



**INEQUALITY WITHIN THE BRITISH  
EDUCATION REGIME AND THE  
CREATION OF A MERITOCRATIC  
EDUCATION SYSTEM**

**EDUCATION**

# 03

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POLICY

# EDUCATION



# INEQUALITY WITHIN THE BRITISH EDUCATION REGIME AND THE CREATION OF A MERITOCRATIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

By Dan Marks and Caleb Heather

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# BRIEFING NOTE

## OVERVIEW

The aim of this report is to identify the reasons why the British education system continues to be unmeritocratic and to suggest ways of resolving this problem.

Meritocracy is the principle that no matter your background, everyone should have an equal chance of succeeding in life. That success is solely based on effort, ability, and hard work. Ultimately, structural forces don't hold people back. Equality of opportunity has to be the cornerstone of a fair society.

We believe that the education system plays a fundamental role in this area. The aim of education is to prepare children for the adult world. With the increasing importance of qualifications, success in life is dependent on success in education. However, as the evidence shows, there are factors in society that prevent some children from achieving, of no fault of their own.

In this briefing, we will be looking at three general themes. Firstly, we will be looking at how social factors negatively impact children's chance of success, such as class, ethnicity, and disability. Secondly, we will be looking at how the structure of the education system perpetuates these pre-existing inequalities, with a focus on funding, the national curriculum, and the school starting age. Finally, we will look at issues with adult education. One cannot have meritocracy if those who don't succeed in childhood education are written off as failures.

It is our firm belief that a successful society is dependent on a successful education system.

## FACTORS LEADING TO INEQUALITY IN BRITISH EDUCATION

### Parental social class impacts children's academic achievement

- 83% of children of higher professionals gained 5 or more A\*-C GCSEs compared to only 44% of children of routine workers<sup>1</sup>.
- There are significant differences in the percentage of children achieving a good level of development at age 5 by level of background deprivation - 63% of the most deprived compared to 81% of the least deprived<sup>2</sup>.
- On a 20 point scale where students were asked to rate their attitude to learning with consideration of their parent's socioeconomic background, those with no qualification stated 16.5, whereas those with a degree or above stated 17.4<sup>3</sup>.
- According to Leon Feinstein, the language used by parents from different social classes greatly impacts children's academic development.<sup>4</sup>

### The education system's attitude towards children's social class impacts their academic achievement

- Schools persistently produce working-class underachievement because of the labels and assumptions of teachers.<sup>5</sup>
- Some schools displayed a negative attitude towards parents of a lower social class, and parents experienced a lower level of engagement, including during exclusion processes.<sup>6</sup>

### Children's ethnic backgrounds impact their educational achievement

- According to the Runnymede report, when starting year 3, most minority students start on average below white students.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, 2010, "[Youth Cohort Study & Longitudinal Study of Young People in England](#)" - AQA A Level Sociology Book 1 (Webb et al.) (pg.16)

<sup>2</sup> Social Mobility Commission, 2019, "[State of the Nation](#)", (pg. 24)

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, 2016, "[Longitudinal Study of Young People in England cohort 2: health and wellbeing at wave 2](#)", (pg.36)

<sup>4</sup> Leon Feinstein, 2008, "[Education and the family: parenting success across the generations](#)".

<sup>5</sup> Máiréad Dunne and Louise Gazeley, 2008, "[Teachers, social class and underachievement](#)", *British Journal of sociology of education*

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education, 2019, "[School exclusion: a literature review on the continued disproportionate exclusion of certain children](#)"

<sup>7</sup> Runnymede, 2015, "[The Runnymede School Report Race, Education and Inequality in Contemporary Britain](#)", (Pg.18)

- There is lower confidence among non-native English students in graduation prospects. A study showed that 65% of BME university students had good degree anticipation, compared to 78% of white students<sup>8</sup>.
- Based on UK government figures, there is clear evidence of students from different ethnic backgrounds having different levels of achievement. Out of an attainment score of 90 in 8 subjects, Chinese students were 67.6, Bangladeshi were 53.9, White British were 49.7, and black Caribbean were 44<sup>9</sup>.

