subjects before they start their GCSE courses, is reduced by a year and students are spending more time engaged in learning that is directed towards preparation for performance in public examinations in a narrow range of subjects (Ofsted & Spielman 2017).

Our earlier study gave us a good understanding of teachers' perspectives on how the reforms were starting to affect their students. However, there has to date been no major study that has engaged directly with young people's experiences of secondary schooling in the wake of the reforms. In this report we present some data from the first wave of an ongoing research study that, although not originally collected for this purpose, is helping to fill this gap.

³ Amongst BTECs, the subjects teachers identified as having been removed from the curriculum in their schools were Applied Science, Child Development, Food Technology/Catering, Graphics, Health and Social Care, Resistant Materials, Construction, Engineering, Hair and Beauty, Travel and Tourism, and Leisure and Tourism.

⁴ The Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA 2022), which has been monitoring GCSE arts results since 2012, has reported year on year decreases in arts GCSE entries, with their most recent research highlighting a decrease in entry rates for GCSE arts subjects of 40% between 2010 and 2022, with Design and Technology showing the steepest decline of 71% fewer entries.

⁵ A subsequent report by Ofsted drew similar conclusions (Ofsted & Spielman 2017).

⁶ Some also reported that the appraisal of teachers' own performance was becoming increasingly data-driven in response to Progress 8. Many referred to teachers leaving, or planning to leave, the profession because the pressures associated with the greater focus on data and meeting accountability targets, workload intensification and reduced classroom autonomy had become, or were becoming, too much to bear.

1.2 Our data

The data upon which this report is based is drawn from a larger study, *Young Lives, Young Futures*, which is investigating the school to work transitions of young people who are not taking the university path. While the study has an expansive focus that goes beyond schooling, this report draws specifically on our data relating to young people's attitudes to and experiences of school. This includes data from a nationally representative survey called *Your Life, Your Future* that was completed by 10,438 young people aged 15-16 in the summer term of 2021 when they were in Year 11 at school. This cohort is of particular relevance to the focus of this report, because they are the first cohort of students who have spent their entire secondary school career in schools whose curriculum and pedagogic approach has been shaped by the 2015-16 reforms.

In the survey we disproportionately sampled young people from certain ethnic groups to ensure they are adequately represented in the study. All of the figures included in this report have been weighted to adjust for this as well as for non-response.

Our dataset also includes in-depth qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of 113 young people aged 15-18 from across the attainment range who are not intending to go to university. These interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022.⁷

While our survey data enables a large-scale quantitative mapping of how young people feel about school, and their relationship with the school environment, the qualitative data provides more detailed insights into young people's perspectives and experiences that help to illuminate some of the quantitative findings.

Further details of the aims and methods of the study, including further information about the survey and interview samples, can be found in the Appendix.

1.3 Our findings in brief

As will be seen in subsequent sections, our findings align closely with the concerns expressed by the teachers participating in our previous study, suggesting that secondary schools are unenjoyable, alienating environments for substantial numbers of young people. This is the case for many young people from across all social backgrounds and from across the attainment range. However, young people are more likely to say that they do not enjoy or feel a sense of belonging to school if they are from low-income backgrounds, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or non-binary, have special educational needs or disabilities, are lower-attaining, think they are unlikely to go to university and/or say that working with their hands in the future is important to them.

The reasons for these findings are complex. Schools can be unenjoyable and alienating places for many reasons, beyond those relating directly to school accountability and assessment pressures and the school curriculum. They are places where young people can feel their identities are not recognised or where they can be subjected to bullying and discrimination, and many young people find it difficult to cope in busy, crowded classrooms even if they are achieving good academic outcomes. Moreover, Year 11 can be a particularly stressful year for young

⁷ Unlike our survey sample, which is nationally representative, our interview sample consists only of young people not intending to go to university. Nevertheless, in all other respects it is a diverse sample, consisting of young people from across four local authorities, chosen to represent regional diversity and reflect contrasting local labour market opportunities, social and economic geographies and education and training provision. The sample is also diverse in terms of social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, special educational needs and disabilities, and represents a variety of interests, aptitudes and aspirations.

people, as it is their last year of compulsory schooling and they are expected to make critical decisions about their futures, especially if they are not taking the more traditional academic A level route out of school. On top of all of this, the cohort of young people who participated in our survey, and many of those we interviewed, were affected by their last two years of compulsory schooling coinciding with the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, which, for many, resulted in heightened stress and a deterioration of their mental health.

In what follows, we discuss how the school curriculum, assessment and accountability climate, other aspects of the school environment and Covid have combined to make the schooling experiences for this cohort especially challenging. In doing so, we suggest that two overlapping and interacting forms of alienation from school are in evidence. The first, which we are calling curriculum-based alienation, is rooted in the mismatch between young people's interests, aptitudes, aspirations and needs and the narrowly academic, test-focused curriculum and pedagogic culture of their schools. The second, which we are calling identity-based alienation, is a product of the cultural injustices young people are subject to in schools by virtue of their class, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability-related and or/other social identities being misrecognised or disparaged within the wider school environment.

Drawing on interviews we have conducted with young people studying in pupil referral units, alternative provision, further education (FE) colleges, training organisations and a university technical college (UTC), we also reflect on how these settings differ from school and how they are often experienced in more positive ways by young people in comparison to their previous schooling experiences.

1.4 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is organised into six sections. In section 2, we use data from our survey and interviews with young people to illustrate that school is something many young people try to get through, but not something they enjoy or find especially meaningful as a learning experience. In sections 3 and 4, we draw on qualitative data from our interviews with young people to unpack some of the reasons behind their negative experiences of school. This includes the one-size-fits-all approach that characterises the classroom culture of many schools, and how this marginalises young people with different interests and aptitudes. It also includes the stress of exams and decision-making in Year 11. In section 5, data from our survey and interviews are used to illustrate young people's experiences of misrecognition and the lack of support that many feel characterises their relationships with teachers in school, highlighting their implications for young people's sense of belonging, agency and mental wellbeing. We show that these experiences are particularly prevalent among more marginalised groups of young people, including those with SEND. In section 6, we draw once more from our qualitative interviews with young people to illustrate how many of the challenges young people encountered in mainstream schools were later addressed in different educational settings, translating into positive educational experiences. Finally, the report concludes with a review of the key findings and their policy implications.

It is important to note from the outset that it is not our intention in what follows to focus on the shortcomings of individual schools or teachers, but rather to highlight the more deep-seated organisational conditions that contribute to alienation being so rife in schools. Perhaps most crucially, as we know from our previous research, the accountability pressures that teachers are working under give them very limited freedom of manoeuvre to deviate from the exam-focused practices being encouraged by national policy reforms. They also leave them with limited time and space to engage in practices of pastoral care and to reflect on, and develop, policies designed to make schools more welcoming, inclusive and enabling spaces for the diverse student populations they serve. This can be particularly the case for those working in resource-poor schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged areas where accountability pressures are felt more intensely (Neumann et al. 2016).

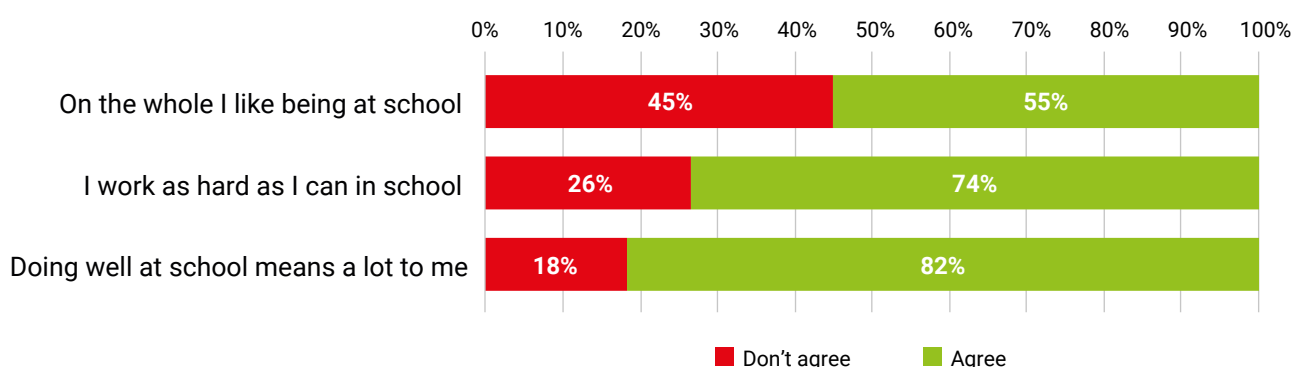
2. School: Something to get through?

2.1 Young people's attitudes to school – findings from the survey

In order to explore young people's attitudes to and relationship with school, we asked those completing our survey to tell us how far they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. Figure 1 shows that, overall, 55% of the young people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'On the whole I like being at school'. While this is a majority of the sample, it means that almost one in every two young people did not agree with this statement, suggesting that schooling is not a positive or enjoyable experience for many students in Year 11. In contrast, a substantial majority of our respondents, 74%, agreed that they 'work as hard as they can in school', and 82% agreed that 'doing well at school means a lot' to them. The stark differences between these young people's enjoyment of school and the effort they put in suggests that, for many young people, school is something that they endure, because they want to do well, rather than something that they enjoy.

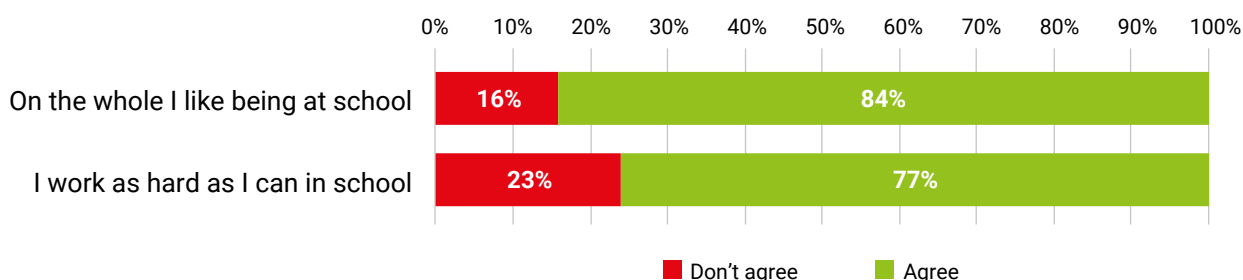
Questions on attitudes towards schools are used in a number of studies of young people. In Figure 2 we present some complementary data from the *Next Steps Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England*, conducted in 2006 with a similarly sized sample of young people who were the same age and in the same school year then as our cohort are now. While there are several important differences between *Next Steps* and the *Your Life, Your Future* survey, the design and focus of the surveys are similar, creating an opportunity for some useful – albeit cautious – comparisons. The differences between the surveys mean that it is to be expected that the share of young people who agree with the statements about school attitudes will be larger in *Next Steps* than in *Your Life, Your Future*.⁸ Nevertheless, the differences in the rates of agreement between the two cohorts on the two attitudes questions that were asked in both surveys is striking, with 84% of the *Next Steps* cohort agreeing with the statement that on the whole they like being at school compared to the 55% agreement rate in the *Your Life, Your Future* survey. What is also striking here is that, in *Next Steps*, the proportion of young people who reported liking school is larger than the proportion who reported working as hard as they can, whereas in our study it is smaller. This would seem to indicate a decline in young people's enjoyment of school since 2006.

Figure 1: Attitudes towards school (*Your Life, Your Future*, 2022)



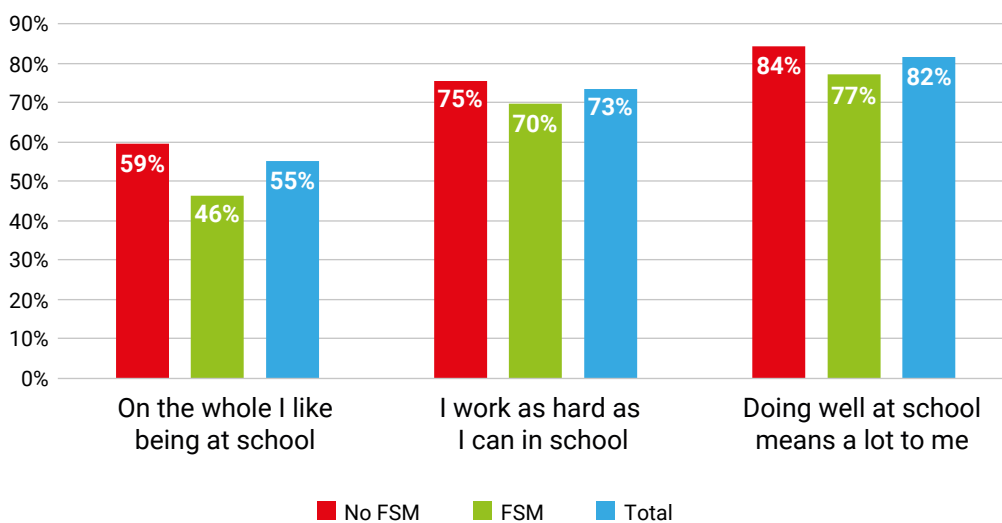
⁸ The reasons for this are that, unlike the *Next Steps* sample, the sample from *Your Life, Your Future* does not include students from independent schools at the time of the initial sampling. In addition, the *Next Steps* questions on school attitudes used 4-point scales with no middle point, while the *Your Life, Your Future* questions use 5-point scales to allow students the option of neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the question being asked.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards school (Next Steps, 2006)



Returning to the *Your Life, Your Future* findings, Figures 3 to 12 show how young people’s responses to the three statements – ‘on the whole I like being at school’, ‘I work as hard as I can at school’ and ‘doing well at school means a lot to me’ - varied according to a range of characteristics. Using free school meals (FSM) eligibility as a proxy for low income, Figure 3 shows that young people from low-income backgrounds (who are currently, or have in the past, been eligible for FSM) report lower levels of enjoyment of school, with only 47% agreeing with the statement that, on the whole, they like being at school, compared to 60% of those who have never been eligible for FSM. Young people from low-income backgrounds are also less likely to report that they work as hard as they can in school and that doing well at school means a lot to them, although the differences for these two statements are not as large as the difference for the first statement.

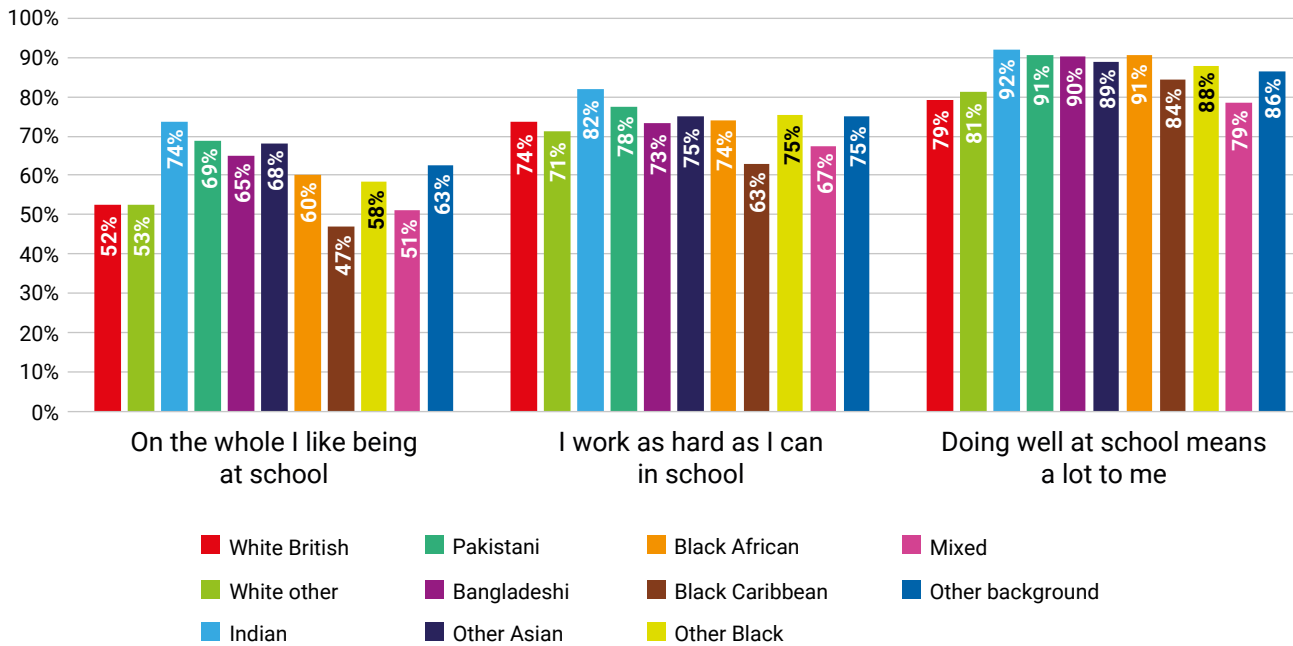
Figure 3: Differences in attitudes towards school by free school meals (FSM) status



The differences across different ethnic groups present a more complex picture. Figure 4 shows that, overall, young people identifying with minority ethnic categories are more likely to indicate higher levels of enjoyment of school than those identifying as White British. The only exception to this is those identifying as Black Caribbean or with a Mixed/multiple ethnic group category (although these differences are not statistically significant). With regard to how hard they work in school, young people from across all ethnic groups express similar levels of agreement with the statement, ‘I work as hard as I can in school’. Finally, while most young people agree that ‘doing well at school means a lot’ to them, those identifying with the White British and Mixed/multiple ethnic group categories are least likely to agree with this statement.