**Children with disabilities and special needs have lower levels of educational achievement, which grows as they get older**

- Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) account for just under half of all permanent exclusions and suspensions<sup>10</sup>.
- 45% of students with learning difficulties do not achieve 5 good GCSE grades<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Joyner, George and Cotton, 2015, "[Understanding the gender and ethnicity attainment gap in UK higher education](#)", (p.481)

<sup>9</sup> Gov.uk, 2021, "[GCSE English and maths results](#)", (Table 10)

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, 2021, "[Special educational needs and disability: an analysis and summary of data sources](#)", (Pg.17)

<sup>11</sup> Children's commissioner office, 2018, "[Briefing: the children leaving school with nothing](#)" (p.6)

## THE STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS OF THE UK EDUCATION SYSTEM

### The UK is suffering from a shortage of teaching staff

- UK teachers have lower pay and entry requirements than other OECD nations. All teachers in Finland are required to obtain Masters degree<sup>12</sup>
- The student-teacher ratio in 2018/2019 was 16.4 students per teacher (compared to 15.5 in 2010)<sup>13</sup>
- In 2018, nearly 92% of teachers in state schools were white.<sup>14</sup>
- The Government plans to make the starting annual salary of teachers £30,000.<sup>15</sup>

### The teaching methods used in early years education are having harmful effects on children's educational development

- The UK is ranked 23/40 in terms of quality of education compared to other OECD countries. <sup>16</sup>
- Even though teachers may be willing to adapt teaching strategies, they are often expected to implement differentiation with minimal support or training. The consequences are detrimental to students' learning. There is a need for further training.<sup>17</sup>

### The exam heavy nature of the education system is perpetuating class inequalities and not equipping students with the necessary skills

- The argument for abolishing exams for 16-year-olds has been present for 100 years, based on the suggestion of the New Education Fellowship in 1921.<sup>18</sup>
- Andreas Schleicher (director of education and skills at OECD) believes that “the UK is at one end of the spectrum: everything is standardised, and assessment is very high stakes,” yet he regards the UK as an “average performer” educationally. Contrastingly, Finland has

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Colagrossi, World Economic Forum, 2018, [“10 reasons why Finland's education system is the best in the world”](#)

<sup>13</sup> Beng Haut See and Stephen Gorard, Taylor and Francis online education journal, 2019, [“Why don't we have enough teachers?”](#) (pg.421)

<sup>14</sup> Dr Remi Joseph-Salisbury, 2020, The Runnymede Trust, [“Race and racism in English Secondary schools”](#) (pg.5)

<sup>15</sup> GOV.UK, 2019, £30,000 starting salaries proposed for teachers, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/30000-starting-salaries-proposed-for-teachers>

<sup>16</sup> OECD Education Better Life Index, 2021, [Education](#)

<sup>17</sup> Sasha Taylor, The Warwick Journal of education, 2017, [“Contested Knowledge: a critical review of the concept of differentiation in teaching and learning”](#)

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Watts, Cambridge University, 2020, [“Why didn't we abolish exams for 16 year olds: the history of GCSEs”](#)

no standardised testing and is one of PISA's (Programme for International Students Assessments) gold medallists.<sup>19</sup>

### **Not enough resources and time is being dedicated to Life skills and extracurricular activities within school**

- The most common soft skill lacking in the UK labour market is the ability to organise one's time and task prioritisation (51% of all skill-shortage vacancies attributed to this in 2017).<sup>20</sup>
- Under current government policy, no teaching of PSHE is currently required, and only extremely basic SRE must be taught<sup>21</sup>
- The PSHE association makes the case of statutory PSHE education. "According to a CBI-backed study, teaching the necessary soft skills could contribute £109 billion to the UK economy over the next 5 years"<sup>22</sup>

### **Education funding is insufficient and below 2010 levels**

- Education spending in the UK as a percentage of GDP has dropped dramatically, from 5.5% in 2010 to 3.9% in 2019.<sup>23</sup>
- The UK government should spend up to £15 billion to help students catch up on lost learning during the pandemic. A range of policies have been suggested to help students catch up, including longer school days. <sup>24</sup>
- Government spending per pupil has fallen in real terms between 2009-10 and 2019-20 by 9%.<sup>25</sup>
- In the Autumn 2021, the government pledged to restore education spending to 2010 levels by 2024-25, and only allocated £1.6 for 2022-23 to help with COVID catch-up (Britton et al, 2020)

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<sup>19</sup> Eilean Glaser, Prospect magazine, 2021, ["Failing the Test: the perversity of England's exams"](#)

<sup>20</sup> Michael Donnelly et al, Social Mobility Commission, 2019, ["An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility"](#) (pg.4)

<sup>21</sup> Department of education (2020), ["Personal, social, health and economic education: guidance"](#)

<sup>22</sup> PSHE Association, 2017, ["A curriculum of life"](#). (pg.11)

<sup>23</sup> Paul Boulton, House of Commons briefing paper, 2020, ["Education spending in the UK"](#). (pg.3)

<sup>24</sup> Whitney Craner Jenning, Natelie Perera and Luke Sibietil, Education Policy Institute, 2021, ["Education recovery and resilience in England"](#) (pg.45)

<sup>25</sup> Jack Britton et al, Institute for Fiscal studies, 2020, ["2020 annual report on education spending in England"](#) (pg.8)



## ADULT EDUCATION AND RETRAINING IN THE UK

### Adult education in the UK produces lower returns to education than other OECD nations

- The UK sits just 29th in the world in terms of re-training effectiveness, compared to 6th by GDP.<sup>26</sup>
- A report found that adult education outcomes did not translate into gains in living standards - "While there has been a significant increase in the level of skills and qualifications in the population and workforce, this has not necessarily translated into increased social mobility" <sup>27</sup>
- These cuts are happening within the context of a UK workforce in which 21% of people are low paid, one of the highest proportions of any OECD nation<sup>28</sup>.

### Funding and investment for adult education in the UK is insufficient and below 2010 levels

- 2020 Spending Review - £138 Million boost to adult education courses, but this has been long needed<sup>29</sup>.
- Adult education has been cut by 45 percent since 2009-10. IFS Further Education Report 2018<sup>30</sup>

### The same barriers in childhood education exist for disadvantaged people in adulthood education too

- The number of students from these ethnic groups decreased from 796,730 to 650,130<sup>31</sup>.
- People with a disability are less likely to participate in learning. They are also less likely to participate in the labour market, which is related to lower rates of participation in learning.<sup>32</sup>
- People in lower-paid and lower-skilled roles receive the least training in the workplace <sup>33</sup>.
- Slower adapters to technological advances experience greater barriers to learning. They are more likely to be: people in social housing; people with lower incomes or who are

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<sup>26</sup> CBI, 2020, [Learning for Life: Funding a world-class adult education system, 2020](#).

<sup>27</sup> Social Mobility Commission, 2019, [State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#)

<sup>28</sup> The Guardian, 2015, ["OECD survey highlights skills problem among young Britons"](#)

<sup>29</sup> HM Treasury, 2020, ["Spending Review 2020"](#)

<sup>30</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018, ["2018 Annual Report on Education Spending in England"](#)

<sup>31</sup> Department for Education, 2019, ["Further Education and Skills"](#)

<sup>32</sup> OPM and Ipsos MORI (2014) ["Removing barriers, raising disabled people's living standards"](#)

<sup>33</sup> Tom Schuller and David Watson (2009) ["Learning Through Life Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning Summary"](#)

unemployed; people with disabilities; rural populations; older people; traveller communities; homeless people; NEET young people; and people with access to public fun

# INSIGHT

## OVERVIEW

Our insight is based predominantly on the findings of interviews we conducted with staff in the education system. The members of staff we interviewed include:

- CEO of an Academy Trust in Surrey
- Former Headteacher of infants school in southwest London
- Secondary school geography teacher and geography lead for academy trust in Surrey
- Newly qualified primary school teacher in Surrey
- An experienced Teaching Assistant working with SEN children
- A newly qualified Teaching Assistant working with SEN children
- CEO of Private tuition company based in Southeast England

We wanted to hear the personal experiences of those on the front line of the education system, enabling us to make sense of the quantitative data using qualitative data. Teachers have unparalleled knowledge about the system, having such considerable insider access. This access gives them a unique ability in identifying factors that prevent the UK education system from being truly meritocratic. We made sure to hear the perspectives of staff from all the different levels that exist within the system.

In order to analyse and make sense of the clear trend in educational achievement, we decided to divide our insight into 4 sections. They include class, the education structure, SEN children, and Skill

## **Economically deprived backgrounds continue to have a significantly negative impact on children's academic achievement**

### **LANGUAGE**

Based on our interview findings, we found that when children from different socio-economic backgrounds start school, there are distinct and noticeable differences in their language capabilities. For example, the CEO stated that it is easy to tell which 3 or 4-year-olds were read to by their parents and which weren't. This is evident by their grasp of language, range of vocabulary, and ability to communicate. This difference in language abilities was also identified by the former headteacher, with the level of family affluence being the main factor. Consequently, this demonstrates how some children are starting school already behind their peers. This ultimately prevents a meritocratic education system, since there is not a level playing field.