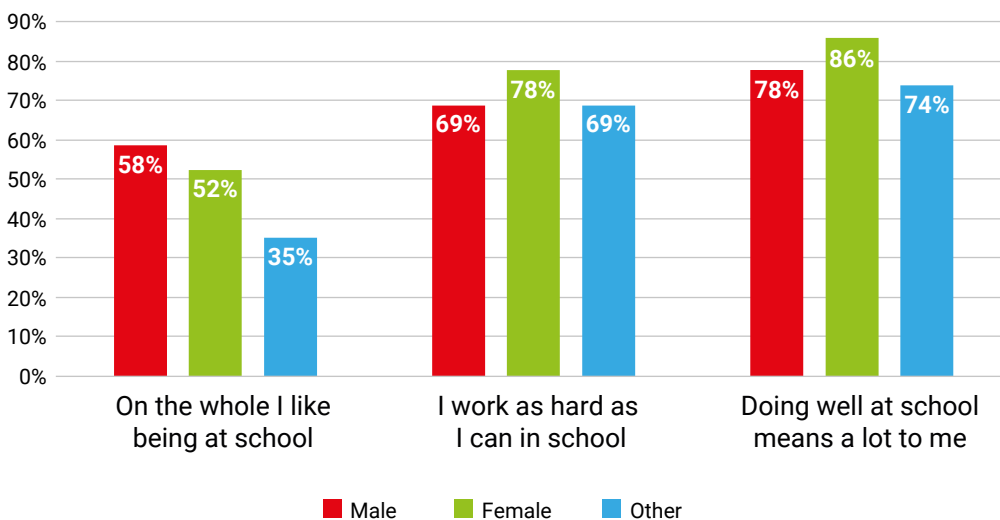
2. School: Something to get through?

Figure 4: Differences in attitudes towards school by ethnicity



The gender differences, shown in Figure 5, suggest that the gap between enjoyment of school and how hard students work is much larger for female than male students, with a gap of 26% for female students compared to one of 11% for male students. A higher proportion of female than male students also agreed with the statement that doing well at school means a lot to them. Those not identifying as male or female, who chose to self-describe their gender, indicated much lower levels of enjoyment than both male and female students, with only 35% agreeing with the statement that ‘on the whole they like being at school’, while the percentage in this category saying that they work as hard as they can is the same as for male students.

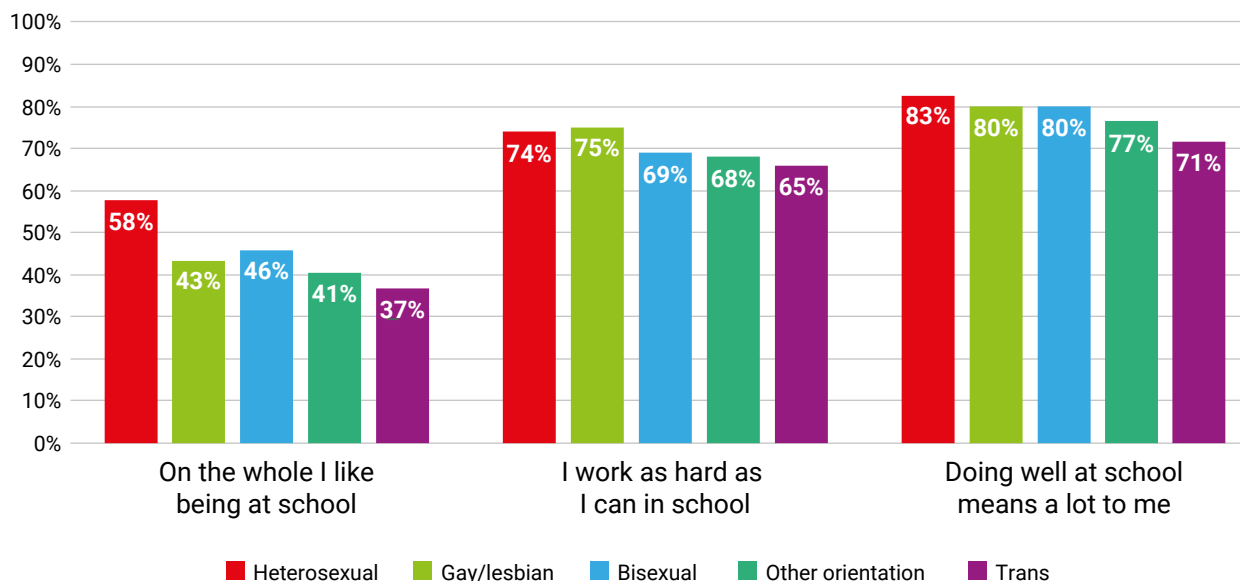
Figure 5: Gender differences in attitudes towards school



2. School: Something to get through?

We found striking differences in school attitudes between those who identified with minority sexuality categories and/or as trans and their heterosexual and cisgender peers (see Figure 6). Most notably, young people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual and/or as trans (LGBT) are significantly less likely to agree with the statement that on the whole they like being at school, with 43% and 46% of those identifying as gay/lesbian and bisexual respectively and only 37% of trans students agreeing with this statement.

Figure 6: Differences in attitudes towards school by sexual orientation and trans status



Young people with special education needs, a disability and/or long-term health condition (SEND) also report significantly lower levels of enjoyment of school, with only 45% of those with SEND agreeing with the statement 'on the whole I like being at school' compared to 64% of those who did not report having SEND (see Figure 7). Those with SEND also report lower levels of agreement with the statements, 'I work as hard as I can in school' and 'doing well at school means a lot to me', suggesting lower levels of school engagement for young people with SEND. Amongst the different types of SEND⁹ we asked about, those who report social, emotional and mental health difficulties were the least likely (at 38%) to say that they like being at school (see Figure 8).

⁹ We have categorised young people as having a special educational need, disability or health condition if they ticked yes to one or more of the categories below when asked 'Do you have any of the following, which have lasted, or are likely to last, for at least 12 months?'

- A learning difficulty (e.g. Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD)
- A speech, language or communication need
- Autism/autism spectrum condition
- A mental health condition (e.g. anxiety, depression)
- A physical illness or health condition (e.g. asthma, diabetes, a serious allergic reaction)
- A physical impairment or mobility issues
- Deafness or partial hearing
- Blindness or partial sight (that cannot be corrected by wearing glasses)

2. School: Something to get through?

Figure 7: Differences in attitudes towards school by SEND status

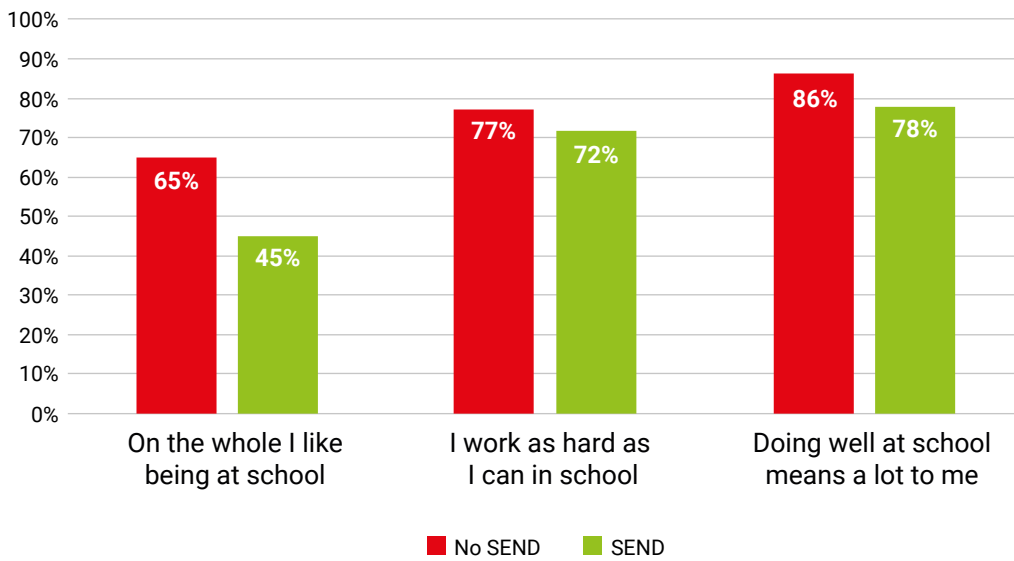
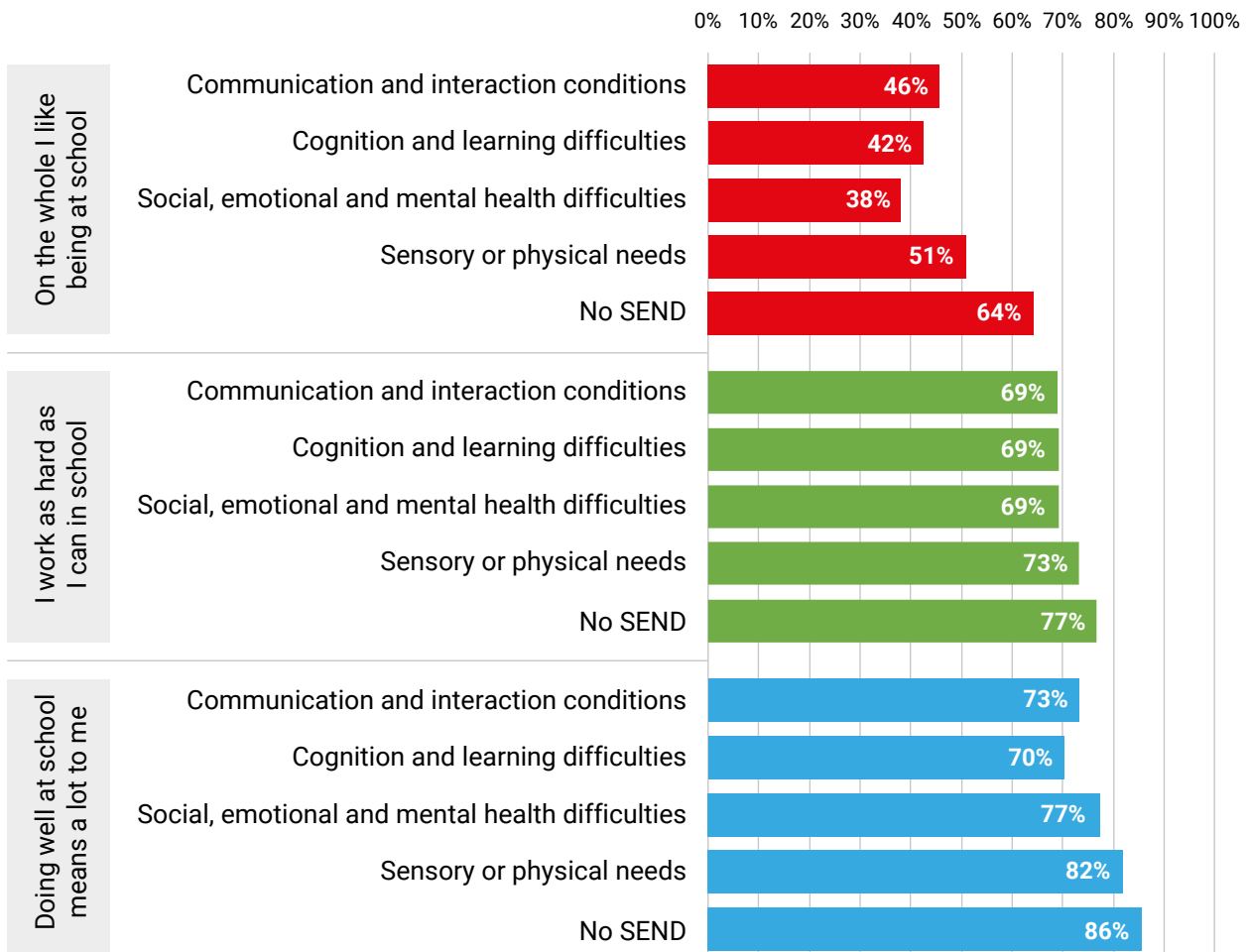


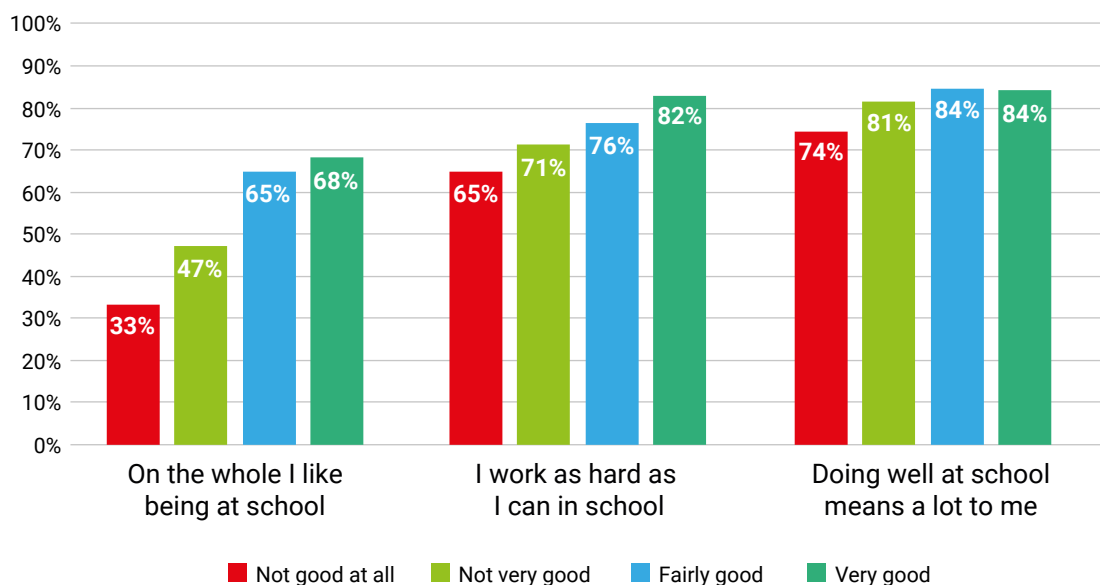
Figure 8: Differences in attitudes towards school by SEND type



2. School: Something to get through?

We also took a closer look at the relationship between young people's mental health (which is one component of 'SEND') and their attitudes to school (Figure 9). This shows a strong pattern of association between how good the young people reported their mental health to be and how much they enjoyed school, with only 33% (one in three) young people who described their mental health as 'not good at all' agreeing with the statement that overall, they liked being at school, compared to more than double that percentage (68%) for those who say their mental health is 'very good'. Similarly, those who report poor mental health are less likely to agree with the statements that they work as hard as they can at school and that doing well at school means a lot to them, although the differences are smaller for these two indicators.