### **Material Deprivation**

Material deprivation is a factor put forward by most of our interviewees. The CEO highlighted how coming from a deprived background hinders children's ability to achieve. For example, the lack of suitable study space and access to IT at home will make it harder for students to do homework, and this problem would have been amplified during the pandemic. Furthermore, children from deprived backgrounds would often come into school not having breakfast, which would make concentrating difficult. The scale of the struggle faced by deprived families was made clear when the CEO informed us that children become pupil premium and receive free school meals when their family income is below £16,000 a year. Such strained finances will obviously make it difficult for parents to invest sufficiently in their children's intellectual development at home. The former headteacher, having worked in both a middle-class Church of England school and a working-class state school, was able to show the difference family wealth can have. For example, in the CoE schools, middle-class parents made regular and healthy donations, with parents often volunteering as teaching assistants. The secondary school teacher made clear the impact of family wealth, stating that pupil premium students are nearly 2 grades lower in every GCSE subject than non-pupil premium students. Additionally, the secondary school teacher argued that deprived families are often more unstable due to financial stress. As a result, home for a lot of children isn't a nice environment. They want to get out of the home, with homework not being a priority. The private tutor also identified how parents with higher income are more likely to hire private tuition, which further widens the gap between children of different socio-economic backgrounds. These differences in wealth are preventing a meritocratic education system since meritocracy is based on the principle that wealth should not determine educational success.

### **Attitudes**

Our interviewees also notified us of how children from different socio-economic backgrounds have different attitudes to learning, with parents playing a key role. For example, the CEO argues that

the level of support of parents is the biggest factor determining children's academic achievement. The lack of positive role models can have seriously detrimental consequences. According to the former headteacher, parents can be the best and worst thing. Many parents repeatedly asked what they could do to help with their children's academic work, and yet some children came to school, not toilet trained. The secondary school teacher, based on her experiences working in private and state schools, noticed how parents at private schools placed a very high value on education, investing in their child's cultural capital. The consequences were high outcomes. Importantly, she challenged that notion that only wealthy parents value education, informing us how eastern European and southeast Asian children (often from deprived backgrounds) had a very good attitude to learning, mainly because their parents saw it as the way to improve their social position. The primary school teacher gave a particular focus to the impact of cultural capital. Parents who don't value education are less likely to take their children on trips to museums, and consequently, these children are less likely to see education as something fun. The influence of parents is further demonstrated by when a GRT child said that they didn't need maths. The importance of parents continues to be stressed by the private tutor, who described parents as the prevailing wind behind children. If parents don't know about all the opportunities out there, they can't help their children. Without parents imbuing attitudes of hard work, resilience, and a love of learning, into their children, the principles of meritocracy cannot exist.

In summary, social class has a significant impact on children in 3 main ways: language, material, and attitude. Parents have a significant influence on a child's development. To argue that home background doesn't have an impact on children's academic achievement is greatly misguided. As the CEO made clear to me, children only spend 7 out of 24 hours a day, 5 days a week, 38 out of 52 weeks a year at school. The fact that differences in ability exist already before children start school, and that children spend most of their time outside of school implies that is where the problem lies. This shows that in order to tackle the problems, interventions need to be made to help children from deprived backgrounds from the moment they are born to ensure they don't fall behind and have the best possible start to life.

## **The nature of the education system perpetuates social class inequalities**

### **Lack of funding**

The lack of funding for the education system is a major issue outlined by numerous interviewees. According to the CEO, each year a primary school receives £4000 pounds per student, which equates to £10 a day. Of that, £7.50 is spent on staff salaries, with the rest on bills, maintenance, and extracurricular activities. Its inadequacy is made clear by the fact that private primary school children have £12,000 a year spent on their education. It is impossible to create a meritocratic education system whilst such disparities exist. The CEO argues that education spending returning to its 2010 levels by 2024-5 isn't good enough; a whole generation has been lost. The cuts have been particularly devastating, with schools being given no choice but to sacrifice incredibly important extracurricular activities. Some schools charge for them, which only perpetuates social class inequalities. The importance of funding is echoed by the former headteacher.

Specialising in early years education, she argues that staff are the most important resource, with cuts to funding ultimately leading to cuts to teaching assistant staff. One cannot expect 30 3-4-year-olds to sit quietly on the carpet listening to the teacher at the front of the class 'teaching'. The importance of teaching assistants is highlighted by the secondary school teachers. A salary of £10,000 a year makes it difficult to find and keep good TAs. TAs play an invaluable role in the education system, providing support to those who need it, as well as challenging high achievers. The fact that schools are always in significant debt is proof that current funding isn't providing for their needs. The primary school teacher also stated how schools are massively underfunded. The private tutor also talked about the damage done by cuts to funding. Many of the extra-curricular activities helped to tackle issues such as poor behaviour and truancy, with breakfast club being essential for deprived families. Teaching requires time, resources, and staff; this means money. Schools cannot do their job if they are underfunded. The reason why more affluent children do better is because their parents have more money to spend on their education. This means that more money needs to be spent on deprived children to bring them up to a high and level playing field.