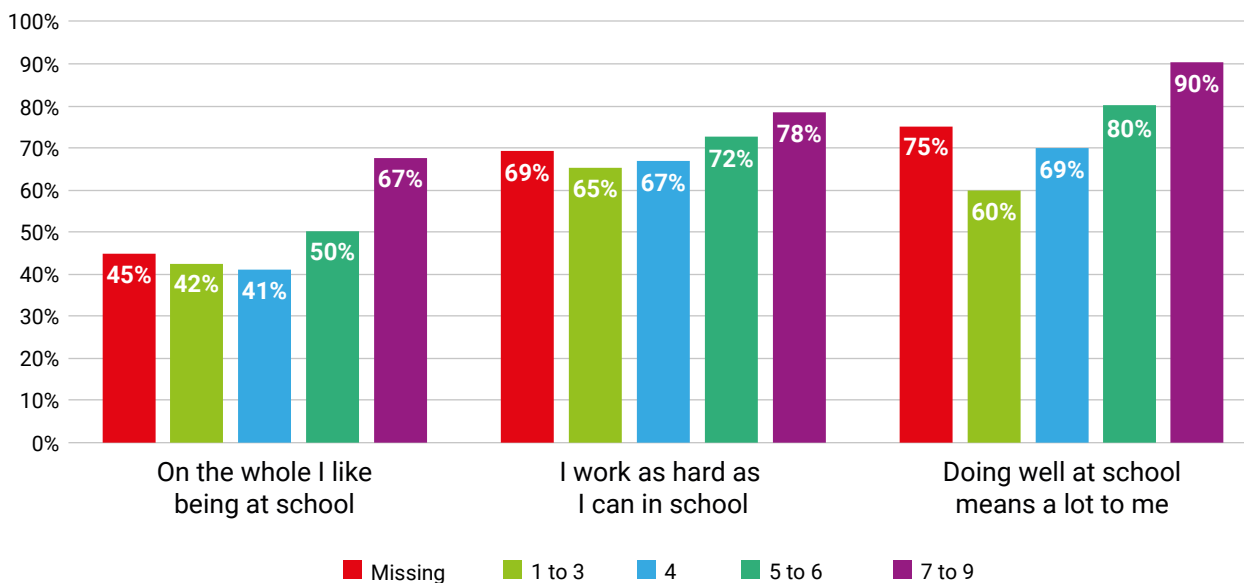
Figure 9: Differences in attitudes towards school by mental health status



There is, in addition, a strong association between young people's predicted academic attainment at the end of Year 11 and their attitudes towards school (see Figure 10). While 67% of those reporting predicted grades of 7 or higher for at least one of their Maths, English literature and English language GCSEs agreed with the statement, 'on the whole I like being at school', only 42% of those who reported predicted grades of 3 or lower agreed with this statement, while the patterns for the statements 'I work as hard as I can in school' and 'doing well at school means a lot to me' are similar. As we will discuss in more detail below, this association between higher predicted grades in these 'core' school subjects and more positive experiences of school is perhaps unsurprising given the emphasis schools place on performance in public examinations and the fact that more curriculum time is devoted to these 'double-weighted' subjects than any of the others on the curriculum.

2. School: Something to get through?

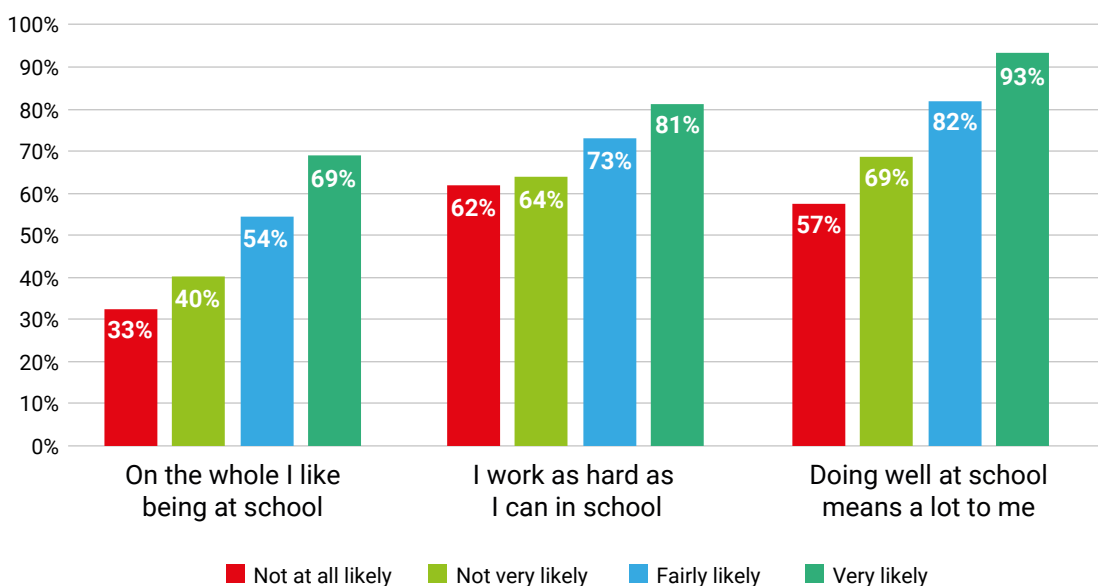
Figure 10: Differences in attitudes towards school by predicted GCSE attainment



Note: Those who did not provide a valid answer for the predicted GCSE grades questions are also included in the chart (in the category 'missing') as they form a sizeable group.

We also found a very clear association between young people's perceptions of how likely it was that they would go to university and their enjoyment of, and engagement, with school (Figure 11). For example, only 33% of young people who said they were not at all likely to go to university reported that on the whole they liked being at school, compared to 69% of those who said they were very likely to go to university.

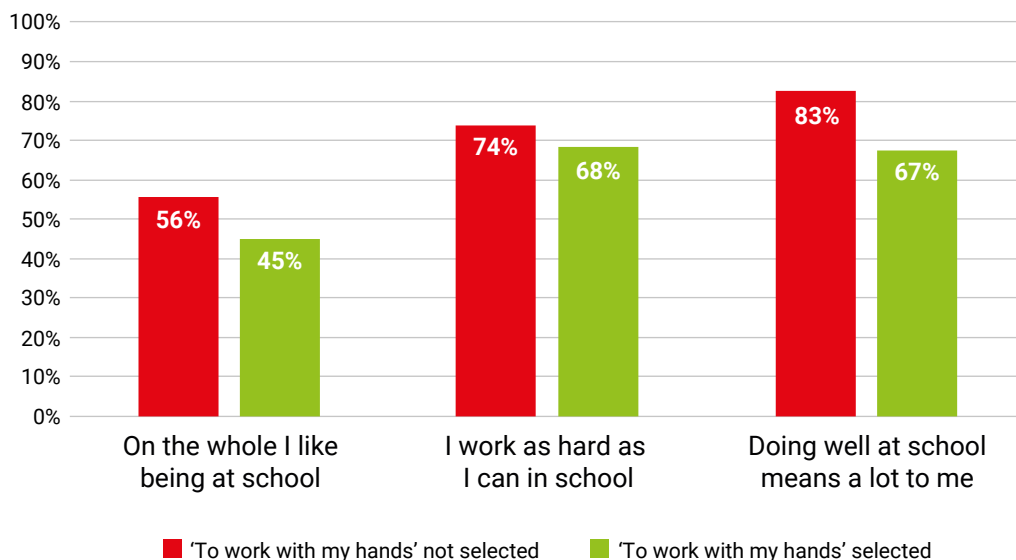
Figure 11: Differences in attitudes towards school by self-reported likelihood of going to university



2. School: Something to get through?

Finally, we compared those 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 (see Figure 12). This comparison shows that those who want to work with their hands were significantly less likely than those who did not select this option to say they liked being at school and that doing well at school meant a lot to them.¹¹

Figure 12: Differences in attitudes towards school by whether young people selected ‘working with my hands’ as important in their future work or career



2.2 Forms of alienation in/from schools

In what follows we will suggest that these findings, in conjunction with other data we present below, reflect the two broad, overlapping, forms of alienation experienced by young people in schools that we introduced in section 1.3, above. The first, which we refer to as curriculum-based alienation, is a product of a cultural mismatch between young people’s interests, aptitudes and aspirations and the narrow academic curriculum and test-focused culture of the classroom. This mismatch can result in young people feeling unfulfilled, bored and frustrated by having to engage with curriculum content that lacks meaning for them and over which they have little or no choice and control.¹²

The second form of alienation, which we refer to as identity-based alienation, occurs when young people feel cut off from or ‘othered’ by their school because their identities, whether based on class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality or other categories of social difference, are not adequately recognised or respected within the wider

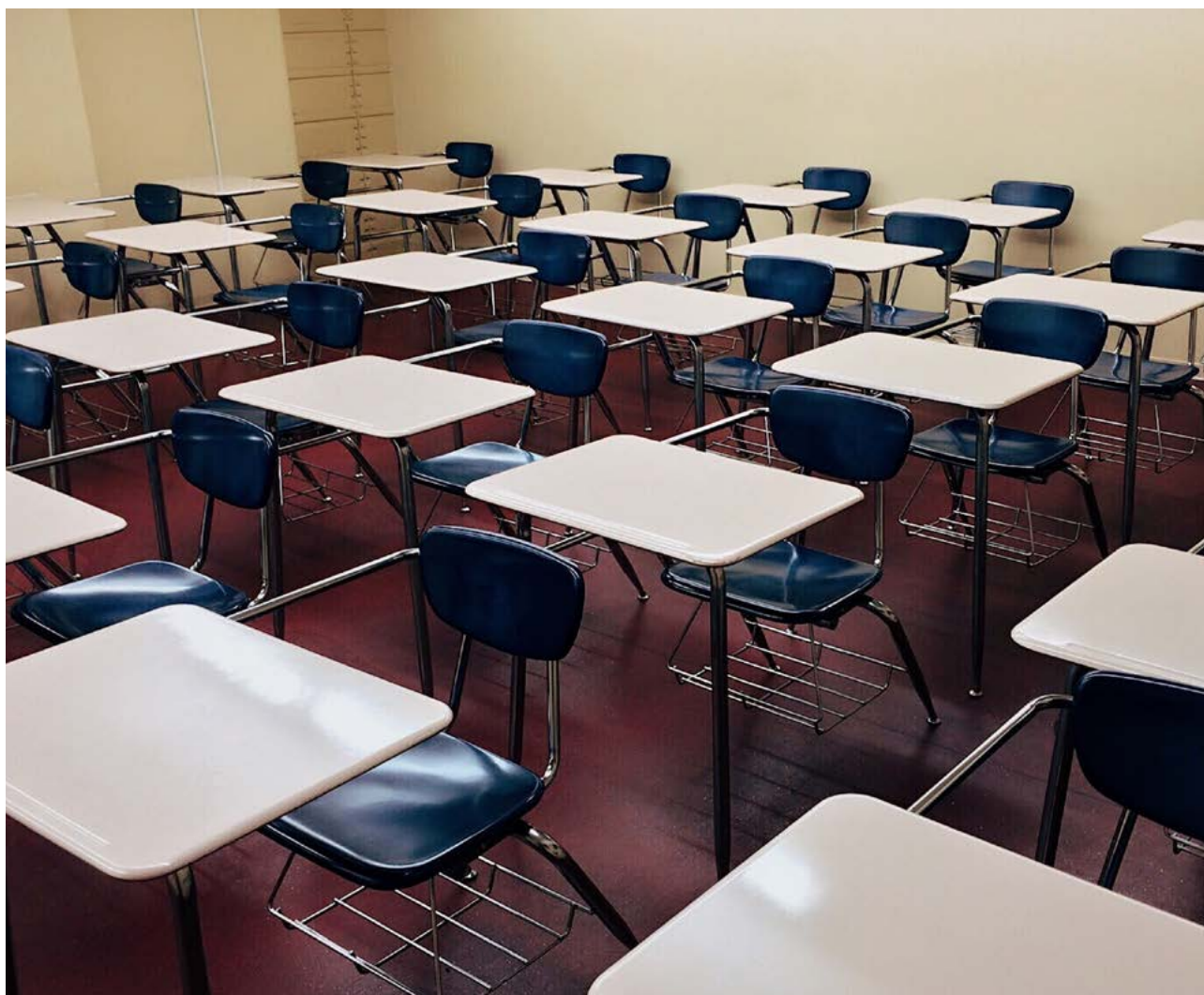
¹¹ For this question, we gave respondents a list of things they might want from work or a career in the future and asked them to select up to three that were the most important to them. In the figure we compare those who selected ‘to work with my hands’ as one of the things that was most important to them with those who didn’t. The other answer options were: to have a job which pays well, to have my own business, to do a job that leaves enough time for family life and/or leisure, to do work that I enjoy, to do work that involves helping other people, to work with others as part of a team, to work on my own, to have a job that is flexible, to have a job that is secure, to work in my local area/community, and to do work that makes a contribution to society.

¹² In the research literature on alienation from learning (borrowing from Seeman’s classic sociological paper ‘On the meaning of Alienation’ [1959]), these aspects of alienation tend to be referred to respectively as ‘self-estrangement’ (being unfulfilled by classroom work and so disconnected from the self), ‘meaninglessness’ (feeling disconnected from meaningful learning) and ‘powerlessness’ (feeling controlled by others or subject to an impersonal system). See, for example, Lian et al. (2022).

2. School: Something to get through?

school environment. Identity-based alienation can result from outright discrimination and bullying as well as more subtle, but often no less harmful, microaggressions (Sue et al. 1992). The wider school environment that produces identity-based alienation includes the official curriculum, pedagogy and forms of assessment - hence the overlap with what we are calling curriculum-based alienation. But it also includes the broader ethos of schools, peer relationships, student-teacher relationships and the 'hidden curriculum'; that is, the values and messages that are not part of the official curriculum but that are implicitly communicated to students, for example, by the way teachers interact with students or by what is left out of the official curriculum. All of these things can result in students having a sense of being cut off from school - as being on the outside, looking in.

We return to this second form of alienation in section 5 when we discuss the young people's survey responses to questions about whether they have experienced unfair treatment by their teachers and peers and the extent to which they felt encouraged, noticed and listened to by their teachers. While our survey data sheds light on both forms of alienation, our first wave of interview data is, on the whole, more focused on curriculum-based alienation. In future waves of the interviews we hope to explore the relationship between the two forms of alienation in more depth, as it is likely that young people's experiences of being alienated from the curriculum will be exacerbated by, and entangled with, identity-based forms of alienation.



2.3 Introducing our qualitative findings

As with the survey data, our interview data presents a mixed picture. While some of the young people we interviewed reported overwhelmingly negative or positive experiences of school, many described school as falling somewhere in the middle, as something they enjoyed elements of while disliking or struggling with others. As in the survey, for many of the young people we interviewed, school was something that they did not enjoy but rather endured:

Some of my lessons I absolutely loved and then others I absolutely despised and I was like, "I really don't want to go to this lesson"... But I went, I did the work and left... I got through it. (Lydia¹³, 16)

I just kept my head down and got on with my work. (Farid, 17)

School was alright, I just couldn't wait to leave it all the time... I was just serious about it because I wanted to pass. (Brooke, 17)

For these young people, school was something they felt they had to participate in, hoping to do as well as possible, but they ultimately looked forward to leaving at the earliest possible opportunity.

The aspects of school life the young people described themselves as enjoying were most commonly the social dimension of school, certain subjects and having positive relationships with a select few teachers:

I didn't enjoy the lessons, but I enjoyed like break and lunch and friends and stuff. (Hafsa, 16)

The only thing I enjoyed was, like, friends and PE... and the odd one or two teachers. (Phil, 18)

However, young people's negative experiences of school typically outweighed the positive ones for most of those we interviewed, who, for various reasons, often felt that school was 'just not for them':

I'm not really a school person, to be honest. (Chester, 17)

Reasons for not enjoying school varied across the sample and included: struggling in classroom environments; finding the curriculum uninteresting or irrelevant to their interests and future aspirations; stress brought on by the focus on exams and testing in schools; negative relationships with teachers; and bullying. These issues will be unpacked in the following sections, drawing on our interview data to illuminate young people's experiences of curriculum alienation and exam stress, and a combination of our survey and interview data to explore young people's negative relationships with teachers and their experiences of bullying. It is worth noting at this juncture, however, that, given the prevailing emphasis on uniformity in the delivery of education in secondary schools in England, combined with the diversity of the student body, it is perhaps unsurprising that school was a hit or miss, or outright negative, experience for many of the 113 young people we interviewed.

¹³ To preserve their anonymity, participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

3. Pushing squares into circles: young people's experiences of curriculum alienation – findings from the qualitative data

As discussed above, as a result of increased government pressure on schools and teachers to ensure that students perform well in tests and examinations, lessons are increasingly being 'taught to the test', modelled heavily on exam content and preparation for exams. This has reduced the overall interactivity of school lessons, with more didactic, mechanistic forms of teaching - where teachers instruct and students listen – dominating (Gewirtz et al. 2021). This policy emphasis and the uniform, exam-focussed approach to classroom practice that it produces are insensitive to the diversity of students' interests, aptitudes and aspirations, and our data suggests that this approach is alienating many young people in school.

Some of the young people we interviewed described lessons as 'boring' or otherwise difficult to get through because of the teaching style adopted. Brooke, 17, enjoyed aspects of school and wanted to do well, but understands the academic content better when it is put into a practical context. As a result, she was flourishing in college, where her course involved mostly practical, hands-on learning, after a school career in which she felt frustrated by the passivity of classroom learning:

I enjoyed [school] but I feel like, I don't know, I just didn't want to sit there all the time and copy off a whiteboard, like I wanted to do it to help me learn... and obviously in college, that's what we do, so it helps me learn better.

Similarly, Chester, 17, described himself as a 'doer', as someone who needs to work with his hands and put learning into practice in order to understand and enjoy it. As a result, school, where he was 'just sat in a classroom listening to someone go on for hours and hours and hours' had 'worn [him] out' and disengaged him from education. Christine, 17, had found school challenging for similar reasons. She felt left behind and boxed in by the rigidity and one-size-fits-all teaching style:

I struggle to concentrate and sit in a classroom... I don't learn being told something and writing it down... I learn being told, "Do this", and doing it over and over again until I can do it.

Christine was not alone in feeling trapped and restricted by school as a result of being, or feeling, unable to learn in the way that suited her. This emerged clearly in a group interview with three college students who reflected on the lack of flexibility in their experiences of learning at school, with one commenting, 'You feel like a robot' (Maxine, 16). Feeling boxed in like this was exacerbated by the rigidity of school in other respects, including long, fixed and highly structured days. Another participant of the group interview described the less structured set-up of college as freeing in this sense: 'being in college feels like it's more broken down so you don't have to, like, get impacted on one whole day' (Anusha, 18). This made learning on their course, something they still found challenging in other ways, more manageable than in the 5-day week structure of school.

3. Pushing squares into circles

Some young people we interviewed were less academically inclined and struggled with the academic content of their lessons. Many described feeling lost and overwhelmed in lessons, not understanding what their teachers were talking about and struggling with classroom learning:

For me, I didn't really understand much, like in secondary I was really behind... I have trouble revising... It's just something that can't stay in my brain for a long enough time. (Maxine, 16)

I never really tried in school because I didn't understand what was going on half the time. (Martin, 17)

I never used to like doing [schoolwork]. Too frustrating... They'd put me in classes with things that I didn't even have a clue what... I wasn't on that level. (Rory, 16)

Importantly, though, struggles with classroom learning were not confined to those who found school academically challenging. For example, Jared, 17, was an academically high-attaining student who was provided with additional coursework while in school to keep him busy because he completed his schoolwork so quickly. However, he struggled to stay focused in school because of the emphasis on classroom learning. He preferred practical learning, and so was thriving doing a T Level course at college, which involved a lot of practical, applied work as well as a work experience component:

I love [the T Level course]... I never knew something like this could actually exist... because it's pretty, like, hands-on... it's practical work.

A number of the young people in our sample were dyslexic, something that made learning in the ways expected at many secondary schools in England even more challenging. All of the young people who disclosed their dyslexia to us cited it as a barrier to their learning in school. They ascribed this partly to a lack of support from their schools, but also to the way education is packaged and delivered in schools:

[School was] bad... because I've got dyslexia, and I do things different, and when they try to teach you in a certain way it's like my brain wouldn't process their way, because I have to see things... So, like, you have to show me and not tell me or write or... I can't read it, I would have to see it. (Leah, 17)

Interviewer: Were the teachers supportive?

Eoin: No, because I'm dyslexic, they didn't know what to do with me... When I was in [school] I was left alone all day, no education. (Eoin, 17)

These findings raise important questions about the viability and ethics of a uniform approach to the provision of education in secondary schools. These schools are populated with students who represent a diverse range of interests, aptitudes, aspirations and needs. Yet the pressures towards uniformity, working in combination with cuts to school budgets, are constraining teachers' ability to adjust their teaching approaches to make lessons more inclusive.¹⁴

¹⁴ This is a problem compounded by a shortage of teaching assistants in many schools, with increasing numbers leaving the profession because of low pay (Hall & Webster 2022, Walker 2022).

3. Pushing squares into circles

In addition to struggling with the academic content and/or didactic teaching approach used in their schools, many of the young people we interviewed found the curriculum rigid and uninteresting, only enjoying one or two subjects that overlapped with their hobbies and interests or with their aspirations beyond school. Jared, 17, had aspirations to work in cyber security and had outpaced the computing classes offered in school, leaving him bored and disengaged. His teacher responded by setting up a mini advanced computing course to keep him motivated and engaged:

She created this course for me, ethical hacking... The course she gave me had nothing to do with a main school course because, well, she realised that, you know, I'm way past that and would be bored.

Saleem, 18, was not academically inclined, struggled with classroom learning and was not engaged by the majority of the curriculum subjects. The only thing he enjoyed at school was his graphics lessons because they aligned with his passion for gaming and computers and with his long-term aspiration to become a graphic designer. Outside of his graphics lessons, Saleem really struggled to enjoy or engage with school:

The only class I ever liked... was my graphics one... I just didn't like [school] because I would go there and then my whole brain would just shut down... Just bored... and I would draw in class... I would get into trouble because I would just doodle in class in my workbook... I wouldn't be able to read anything because at one point I think I doodled over my equations.

Brad, 17, had tried his best in school but found the curriculum, and the emphasis on maths and English in particular, off-putting because the way these subjects were taught made them feel totally unrelated to his interest in sport and his aspiration to become a footballer:

I just wanted to do sport all the time... I couldn't think of like, English, maths, I just wanted to do sport.

Similarly, Phil, 18, enjoyed PE at school, but found maths and English very difficult, something that was continuing to trouble him two years into his time at college, where he was still struggling to pass those qualifications. The current policy emphasis on performing well in 'core' academic subjects, and particularly maths and English, was a barrier to many of our interviewees' enjoyment of school. Most of the young people we interviewed who were in college at the time of their interviews were still studying maths and/or English alongside their course of choice because they had not managed to attain these qualifications while in school. While some of the young people we interviewed enjoyed maths and/or English, they were in the minority, with most feeling forced to take these subjects that they were not interested or confident in.

4. Schooling as a stressful experience – findings from the qualitative data

For many of the young people we interviewed, schools were intensely stressful places to be. This stress was often rooted in young people struggling to learn in ways alien or challenging to them, about subjects that often felt boring or irrelevant to their interests or career aspirations. Schools were stressful in other ways too, however.

A significant source of stress for many of the young people we interviewed was the emphasis their schools placed on exams. Even for those who enjoyed, or didn't mind, school, exams typically generated stress:

[School] was alright, it wasn't too bad, but it was just the fact of getting through my GCSEs and just... Class-wise I was alright, I didn't mind it, but it was when it was like you were sat doing exams every day. (Brad, 17)

The young people who found learning at school difficult typically found exams challenging, linking their struggles with mastering skills such as taking notes and revising to their exam performance:

I have trouble revising... When I try to remember something it just, by the time the test comes, everything will just... go out, and I'd fail. (Maxine, 16)

It's going to be very tough for me, I guess... Everything just adds up and there's a lot of stress. (Ben, 15)

Some of the young people we interviewed were overtly critical of the prominence given to exams in school. This was often in response to having been in Year 11 during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when GCSE exams were cancelled and traditional examination processes had to be adapted. Like the majority of schools, Lydia's school had opted to give students a number of 'mini' assessments over the school term, rather than one final exam at the end, which Lydia felt was a fairer approach to assessing students and a measure that should continue beyond the pandemic:

I think it's better to do mini ones, add it all together and get your... get your final mark, because you could do amazing throughout, like doing in-class assessments, and you could do amazing with everything, but that one day you might have an off day on your exam and screw it all up. (Lydia, 16)

However, many young people, including Lydia, found the uncertainty around exams during the pandemic and the sheer volume of testing extremely stressful. Different schools adopted different policies around how to determine students' GCSE grades, and the uncertainty and inconsistency around this created considerable stress for many of our participants who recognised the weight given to exam results by employers and colleges:

4. Schooling as a stressful experience

It would be nice to know what's happening with our exams, because it's so on and off, like obviously we need to know for college and there's like all this talk about repeating years and stuff, but we just don't know and it's leading to a lot of stress. (Grace, 15)

Most of the young people we spoke with attributed blame for confusion around exams to the Government, rather than their schools or teachers. However, some young people did feel that they could sense the stress their teachers were under in trying to sort out assessments during the pandemic, and felt that this stress was negatively impacting students:

Like a lot of the teachers in school weren't supporting us and they were just making it more of a stressful decision... There's a lot of pressure, which is causing a lot of us to mess about because they're stressing out so much that we just want to defuse the situation. (Mia, 15)

Many young people described this as an intensely stressful time, full of tests and extra work:

Interviewer: How did they work out [your GCSE grades]? Predicted grades?

Chester: Oh, I had to do loads and loads and loads and loads of tests. It was unbelievable... I don't know the word for it, but it was just like it was test and test and test... and there was a good few in each subject... That was horrible... stressful as well. (Chester, 17)

We sat several mini-exams, they called it; they didn't want to call it an exam because they weren't exams, so there like mini-assessments... I made myself ill with how much stress I was getting... I was just stressing with the amount of work, and I was like, "I'm never going to get it finished", like some of the teachers were setting assignments like way past school hours... and we were saying if we were in school they wouldn't have give us this much work, but because we're at home they're just piling it on. (Lydia, 16)

It's like really stressful as well because... we only had like two weeks' notice until we had to do all of these exams... like we didn't really have time to revise. But all like the smarter people, I would say they're like stressing as well, like you never see the smart people stress about exams, right now they are. (Josh, 16)

These findings suggest that exams are a source of significant stress and anxiety for many young people at school, who feel under pressure to succeed. Given the timing of this research, it is also clear from our data that the Covid-19 pandemic had heightened this stress by creating larger workloads for students and more tests than normal.¹⁵ While several young people felt having assessments throughout the year was fairer and preferable to one big, final exam at the end of the school year, most struggled with the former because it entailed more exams, which they found extremely stressful.

For many, the stress they felt around exams was compounded by the intense pressure they felt they were under in school to make decisions about what to do after Year 11. As Lupton et al. (2021) found in their research with young people, Year 11 is a particularly stressful school year, when young people are taking exams, for which

¹⁵ See Barton (2022) and Lough (2022) for similar findings reported by the Association of School and College Leaders and the NSPCC respectively.

4. Schooling as a stressful experience

grades matter more than ever and when they are expected to make important decisions about their futures. This is particularly the case for those not planning to take A Levels. These young people do not have the same luxury as those going on to A Levels to delay these decisions until they are 18, or even later if they go on to university. And the pressure they are under to make these decisions in a compressed time period, often with minimal support (McPherson et al. 2022), has negative implications for the quality of the decisions they are able to make. Unsurprisingly, many of the young people we interviewed reported feeling anxious about these pressures. Several described this taking a toll on their mental health and wellbeing, and felt there needed to be more recognition of the pressure young people are under:

I think the pressure around young people, like, really does have an effect on their mental health... and like the standards that they have to be at, which I think doesn't, like, help. I think there needs to be less pressure on people my age to do well and more support... It shouldn't matter, like, what your grades are or anything like that. (John, 15)

I think's it just such... such a big window and there's so much, so much pressure, pressure put on us, especially this year and it's just overwhelming, like so overwhelming. Sometimes I want to go home and I'll be like, "Yeah, I want to revise", I get home and it's like I don't even know where to start, don't know what to do... And there's such a big window of what to do next year, and it's just overwhelming, all the options, and if it's a good place and all this... It's such a big thing, like such a big choice that we're making. (Dylan, 15)



4. Schooling as a stressful experience

Some of the young people felt they had been under pressure to figure out what they wanted to pursue in terms of a career from a very young age in education and that Year 11 represented the culmination of all of that pressure coming to a breaking point. They often described feeling suddenly out of time and uncertain of what to do:

It's just like picking the colleges and what you actually want to do, and like deciding... because, you know, you go through like, literally from nursery, everyone's like, "Oh, what do you want to be?" and it's like, "Fireman", "Doctor", and then you get, like, older and it's like, "I have no clue anymore". (Lucy, 17)

They asked me, they like asked, "Are you aware of what you want to be?" and I'm like, "No". But I think throughout my life there was stuff, like, I wanted to be a police, I wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to be a scientist, just throughout my life I just said, "I want to be this, I want to be that"... Just very uncertain. (Nasim, 16)

Others felt stressed because they felt they had not been given the opportunity or encouragement to start thinking about post-16 options earlier in their school careers, and felt blindsided by the pressure of being asked to do so in Year 11, when school is nearly finished:

You just get like a mouthful in Year 11 of you've got to start thinking about it now, like you've got this big responsibility of you've got to work out what you want to do. I think if they started introducing it earlier then, like, it gives everyone a feeling of, "Oh, I've got to think about it"... They just like dump that on you... They push exams and then you've got exams to worry about, and revision, and then you've got like, "Oh, what do I actually do, what am I working for through these exams?" (Charlotte, 17)

The findings presented in this section suggest that schools can be very stressful environments for young people, particularly in a school year like Year 11 when so much is expected of them in terms of performance in examinations and decision-making about their futures. The young people we spoke with felt under significant pressure to 'succeed', to perform well in exams that they knew had a bearing on their futures, but also to make important decisions about what to do next. As a result, many were stressed and anxious, overwhelmed by the consequences of their 'performance' in Year 11 and by, what felt to many, the sudden expectation for them to take responsibility for their futures.

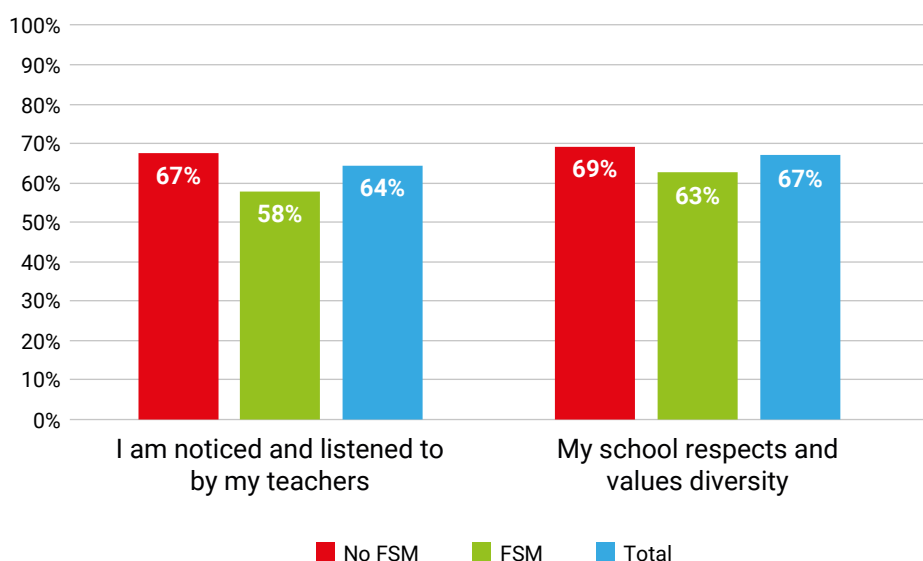
5. Recognition and respect at school

Many young people's negative experiences in school went beyond their encounters with the formal curriculum and assessment pressures. Our survey findings suggest that a significant minority of young people do not feel recognised, respected or supported in school and that many experience unfair treatment and bullying.

5.1 Young people's perspectives on being noticed and listened to by their teachers and on respect for diversity in their schools – findings from the survey

To explore the extent to which students' felt recognised and respected as individuals and how far they felt their school was characterised by a culture of recognition and respect more generally, we asked them how far they agreed with the statements 'I am noticed and listened to by my teachers' and 'my school respects and values diversity'. Around 64% of the overall sample agreed with the former statement and 67% agreed with the latter. However, for young people from low-income backgrounds (using FSM eligibility as a proxy) the proportion agreeing with both of these statements is lower at 58% and 63% respectively (see Figure 13).

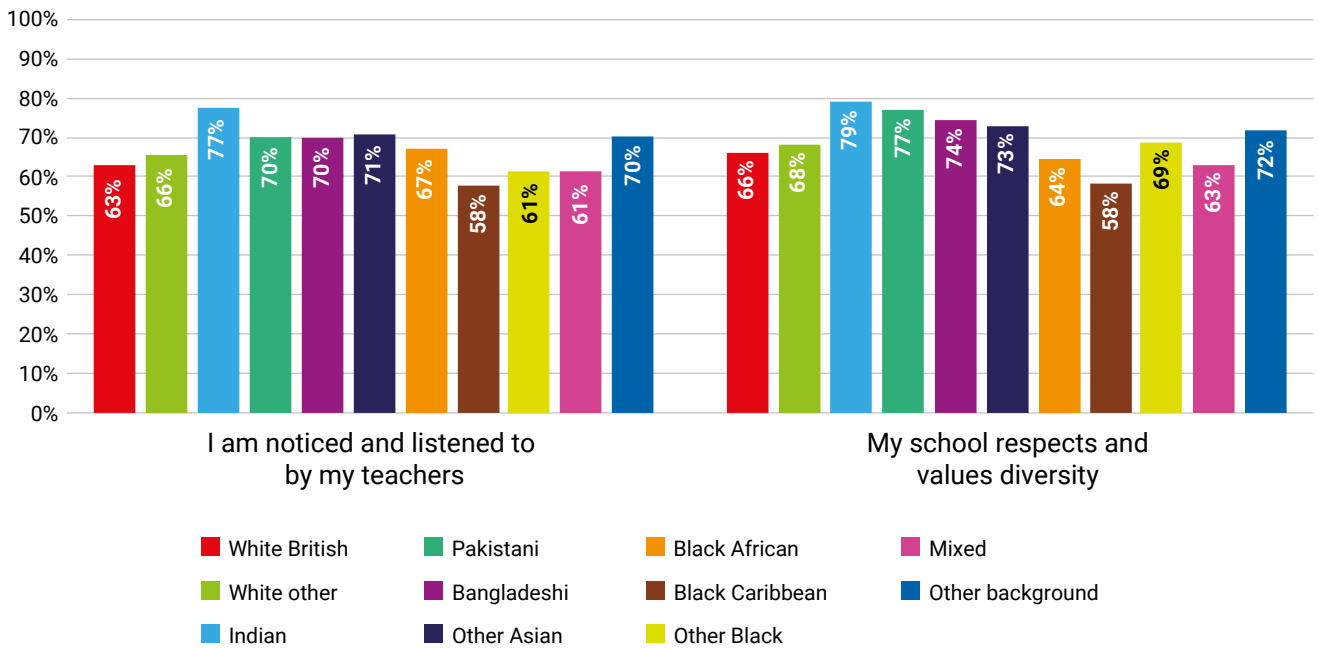
Figure 13: Recognition in the school environment by FSM status



Again, ethnic background presents a more complex picture. Figure 14 shows that, overall, those identifying as coming from an Asian background are the most likely to report feeling noticed and listened to by their teachers and that their school respects and values diversity. The lowest levels of agreement with these statements come from young people identifying as Black Caribbean or as coming from mixed/multiple ethnic backgrounds. Young people identifying as White British, White other and Black African fall somewhere in between the other groups.

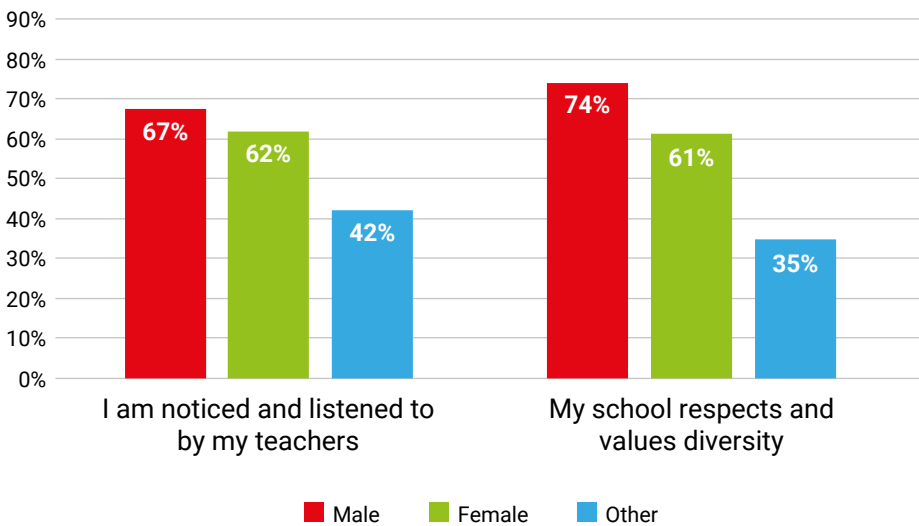
5. Recognition and respect at school

Figure 14: Recognition in the school environment by ethnicity



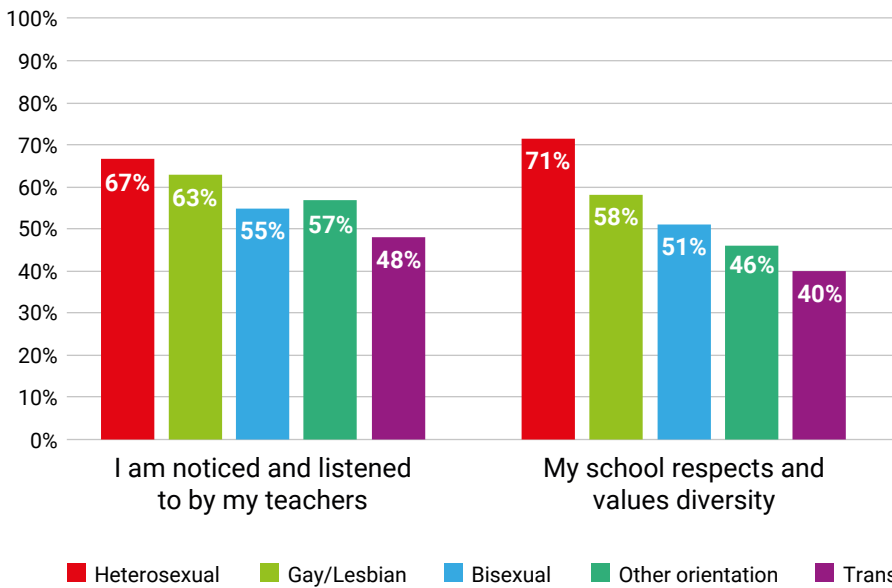
Looking at gender differences (Figure 15), the proportion of young people who agree with both statements, at 42% and 35% respectively, is lowest for those who do not identify as male or female.

Figure 15: Recognition in the school environment by gender



Young people who identify as LGBT are less likely to agree with these statements than their heterosexual/cisgender peers. Levels of agreement with both statements are especially low among young people identifying as trans, with less than one in two trans students agreeing that they are noticed and listened to by their teachers and only 40% agreeing that their school respects and values diversity (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Recognition in the school environment by sexual orientation and trans status



Young people with SEND are also less likely to report that they are being noticed and listened to by their teachers and that their school respects and values diversity (see Figure 17). Figure 18, which compares the data for this survey question according to different types of SEND, indicates that young people reporting social, emotional and mental health difficulties are least likely to agree that they feel noticed and listened to by their teachers and that their school respects and values diversity. And Figure 19 shows a very strong pattern of association between how good young people say their mental health is and their perception of their schools' inclusiveness. For example, while only 44% of young people who describe their mental health as 'not good at all' agree with the statement that their school respects and values diversity, 80% (almost twice as many) of those who say their mental health is 'very good' agree with this statement.

Figure 17: Recognition in the school environment by SEND status

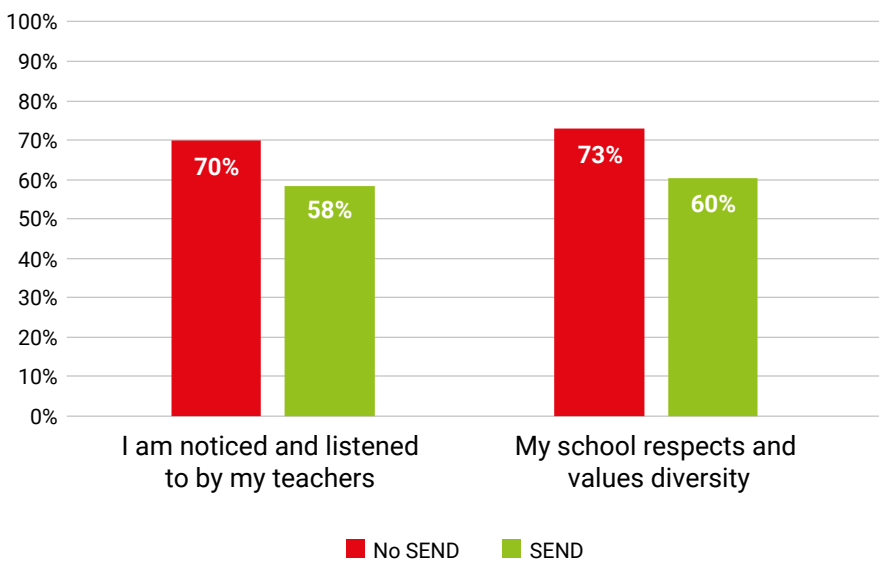


Figure 18: Recognition in the school environment by SEND type

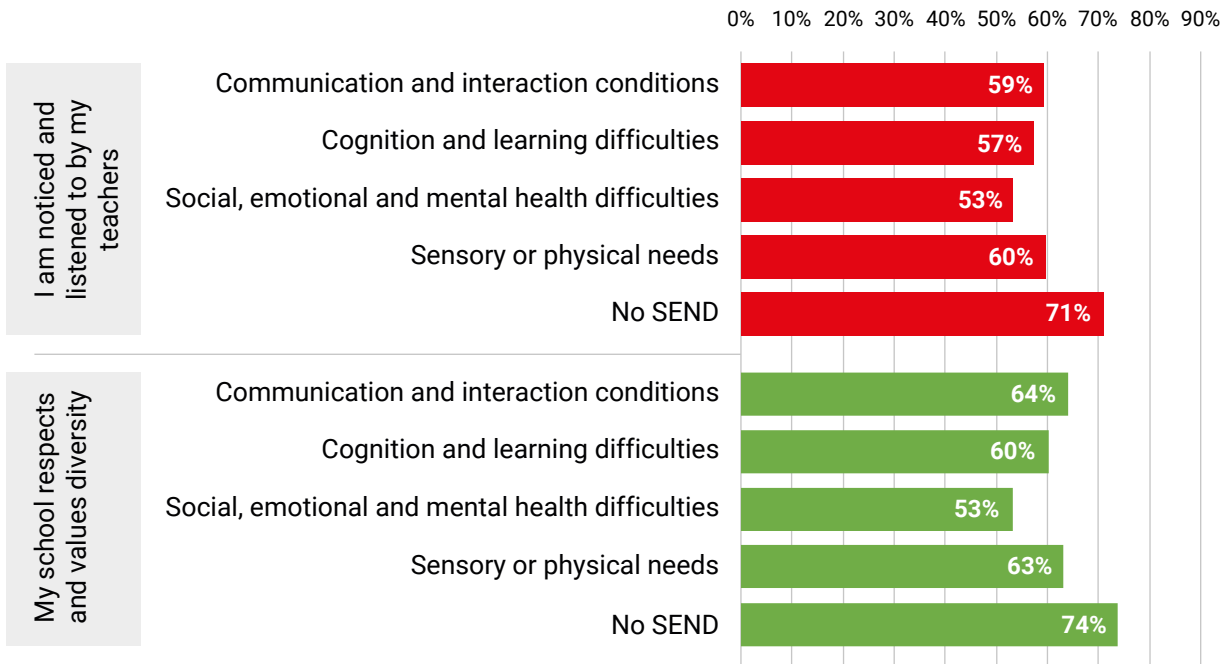


Figure 19: Recognition in the school environment by mental health status

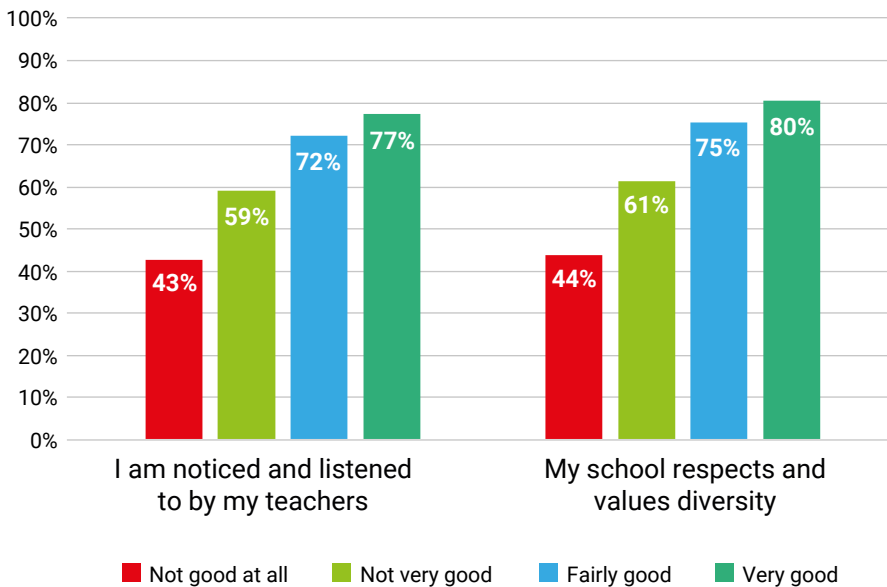


Figure 20 shows that young people reporting lower predicted GCSE grades for their core subjects are less likely to think that they are noticed or listened to by their teachers, suggesting that academically less successful young people may not receive the same level of attention from their teachers as their more academically successful peers. That said, they do not differ in the way they respond to the statement, ‘my school respects and values diversity’ (possibly because they do not see their lower grades as a diversity issue).

5. Recognition and respect at school

Figure 20: Recognition in the school environment by predicted GCSE attainment

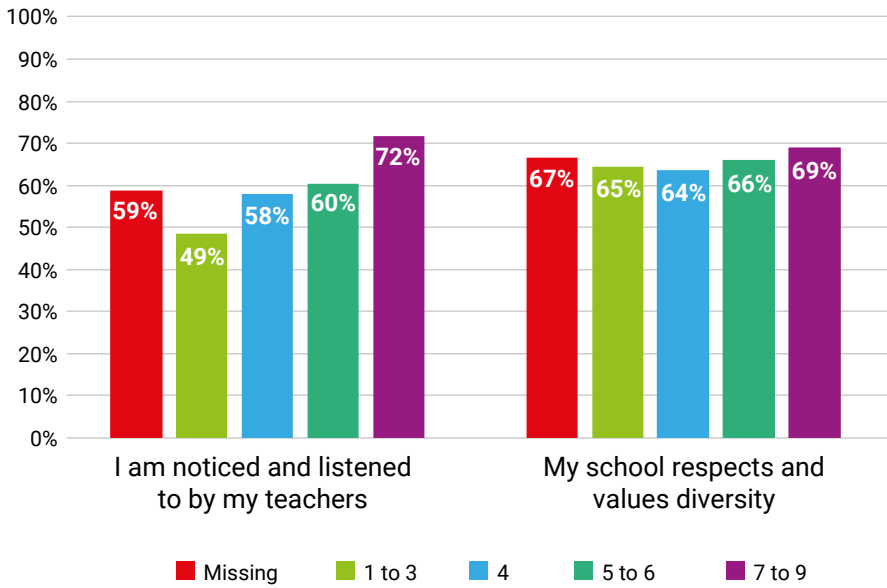
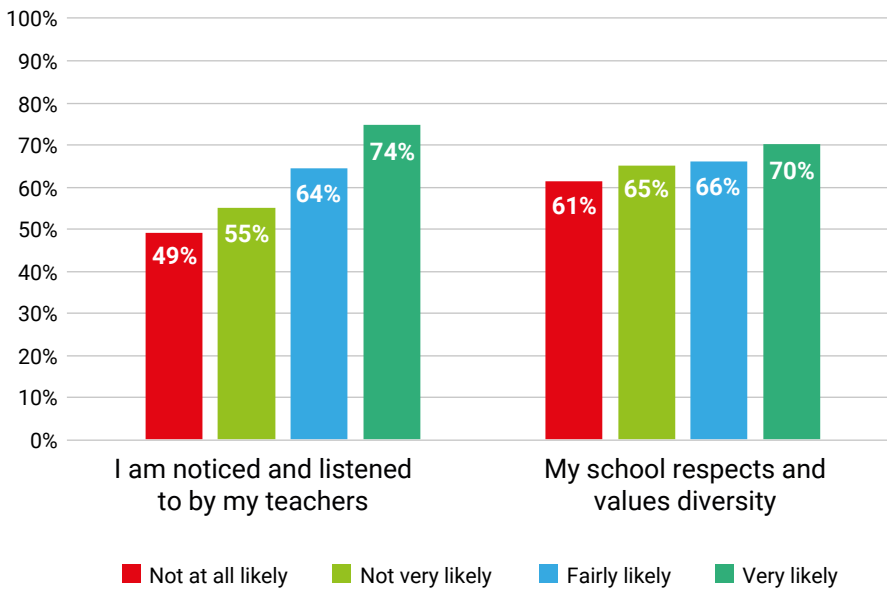


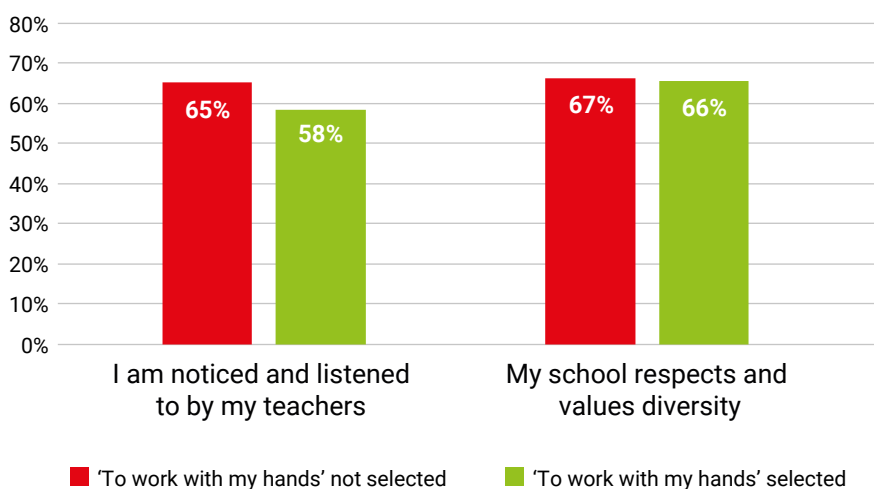
Figure 21 shows a strong association between the self-reported likelihood of young people going to university and the likelihood of them agreeing with the statement that they are noticed and listened to by their teachers. While 74% of those who thought it was very likely they would go to university agreed with this statement, only 49% of those reporting that they were not at all likely to go to university did so. As with predicted GCSE grades, there is, perhaps unsurprisingly and for the same reason, no significant difference in how they respond to the statement, 'my school respects and values diversity'.

Figure 21: Recognition in the school environment by self-reported likelihood of going to university



Finally, young people who told us that working with their hands in the future is important to them are less likely to feel noticed and listened to by their teachers than those who did not (Figure 22). However, as with predicted GCSE grades and young people’s likelihood of going to university, whether or not young people want to work with their hands does not make a difference to how they respond to the ‘my school respects and values diversity’ statement.

Figure 22: Recognition in the school environment by wanting to work with hands

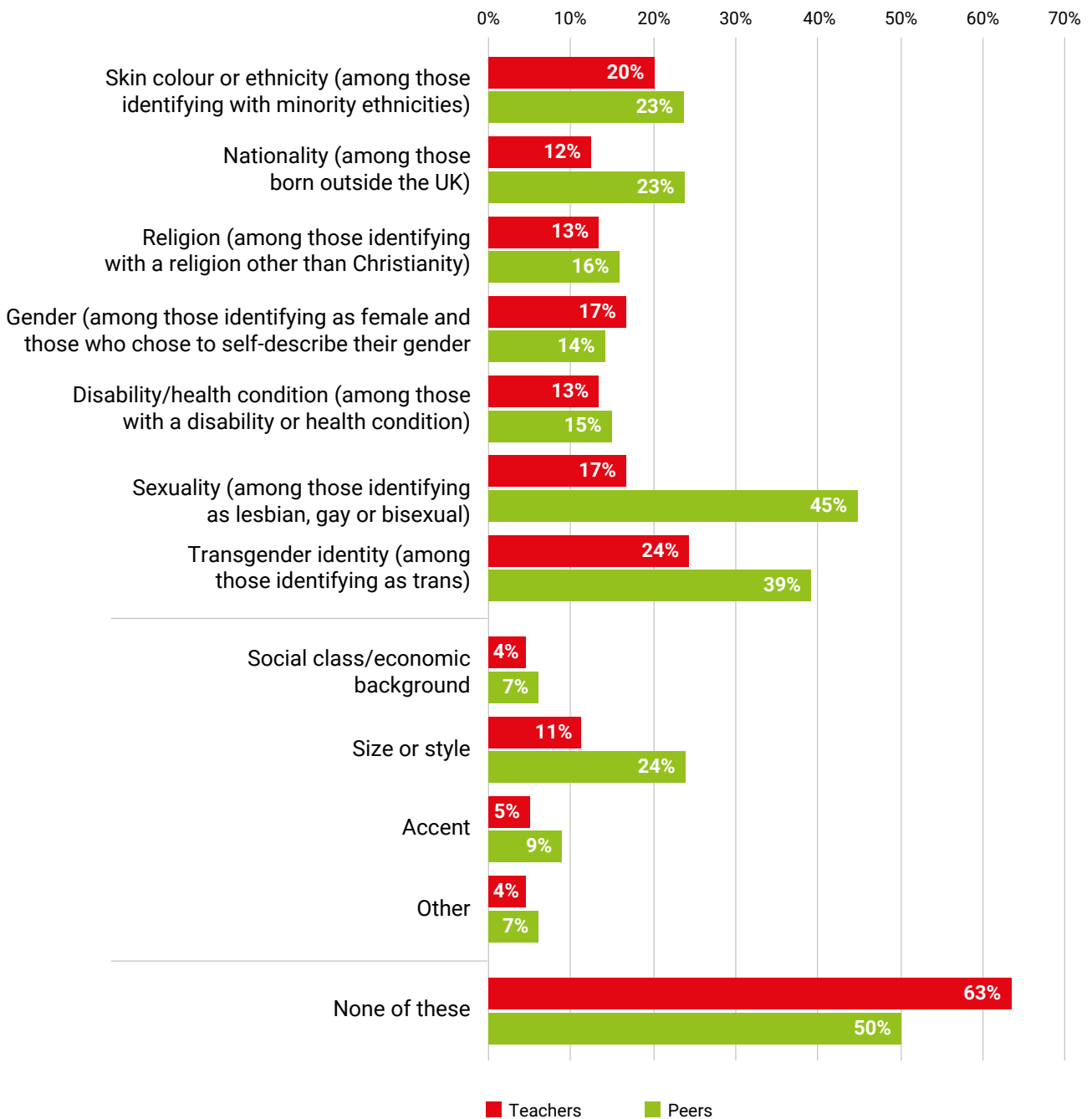


5.2 Unfair treatment and bullying – findings from the survey

To explore young people’s experiences of discrimination and bullying in school, we asked our survey respondents whether they have ever been treated unfairly by their teachers and whether they have ever been treated unfairly or bullied by their peers at school based on a range of factors. Overall, around 37% of all young people reported that they had experienced unfair treatment by their teachers and 50% told us that they had experienced unfair treatment or bullying by their peers at school. Figure 23 lists the prevalence of reported unfair treatment for each of the factors we asked about. The share of young people who say they are unfairly treated are reported for the relevant minority groups, while social class, size or style, accent and other factors are reported for the whole population. According to these results, around one in five non-White-British young people, one in six young people identifying with a minority sexuality and one in four transgender young people say they are treated unfairly by their teachers. When it comes to unfair treatment by their peers, more than one in five young people from non-White-British backgrounds report unfair treatment or bullying based on their skin colour or nationality. 45% of young people identifying with minority sexuality categories and 39% of young people identifying as trans report unfair treatment or bullying by their peers based on their sexual orientation and trans status respectively. Almost one in every four young people also report being treated unfairly by their peers because of their size or style (including how they look).

Figure 23 presents many more depressing findings relating to experiences of unfair treatment based on other characteristics. It is concerning that these experiences are so prevalent in schools, especially given what we know from other research about the longer term scarring effects of bullying and discrimination on young people’s physical and mental health (Wolke & Lereya 2015, Moore et al. 2017, Steketee et al. 2021).

Figure 23: Unfair treatment at school



Note: The bars for the first seven items show the share of young people from the relevant groups reporting unfair treatment by their teachers and unfair treatment or bullying by their peers. The rest are shown for the whole population.

5.3 Encouragement and support from teachers – findings from the survey

To document the prevalence of support from different actors in young people’s lives, the survey asked respondents whether they have received encouragement in their lives from the different categories of people they may interact with. Figure 24 shows the proportion of young people who said they received encouragement from people in these different categories. While 86% mentioned receiving encouragement from parents, 74% mentioned friends and 56% other relatives, only 48% of young people (i.e. less than one in two) said they received encouragement from their teachers. It is surprising that teachers, who are likely to have so much direct and regular contact with young people, do not come higher on their list. While we cannot be confident of the reasons for this, we believe it is likely to include the pressures teachers are under to meet the performance targets they are monitored against, which, as we know from our previous research, limit the time and resources that are required to spend quality time and develop meaningful relationships with their students (Gewirtz et al. 2021).

Figure 24: Who young people receive encouragement from

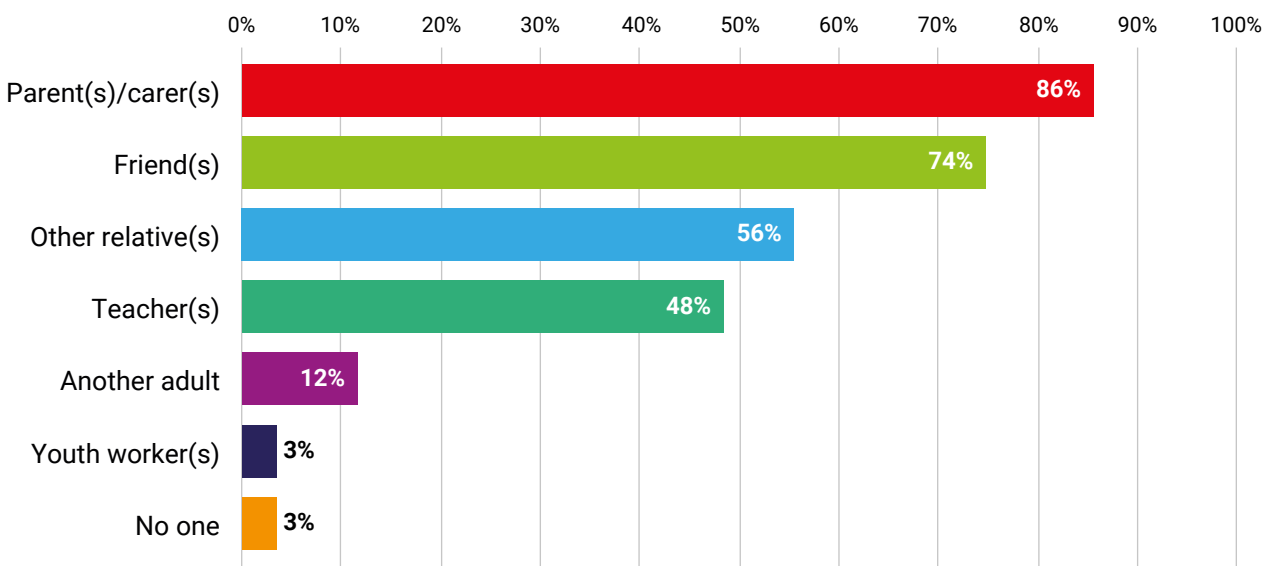
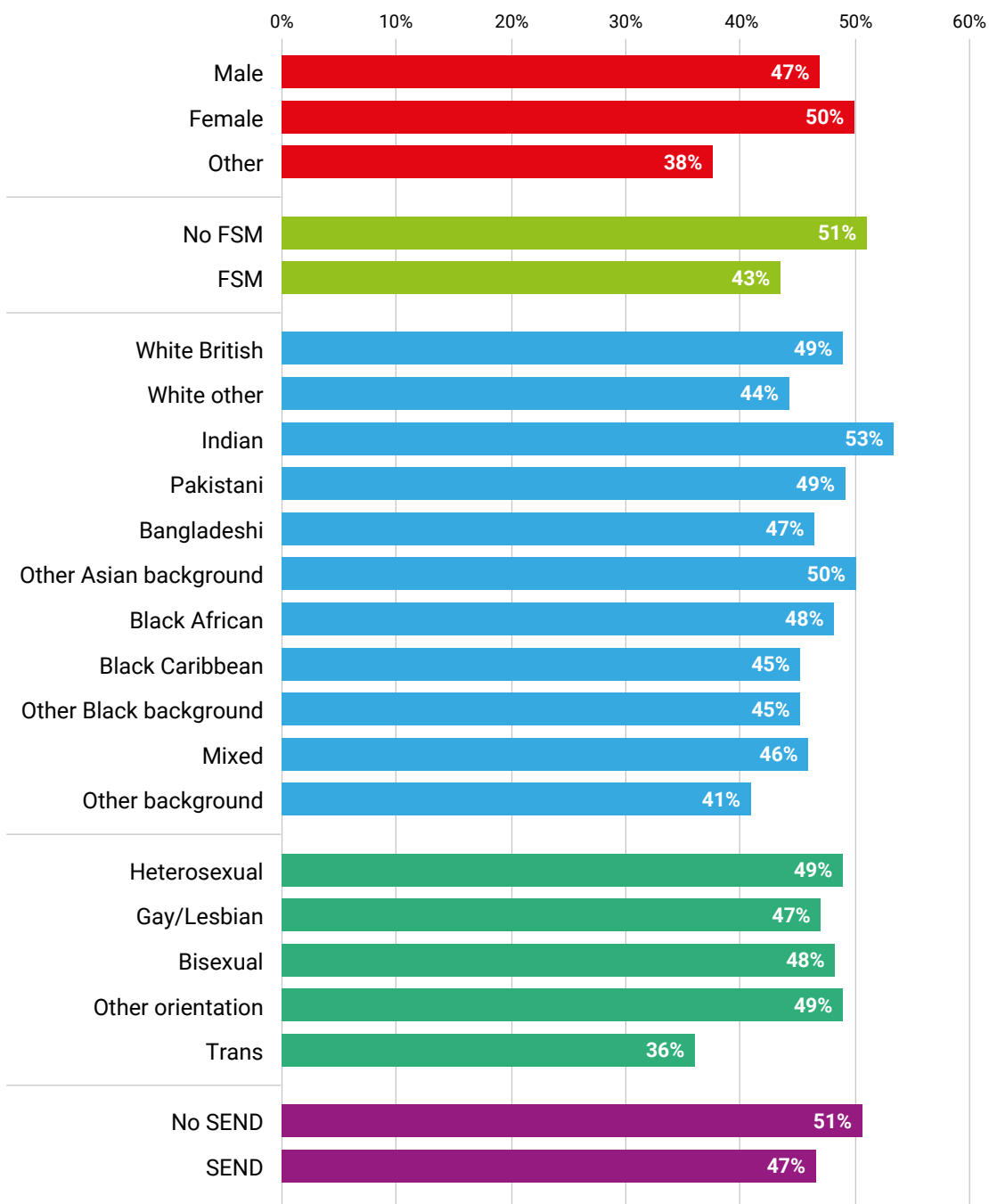


Figure 25 shows the prevalence of young people across different characteristics reporting that they have received encouragement from teachers. While the differences for most characteristics are not clear, two show statistically significant differences. First, students from low-income backgrounds (using FSM eligibility as a proxy) are significantly less likely to report receiving encouragement from teachers than those students who have never been eligible for FSM (43% vs 51% respectively). Second, those with SEND report lower levels of encouragement than those without SEND (47% vs 51%).

Figure 25: Encouragement received from teachers by different diversity characteristics



5.4 Recognition and respect at school - findings from the qualitative data

As noted earlier, while in the survey we have been able to explore young people's experiences of feeling recognised and respected (or not) at school in relation to a range of identity characteristics, this is not something we have yet had an opportunity to explore in our interviews in any depth.¹⁶ However, what has emerged from our interview data is a broader sense of young people feeling alienated from school because they don't feel recognised, respected or supported by their teachers. As is illustrated below, some young people's narratives did imply they felt mistreated because of their social class backgrounds, but for the most part, young people felt they were misrecognised, disrespected or treated unfairly because of an overall lack of understanding and care on the part of their teachers.

Damian, 16, had experienced a difficult upbringing in the North of England, characterised by poverty, drug use and family breakdown. He had eventually left mainstream school for alternative education at a boxing club, but in his interview reflected in depth about how he had felt misrecognised by his teachers at school, pointing to the gulf that he felt separated him and his background from those who taught him:

I've had so many teachers that have said to me, "I know what's going on". You don't. You don't have a clue what's going on in my head... They don't have a clue, man. I've grown up on some of the roughest estates in the fucking country, man... They haven't, they haven't seen that, they haven't done... not even done what I've done, they haven't experienced what I've experienced... I'm just on about poverty.

Ricky, 15, had a similarly difficult upbringing and felt that teachers at school did not have the time, nor the inclination, to support him through challenges at school. Instead, like several other young people, he felt that teachers actively did not want to support him, finding him too difficult to deal with:

They might as well say... fuck off!... They don't help you... They just do their best to get rid of you because they can't handle the hassle.

There was a strong feeling of being disrespected by teachers among some of the young people we interviewed. This was particularly common in interviews with young men from low-income backgrounds who felt that a combination of their age, assumptions about their social class backgrounds and, in some cases, their teachers being stressed meant they were overlooked, underestimated and profiled at school:

Do you know what, school was absolutely terrible for me. I had teachers telling me I was going to fail, the whole enchilada. (Chester, 17)

¹⁶ Although there is a substantial and long-standing body of existing research on teachers' and students' experiences of racism in schools and the institutional factors that contribute to racism being 'deeply embedded' in English schooling. The latter include the teaching workforce being disproportionately white and a lack of 'racial literacy' among teachers, a problem compounded by a curriculum that is overwhelmingly white and Eurocentric in its scope and focus (Lander 2011, Doharty 2019, Joseph-Salisbury 2020). They also include school policies related to rules around school uniform and hair, which often discriminate against students of colour (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018, Dabiri 2020). Exclusion and other forms of discipline have also been found to be unequally applied to students in England's schools, with recent analysis by McIntyre et al. (2021), for example, finding that school exclusion rates are five times higher for Black Caribbean students than their white peers in parts of England. There is also extensive evidence of the prevalence of more direct forms and experiences of racism in schools in England, including the bullying of students from ethnic minority backgrounds by peers at school, as well as discriminatory treatment towards them from teachers (Joseph-Salisbury 2020).

Similarly, existing research indicates that LGBT young people often feel isolated and marginalised at school, with studies highlighting extensive homo- and transphobic bullying, a lack of visible LGBT teachers, a curriculum that is not LGBT-inclusive and a lack of LGBT-specific support for students (Snapp et al. 2015, Pearce & Cumming-Potvin 2017, Sauntson 2019, Bradlow et al. 2020).

There are some teachers that I absolutely love... and I owe a lot to them... But sometimes teachers just want to shout at kids and think that works... As long as they're not going mad at me and they're just stressed, I can tell they're stressed out. (Aaron, 16)

Just, like, talk to us like you want to be talked to... Like, you have to watch your back every five seconds... Because the way, like, you talk to us is like, do you talk to all your friends like this or is it just, like, us? (Shanni, 16)

In interviews, as with the survey, it was more common for young people to report feeling discriminated against by their peers at school. Numerous young people had been badly bullied on the basis of their ethnicity or appearance. All of the young people we interviewed who had Irish Traveller backgrounds described being bullied about their heritage. This often led to young people moving school or withdrawing from school entirely. Rory, 16, who had an Irish Traveller background, had left school in Year 7 due to being badly bullied, spending several years working with his dad in construction. Like other young people who had experienced bullying, Rory felt that teachers did little to support him. Shelly, 17, had been bullied about her weight and felt this was made worse by the inaction of teachers:

[I] didn't like [school]... There was quite a bit of bullying, and obviously some teachers take favourites... Some of the girls and boys jointly filmed it and sent it around the school... But teachers saw the video but didn't take any action against it... [I was] fourteen.

Rather than feeling explicitly mistreated by teachers, it was more common for young people to feel unsupported or ignored by them. This theme emerged strongly in many of our interviews, but particularly in those with young people who had SEND. All of the young people we interviewed who had dyslexia reported feeling unsupported by teachers. Leah, 17, struggled in school due to her dyslexia and eventually left in Year 10, after her family tried and failed to secure support for her:

My mum was pushing for me to get help, and I had help for like Year 7, and then they gave up with me, because apparently I was too much.

Eoin, 17, had a very difficult school career due to a lack of support with his dyslexia. He had missed several years of education because schools and teachers did not know how to support him with schoolwork. For the years he did spend in education, he described being left alone in empty classrooms, being allowed to watch videos on his phone and being ignored. He also described being given no careers advice or guidance:

They never did nothing like that with me... No [careers advice], not in high school or nothing like that... [Schools] didn't have a placement for me... They didn't have a place for me... [I was just at] home watching videos and stuff. And when I went they didn't know what to do with me, so they just... let me go on my phone a bit... during classes, lessons; the teachers wouldn't really talk to me either.

Young people with poor mental health also often felt they had not received support from teachers in school. Like with those with dyslexia, this often led to them missing lessons or school entirely:

Academically, I did [enjoy school], but I had a lot of problems with like anxiety and, unfortunately, the school didn't really support me that well, so I struggled in that sense. And I missed a lot of lessons because I just couldn't really go in sometimes... It was horrible. (Chelsea, 18)

Having good teachers emerged as important in many of our interviews with young people. Several noted a decline in the quality of their experiences at school when 'good' teachers left or when they were taught by supply teachers, making it difficult to forge relationships or experience consistency in their education:

[I didn't enjoy school]... like Year 10 onwards... because the best teachers left and then it all went downhill... Like, they say Year 11 is your most important year, don't they?... And none of the teachers were in, we had supply teachers... and they never taught you anything. (Phil, 18)

In Year 11, we didn't really get many, like, just full teachers, it was always supply, so you never really got a chance to sit down with someone and say, like, "I want different options, can you give us some ideas of different options?" (Brad, 17)

There are growing concerns about the impact of intensifying pressures on teachers, leading to record numbers leaving the profession (Long & Danechi 2022), and to schools increasingly relying on supply teachers or doubling up of roles to plug the gaps. The National Education Union's (NEU 2022) most recent survey of teachers found that 44% of England's state school teachers intend to leave the profession by 2027, with over half (52%) saying their workload is either 'unmanageable' or 'unmanageable most of the time'.

5.5 Young people's positive relationships with teachers – findings from the qualitative data

While many of the young people described negative, or simply insignificant, relationships with their teachers, almost all identified positive relationships with one or two of their teachers. Often, these relationships were important sources of support and advice throughout school and throughout young people's decision-making processes. These were typically most important and influential for young people who had a very difficult time at school and/or at home. For example, Damian, 16, who had very little trust in teachers at school, felt that overcoming his drug addiction had been made possible by the support of two teachers at his school who had intervened, not judged him and reassured him of his place at school:

I was a mess. Cheeks sucked in... just looked terrible... And at that school, Dale and Dave, two teachers, both sat me down and they said, "Listen, we know you've got a problem" ... "And we're not going to kick you out, so don't panic or anything, we're here to help you". And they genuinely were there to help me... these people have really helped me out.

Similarly, Aaron, 16, who described very negative relationships with his teachers at school more generally, talked about one teacher who went to great lengths to support him, driving him home after school, helping his mother pay for a school trip and checking on him once a week even after he had left mainstream school for a pupil

5. Recognition and respect at school

referral unit (PRU). For Aaron, what differentiated this relationship from his others with teachers was that this teacher took the time to get to know him, seemed to genuinely care about him and did not give up on him:

I just got on really well with him and I knew he was a genuine guy... I always knew, like no matter how much I pissed him off... he'd still put the time in every time, he'd never, ever give up.

Critically, the actions taken by some of the teachers that young people described seemed to be at the discretion of individual teachers who were able, or decided, to go above and beyond the expectations of their profession. As noted in the introduction to this report, our earlier study documented the deleterious impact of the 2015-16 reforms on teachers' ability to spend time building meaningful, supportive relationships with their students or attending to their pastoral needs (Gewirtz et al. 2021). Other research has pointed to the risk that more intrusive forms of school accountability pose to the capacity for teachers to devote attention and resources to issues of social and cultural justice, such as racism, classism, ableism, sexism and homophobia, 'because they are not seen to be the core business of schooling' (Keddie et al. 2011: 3).

Young people's narratives of feeling overlooked, ignored and unsupported by teachers and of bullying and unfair treatment at school, in combination with the survey data reported in section 5, are worrying, both in themselves and because of the serious implications of an absence of supportive relationships with teachers and inclusive school cultures for young people's longer term physical and mental health, especially if any bullying and unfair treatment they experience at school is left unchecked (Wolke & Lereya 2015, Moore et al. 2017, Steketee et al. 2021).

As will be discussed in section 6, young people who spent time in alternative education settings or FE colleges, where class sizes are generally smaller, often described feeling more supported by, and connected to, their teachers, in ways that positively impacted their engagement with education.



6. Thriving elsewhere: young people's experiences of being in alternative provision, further education and training – findings from the qualitative data

Some of the older young people we interviewed had left school by the time we met them, and were currently engaged in vocational education and training, doing courses at a college or with a training provider. Others were still in Year 11 at the time of their interviews, but had left mainstream school, engaging instead in alternative education. We learned a lot about school experiences from these interviews with young people who were now engaged in different educational settings. What emerged most strikingly from the overwhelming majority of these interviews was that young people who had really struggled in school were not only performing better in alternative education, colleges and training settings in relation to attainment, but were also enjoying learning and having positive experiences of education.

Damian (16), Ricky (15) and Gavin (15) were all interviewed at their alternative education setting, a boxing club in the North of England. They had all had very difficult school careers in mainstream school, ultimately leaving for various PRUs before ending up at the boxing club, where they were able to combine schoolwork with boxing matches and fitness training. All of them felt they had benefited tremendously from their time at the boxing club, not just in terms of the fitness and discipline boxing had provided them with, but also educationally, because they were able to work in smaller groups than in mainstream school. Schoolwork that had felt daunting and impossible in mainstream school now felt more manageable, with lessons delivered interactively in a more informal setting that felt less pressured and more supportive:

Damian: Oh my God, this is the best thing I've ever done...

Ricky: The only time they pressure you is when you need it... They won't put [pressure] on you just to make you feel uncomfortable... You can have a laugh with them, and you can joke along with them.

For Damian, key to his better educational experience at the boxing club was having teachers from similar backgrounds to him and his classmates. Unlike in school, where he had felt misunderstood by teachers who had little understanding of his life, in alternative education he felt recognised and represented:

[They need to] bring people in that understand, that's been there and done that... That's why I like these teachers, because they've been there, they've done that, they've got the T-shirt, they know what's happening, they know what's going on and everything, they know how to help.

Gavin felt the same way, noting that he felt respected by his teachers at the boxing club, rather than judged, as he had felt in mainstream school, something that made asking for support with his schoolwork easier:

Gavin: You do get judged by teachers in mainstream schools, a hundred percent.

Interviewer: But you don't feel like you're judged here?

Gavin: No, definitely not... They understand more... they just know how to deal with you and things like that... The education side is easier because they take more time try and help you do the work.

Similarly, some young people taking courses with training providers were finding learning a more positive experience in these settings than in school. Typically, these young people were engaged in courses preparing them for work or further study, but most were also continuing to study for their maths and English qualifications, which they had found very difficult while at school. As discussed earlier in this report, a lot of young people struggled to learn in the busy classroom environments of school. Some of the young people engaged in training courses had tried college after leaving school but found that too busy as well, and were thriving, both socially and educationally, in the smaller and more focused environments of training provider classrooms:

I came out of college... it was the setting and the atmosphere, it weren't for me, and then, obviously, this came up and when I started to come here... because there was only so many of us, it was like it easier to be able to fit in and speak to people and, you know, just get to know people. (Natalie, 17)

I like it a lot here... It's not crowded. (Shelly, 17)

Farid, 17, was doing a 'Preparing for Work' training course at a local training provider while working to achieve his maths and English qualifications. He had found these subjects impossible to learn in school but described finding them enjoyable at the training provider, again pointing to the smaller class sizes:

It's a lot easier... Like, you can concentrate more in here than like in bigger classes, basically.

The young people we interviewed who were FE college students felt that college compared favourably to school as a learning experience for a multitude of reasons. While at school young people are taught a prescriptive curriculum, at college they have greater freedom to choose what they want to study. This was mentioned by several participants as improving their engagement in education. While they had felt constrained and bored at school, forced to participate in academic subjects, despite often having more vocational aspirations, at college they felt they were finally learning more on their own terms:

I was in high school, so I was doing loads of subjects... and I didn't like most of them, like for me anything to do with sciences, I hate sciences, that's not my thing... I prefer college because in college I'm not doing so many subjects, and you can make a choice actually. (Gasira, 17)

As discussed previously in this report, many young people we interviewed had struggled in school because they found classroom learning, and more didactic teaching approaches, alienating. Several of the young people we interviewed at college felt they were taught in more engaging ways there, largely because their courses were more interactive or required practical, hands-on learning:

I think we learn more. When you're in school you write it all off a whiteboard and you just listen to the teacher, but when you're in college someone's showing you and they

go, “Oh, why don’t you try it?” So, you’re learning in a better way, and it’s a quicker way as well, I think... And then when we do an exam, like in college, it’s alright because we think, oh, we done that on someone’s hair, we done that on someone’s nails, do you know what I mean? (Brooke, 17)

Another theme that emerged powerfully from our interviews with young people studying in FE was them feeling more supported by teachers in college than in school. For many, greater respect and a flatter, more relaxed hierarchy between students and teachers seemed to underpin this support and their relationships with their teachers at college seemed to be more meaningful and substantial than those they had with teachers in school. This, combined with the less structured set-up of college compared to school, meant that college was experienced as a more adult, flexible way to engage with learning that felt less pressured and more supported:

[College] is certainly better, because they actually help you... It’s a hundred times better... They actually speak to you... They make you feel more, I don’t know how to... Make you feel, like, more welcome and that. (Phil, 18)

It’s much more personal and it really does seem like they do care, because it’s more focused. (Chelsea, 18)

Similar experiences were reported by students studying a range of courses at a UTC who felt they were treated like adults in this setting and were enjoying greater independence and responsibility over their learning:

It’s like a big step when you go from school to college: you have much more freedom and they treat you like adults, not children... and they’re more understanding and they’re like, “Right, if you’re not going to turn up, that’s absolutely fine, like we’re not going to force you, but it’s your loss at the end of the day” ... So, they’re just so much better. (Lydia, 16)

You just feel a bit more open, you’re a bit more free, you can do whatever you want... But you’re still learning... [The teachers] treat you like adults. (Brad, 17)

It is not the intention of this section, or indeed of this report, to blame schools or teachers for failing young people. Nor do we want to imply that alternative education settings, training providers or colleges are immune from the challenges faced by schools, including the consequences of funding cuts and policy reforms (Danechi 2018, Dominguez-Reig & Robinson 2018, Sibieta & Tahir 2021). However, our conversations with young people suggest that, for some, there seems to be something specifically about mainstream school, rather than education and learning in themselves that is off-putting and alienating.

For many, school had been a difficult and strikingly unproductive time of their lives, and the reasons young people gave to explain these negative experiences often related to features of secondary school that have been produced or accentuated by the school curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms summarised in the introduction to this report. These have resulted in an intensive focus on exams, a prioritisation of a narrow core of academic subjects over creative, technical and vocational subjects and a one-size-fits all, didactic approach to teaching and learning. As the data presented in this section illustrates, while these features of schooling have resulted in many young people feeling stressed and alienated from school, some of the same young people were managing to thrive – socially and educationally – in different educational settings where they were able to form relationships with their teachers, access support and learn in ways accessible to them, in an environment that offered more flexibility in what and how they were taught.

7. Conclusions

There are approximately 3.5 million young people in secondary schools across England, a student body that represents a wide range of interests, aptitudes, aspirations and needs. On the other hand, there is an increasingly standardised approach to the delivery of a narrowed conception of education in English secondary schools. It should not be surprising that for many young people, school is not a positive or productive environment.

While the government has made it clear that vocational education and training is a policy priority in England, this is incongruous with recent school reforms. These reforms narrow the curriculum, prioritise traditional academic subjects over more creative, practical and vocational ones, and marginalise the many young people who have interests, aptitudes and aspirations that fall outside of these parameters. For school students whose interests and aspirations do not align with academic subjects, knowledge and trajectories, the increasingly narrow curriculum, along with a greater emphasis on performance in academically demanding exams, poses worrying questions about the inclusivity and accessibility of contemporary schooling.

Whether or not young people enjoy or feel comfortable at school does not seem to be a concern treated seriously in education policy decision-making in England. Instead of education being understood as something concerned with individual and collective processes of meaningful learning, self-discovery and personal growth, it is effectively being re-defined in terms of narrow accountability indicators and measures of attainment. And, at a time of extensive education reforms, the perspectives and experiences of young people, the group most affected by these reforms, appear to have been overlooked.

This report draws on research that is attempting to help address the absence of young people's voices in policy decision-making by directly focussing on their experiences and perspectives on schooling. In doing so, we hope to more appropriately reflect their proximity to the effects of education reforms and better understand their experiences of contemporary schooling in England.

Over five sections, drawing on data collected from thousands of young people who participated in our survey and qualitative interviews, this report has shown that secondary school is a challenging and uncomfortable experience for many young people. Young people told us that school was just something they felt they had to get through, recognising it had some bearing on their futures, but often not finding it, or what they learned, particularly beneficial or meaningful. These young people nevertheless typically tried their best and worked hard, complying with the expectation for them to 'perform' by completing schoolwork, revising and doing well in exams. While this kind of performative orientation towards school is not a new phenomenon (Denscombe 2000), it has arguably been amplified in recent years by the increased pressures schools are under to ensure their students are making 'expected levels of progress' or above, as currently defined by the algorithm that produces schools' Progress 8 scores.

Many of the young people we spoke with described feeling constrained and disengaged by the 'teach-to-the-test' mechanistic 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 particularly the case for those whose more practical, creative and/or vocational interests fell outside of these constraints and who often found school difficult to navigate and 'succeed' in. 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.

The intensification of teachers' workloads produced by increased assessment and accountability demands, coupled with cuts to school budgets, have been found in other research to limit teachers' ability to teach inclusively and creatively (Gewirtz et al. 2021). They have also been found to constrain teachers' capacity to spend time building meaningful relationships with their students, attend to their pastoral needs or devote attention and resources to issues of social and cultural justice (Keddie et al. 2011). These themes emerged in our data. 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 respect and value diversity. Numerous young people told us they had experienced bullying in school, including 50% of our survey participants, and many reported that they had received no support from their schools.

In the final section of this report, we drew from our interviews with young people across England to illustrate how some of the challenges that young people had encountered in mainstream secondary schools had, in their view, later been positively addressed in other kinds of educational settings such as alternative education providers, colleges and training organisations. In mainstream schools, young people had often felt constrained by a narrow curriculum and the classroom learning model, while in these different settings they felt more 'at home' and often described a feeling of greater autonomy and choice over what and how they learned, enabling them to opt for courses that involved more practical learning, or which corresponded better with their interests and career aspirations. Some 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 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 environment in particular, rather than education and learning in themselves, that is off-putting and alienating.

Many young people clearly felt alienated at, and by, their schools. Our findings suggest that two broad forms of alienation, discussed in section 2.2, are affecting young people in school. The first, which we have called curriculum-based alienation, relates to the cultural mismatch young people experience between their interests, aptitudes and aspirations and the narrowly academic, high-stakes testing environment, curriculum and pedagogic culture of schools. The second form of alienation, which we have called identity-based alienation, stems from the cultural injustices young people are subject to in schools in relation to their social class background, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, sexuality and/or disability-related identities being misrecognised or disparaged. This was primarily evident in young people's survey responses regarding their experiences of unfair treatment and bullying by peers, and whether they felt fairly treated, encouraged, noticed and listened to by teachers. These findings point to the prevalence of wider school cultures that are experienced as discriminatory,

unsupportive and alienating for many young people and that are detrimental to their mental health. These cultures are not exclusively the product of the reforms discussed in this report, but we know from our own and other research cited above that the accountability pressures teachers are under, coupled with resource constraints, severely limit opportunities for schools to develop and implement policies that would make them more inclusive, welcoming spaces for the diverse student populations they serve.

In conclusion, therefore, we suggest there is an urgent need to develop new approaches to the design of school curricula and school accountability processes. These new approaches and processes must be based on a broader conception of the purposes of, and what it means to be successful in, education and be more responsive to the diversity of young people's experiences and perspectives. This will require the participation - alongside teachers and other key stakeholders - of young people, whose voices have, for far too long, been ignored in decision-making at all levels of the education system.

Finally, there is a pressing need to create more resources, space and time for teachers to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with their students. Such relationships would be rooted in whole school practices that reflect the diverse identities and concerns of learners and help tackle, rather than side-line, the social and cultural injustices that can make schools such alienating places for so many young people. This needs to be a priority for policy, given the serious implications of an absence of supportive relationships with teachers and inclusive school cultures for young people's experiences of school, their engagement with education more broadly and their longer term physical health and mental wellbeing.

References

- Barton, G. (2022) *Student anxiety has emerged as the biggest challenge of exams season*. <https://www.ascl.org.uk/News/Blog/May-2022/Student-anxiety-has-emerged-as-the-biggest-challen>
- Bradlow, J. & Guasp, A., Cooke, V., Wicks, H. et al. (2020) *Shut Out: The experiences of LGBT young people not in education, training or work*. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/shut-out-experiences-lgbt-young-people-not-education-training-or-work>
- CLA (Cultural Learning Alliance) (2022) *Arts GCSE and A Level entries 2022*, 25 August 2022. <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/arts-gcse-and-a-level-entries-2022/>
- Dabiri, E. (2020) 'Black pupils are being wrongly excluded over their hair. I'm trying to end this discrimination', *The Guardian*, 25 February. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/25/black-pupils-excluded-hair-discrimination-equality-act>
- Danechi, S. (2018) *Alternative Provision Education in England*, House of Commons Education Committee Briefing Paper, No. 08522, 12 March. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8522/CBP-8522.pdf>
- Denscombe, M. (2000) Social Conditions for Stress: Young people's experience of doing GCSEs, *British Educational Research Journal*, 26:3, 359-374, DOI: [10.1080/713651566](https://doi.org/10.1080/713651566)
- DfE (Department for Education) (2015) *Consultation on implementing the English Baccalaureate*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/473455/Consultation_on_implementing_the_English_Baccalaureate.pdf
- DfE (Department for Education) (2016a) *Progress 8 and Attainment 8 Measure in 2016, 2017, and 2018: Guide for maintained secondary schools, academies and free schools*. <https://www.openroadtraining.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Progress-8-school-performance-measure-18-Oct.pdf.pdf>
- DfE (Department for Education) (2016b) *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education by Command of Her Majesty. Cm 9230. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere>
- DfE (Department for Education) (2018) *New T Levels mark a revolution in technical education*, 27 May. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-t-levels-mark-a-revolution-in-technical-education>
- Doharty, N. (2019) "'I FELT DEAD": Applying a racial microaggressions framework to Black students' experiences of Black History Month and Black History', *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 22(1): 110–129.
- Dominguez-Reig, G. & Robinson, D. (2018) *UTCs: are they delivering for young people and the economy?* https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/UTCs-2018_EPI_.pdf

- 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*, 0: 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1706103>
- Gove, M. (2011) *The Secretary of State's speech to Cambridge University on a liberal education*, 25 November 2011. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-cambridge-university>
- Hall, S. & Webster, R. (2022) *From Covid to the Cost of Living: The crises remaking the role of teaching assistants*, Portsmouth: University of Portsmouth. https://pure.port.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/57436644/From_Covid_to_the_Cost_of_Living_The_crisis_remaking_the_role_of_teaching_assistants_FINAL.pdf
- HM Treasury (2021) *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957856/Skills_for_jobs_lifelong_learning_for_opportunity_and_growth_web_version.pdf
- Jones, K. (2019) The Sun Sets on Old England: Contradictions in Conservative Educational Policy, *Changing English*, 26:3: 321-331, DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2019.1614753
- Joseph-Salisbury, R. & Connelly, L. (2018) "If your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they're not happy": Black hair as a site of "post-racial" social control in English schools, *Social Sciences*, 7(11): 219.
- Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020) *Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools*. Runnymede. https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61bcc0cc2a023368396c03d4_Runnymede%20Secondary%20Schools%20report%20FINAL.pdf
- Keddie, A., Mills, M. & Pendergast, D. (2011) Performing schooling as 'number one': fabrication, resistance and de-socialisation, *Oxford Review of Education*, 37(1): 75-92.
- Lander, V. (2011) 'Race, culture and all that: An exploration of the perspectives of White secondary student teachers about race equality issues in their initial teacher education', *Race Ethnicity and Education* 14(3): 351-364.
- Leckie, G. & Goldstein, H. (2017) The evolution of school league tables in England 1992-2016: 'Contextual value-added', 'expected progress' and 'progress 8'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43: 193- 212.
- Leckie, G. & Goldstein, H. (2019) The importance of adjusting for pupil background in school value-added models: A study of Progress 8 and school accountability in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(3): 518- 537.
- Lian, Y., Wong, N., Lai, J., Kwok Kuen, T. & Guanyu, L. (2022) Alienated Learning in the Context of Curricular Reforms. *Education as Change*, 26(1): 1-29. <https://dx.doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/9680>
- Long, R. & Danechi, S. (2022) *Teacher recruitment and retention in England*, House of Commons Library, no. 07222. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7222/CBP-7222.pdf>

- Lough, C. (2022) Childline increases counselling sessions over exam anxiety, *Independent*, 14 May. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/childline-children-gcses-alevels-nspcc-b2078866.html>
- Lupton, R., Thomson, S., Velthuis, S. & Unwin, L. (2021) *Moving on from initial GCSE 'failure': Post-16 transitions for 'lower attainers' and why the English education system must do better*. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Post16-transitions-for-lower-attainers-Final-report.pdf>
- Maguire, M., Gewirtz, S., Towers, E., & Neumann, E. (2019) Policy, Contextual Matters and Unintended Outcomes: the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) and its impact on Physical Education in English secondary schools, *Sport, Education and Society*, 24(6): 558-569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2019.1611555>
- McIntyre, N., Parveen, N. & Thomas, T. (2021) Exclusion rates five times higher for black Caribbean pupils in parts of England. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/mar/24/exclusion-rates-black-caribbean-pupils-england>
- McPherson, C., Weavers, A., Gewirtz, S., Maguire, S. et al. (2022) *Young Lives, Young Futures: Interim Report 1*. https://www.ylyf.co.uk/_files/ugd/9522d5_915657d6776541798142b5cc07d7fa30.pdf
- Moore, S. E., Norman, R. E., Suetani, S., Thomas, H. J. et al. (2017) Consequences of bullying victimization in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review and meta-analysis, *World journal of psychiatry*, 7(1): 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.5498/wjp.v7.i1.60>
- NEU (National Education Union) (2022) *State of Education: the profession*. National Education Union. <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/state-education-profession>
- Neumann, E., Gewirtz, S., Maguire, M., & Towers, E. (2020) Neoconservative education policy and the case of the English Baccalaureate, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(5): 702-719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466>
- Neumann, E., Towers, E., Gewirtz, S. & Maguire, M. (2016) *A Curriculum for All?* National Union of Teachers. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/archive/news/education/news/curriculum-for-all-final.pdf>
- Ofsted & Spielman, A. (2017) *HMCI's commentary: recent primary and secondary curriculum research*, 11 October 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-commentary-october-2017>
- Pearce, J. & Cumming-Potvin, W. (2017). English classrooms and curricular justice for the recognition of LGBT individuals: What can teachers do? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(9): 77–92. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.088778866080785>
- Prior, L., Jerrim, J., Thomson, D. & Leckie, G. (2021) A review and evaluation of secondary school accountability in England: Statistical strengths, weaknesses and challenges for 'Progress 8' raised by COVID-19. *Review of Education*, 9, e3299. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3299>
- Roberts, J. (2019) Flawed Progress 8 is costing school leaders their jobs, *TES*, 23 April. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/flawed-progress-8-costing-school-leaders-their-jobs>

- Sauntson, H. (2019) Challenging gender- and sexuality-based discrimination in UK Schools: Young women's experiences of illegitimation and resistance. In J. I. Kjaran & H. Sauntson (eds) *Schools as Queer Transformative Spaces: Global Narratives of Sexuality and Gender*. London: Routledge
- Seeman, M. (1959) On The Meaning of Alienation, *American Sociological Review*, 24(6): 783–791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088565>
- Sibieta, L. & Tahier, I. (2021) *Further education and sixth form spending in England*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/38416/1/R333-Further-education-and-sixth-form-spending-in-England.pdf>
- Snapp, S. D., Burdge, H., Licona, A. C., Moody, R. L. & Russell, S. T. (2015) Students' Perspectives on LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48(2): 249-265, DOI: [10.1080/10665684.2015.1025614](https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1025614)
- Steketee, A., Williams, M. T., Valencia, B. T., Printz, D. & Hooper, L. M. (2021) Racial and language microaggressions in the school ecology, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(5): 1075-1098.
- Sue, D. W., Nadal, K. L., Capodilupo, C. M., Lin, A. I., et al. (2008) Racial microaggressions against Black Americans: Implications for counselling, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 86(3): 330–338. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00517.x
- Walker, A. (2022) Schools struggle to find the support staff they need, *Schools Week*, 30 September. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/schools-struggling-to-find-the-support-staff-they-need/>
- Wolke, D. & Lereya, S.T. (2015) Long-term effects of bullying, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 100: 879-885.

Appendix: The *Young Lives, Young Futures* study

Young Lives, Young Futures is an ESRC-funded longitudinal research project that is examining the school-to-work transitions of young people in England, with a focus on the approximately 50% of young people who do not plan to go to university. The project aims to build a knowledge base to help policy makers and other stakeholders create more equitable and navigable transitions for this sizeable group of young people.

This report draws on the project's two strands with primary data collection components: a national longitudinal survey strand and a qualitative research strand.

The survey data

The national longitudinal survey strand is a representative survey study of over 10,000 young people across England. The survey, called *Your Life, Your Future*, aims to document young people's aspirations, plans, destinations and outcomes as well as their experiences of schools and decision-making, the formal and informal resources that are available to them and the environmental factors that affect their journeys. It draws on a randomly selected sample from the Department for Education's National Pupil Database to create a nationally representative dataset. (See Table 1 for the distribution of some key characteristics in the sample.) The survey has a longitudinal design and aims to follow young people during their transitions at three distinct time points. This report draws on the findings from the first wave of the study, which took place in the summer of 2021 when young people were in year 11. The survey study is being designed by the research team at King's College London and conducted by Public Kantar on behalf of the team.

Table 1: Distribution of key characteristics in the survey sample

Gender	
Male	41.2%
Female	57.7%
Other	1.1%

Ethnicity	
White British	37.0%
White other	5.2%
Indian	10.5%
Pakistani	8.4%
Bangladeshi	9.3%
Other Asian background	2.9%
Black African	9.5%
Black Caribbean	5.3%
Other black background	1.4%
Mixed	8.0%
Other background	2.3%

Free school meals	30.7%
LGBT identity	
Heterosexual	85.6%
Gay/lesbian	2.4%
Bisexual	9.0%
Other orientation	2.9%
Trans	2.0%
SEND	34.9%
Region	
South West	6.6%
South East	13.9%
London	26.3%
East of England	10.1%
West Midlands	12.5%
East Midlands	8.1%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8.9%
North West	10.6%
North East	2.9%
Language	
English only	60.6%
English along with another language	29.6%
Other language	9.8%
Total sample size:	10,438

The qualitative data

The qualitative research strand will, on completion, comprise a longitudinal qualitative dataset of semi-structured interviews with young people from four case study local authority districts chosen to reflect a diversity of local and regional transition landscapes in England, alongside interviews with parents, policy makers, practitioners and employers. The aim is to paint a detailed picture of young people's transitions over three time points with particular attention given to their own perspectives and the transition landscapes they have to navigate. This report draws on interviews with 113 young people from the first wave of data collection, which took place between 2020 and 2022 when the young people were aged 15-18.

The young people who participated in interviews all lived in one of the four case study local authority districts. They were recruited to the study using a range of methods, including through gatekeeping organisations such as schools, colleges, alternative education settings and youth organisations, as well as through direct advertising and word-of-mouth. Efforts were made to recruit as diverse a sample as possible in order to reflect and capture a range of backgrounds and educational experiences and environments (see Table 2). Of the 84

participants who completed a post-interview diversity form, 27% reported having a long-term learning difficulty, disability, illness or health condition. There is a roughly even gender split in the sample, with 50% of participants identifying as male, 48% as female and 2% preferring not to say. In terms of ethnicity, 45% of participants identified as white, 23% as Asian/Asian British, 8% as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African, 11% as of mixed, multiple or other ethnicities, and 13% declined to report their ethnicity. Finally, 36% of participants said they received free school meals.

Interviews took place online or in-person, based on participants' preferences and legal and logistical restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the interviews, the young people were asked to share their experiences of, and views on education, their access to careers guidance and support when making decisions about their futures, and to share their views on their local areas in terms of crime and safety and the availability and quality of education and employment opportunities.

Table 2: Education, employment and training (EET) status at time of interview

EET status at interview	Number of participants
Year 11 student (mainstream school)	35
Year 11 student (alternative education)	6
Sixth form student	1
Further education college student	36
UTC student	21
In training	12
Not in education, employment or training	2
TOTAL	113

**Young Lives,
Young Futures**