### **Ofsted and the National Curriculum**

Another problem identified by our interview was the nature of Ofsted and the National Curriculum. The CEO argued that Ofsted are not fit for purpose due to unnecessary bureaucracy. He also revealed to us that the way the GCSE grading system works means that 30% of students have to fail their exams. A consequence is that children lose their love of learning. The headteacher also criticised Ofsted for interfering too much. Schools are forced to conform to prescribed teaching practices. However, these practices take a one size fits all approach, with the lack of differentiation in methods ultimately not catering to different children's individual needs. The inadequacy of Ofsted is further demonstrated when an Ofsted inspector criticised the way nursery

children were allowed to choose their own activities. The fact that this choice is an essential part of early years development shows Ofsted's lack of knowledge. The headteacher also criticised the way UK education is too similar to Asian systems. The rigidity doesn't encourage independent thinking. Instead, there should be a greater focus on social skills, language development, and problem-solving. The amount of top-down pressure, exasperated by the league tables, ultimately leads to a demoralised workforce. The secondary teacher was particularly critical of the nature of the National curriculum. Her main issue is the amount of content. She argues that the only reason many schools are adopting a 3-year key stage 4 is to ensure they cover the whole curriculum. Teachers haven't got time to physically teach everything, and yet Ofsted enforces it. Many topics are irrelevant, therefore education ceases to be about awe and wonder, instead, it is a box-ticking exercise. Some of the best lessons are ad hoc.

The secondary school teacher also commented on how teachers cannot cope with the pressure they are under. 'Holding teachers to account' leads to an inappropriate level of scrutiny. For example, an open-door policy is unlike any other workplace. The consequences of this means that overworked teachers don't have the time to give careful and consistent education, nourishment and support to deprived children. They have little choice but to teach on mass, assuming that children have the same abilities. The secondary school teacher also criticised the nature of exams. They are predominantly recall-based, meaning teachers often just teach according to the exam. This does nothing for soft and transferable skills, which is what children from deprived backgrounds are lacking.

Issues with the national curriculum were also echoed by the primary school teacher. For example, he is required to teach 9-10-year-olds how to multiply fractions. Allocating more time teaching first aid would be of far greater use for the child. Furthermore, the only geography that year 2s are required to learn is how to use an Atlas and that there are different time zones. During November, there wasn't time to talk about all of the events going on at the time (such as COP26 and Remembrance Day) because it isn't in the national curriculum. This shows how detached the national curriculum is from the world, and it makes us think about what is the purpose of education. The private tutor also identified the irrelevance of the national curriculum, attributing it as a reason for students' growing lack of engagement and motivation.

### **The point at which children start school**

The age at which children either start school or do exams was an issue also brought up by many of our interviewees. According to the CEO, attempts to address the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds are tackled too late. The evidence shows that as the years go on, the gap gets bigger, therefore it will be difficult to help a year 11 catch up months before the exam. He argues that it would be better to close the gap in the younger years whilst it is smaller. The former headteacher made a particular criticism of the way that the curriculum is being brought down. In other words, what was previously taught in the year above

is now being taught in the year below. The consequence is that the younger years have far more expected of them, which ultimately has damaging consequences. Students are not ready to deal with more advanced content, particularly if they don't have strong foundations. The race has already begun before some children have been able to get to the starting line. Starting formal education earlier reduces the time for deprived children to catch up. Making 4-year-olds do sums is “ridiculous” since it closes down thinking. Also, the teaching of phonics can be confusing for the child. Similarly, the secondary and primary school teacher criticised how children are made to do exams far too early, such as SATs, and the potential return of year 9 exams. By making the bar so high, it makes it impossible for deprived children to catch up.

In summary, the key criticism identified by members of the system is that it is underfunded (meaning the system can't help those who need the extra support), the nature of learning is too packed and rigid (keeping deprived children locked on a path of underachievement), and formal education starts too early (reducing the time for the differences in development to be addressed). This would suggest that there are fundamental issues with the system, requiring more radical solutions.



## **Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are one of the groups most affected by inequalities**

### **Staffing numbers can seriously hinder children with disabilities in terms of their educational achievement**

According to the Department for Education analysis, children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) achieve far lower standards of educational attainment than the national average<sup>34</sup>. Of course, a large proportion of this outcome can be explained by the influence of learning disabilities which will primarily affect this. However, other factors such as budgetary and financial factors can impact this. Our interviews with SEN and senior staff at state schools had a recurring theme of a lack of funding at the primary and secondary levels. The effects of this are far too wide for discussion in this report, but the key issues of this concern staffing levels.

A lack of staffing particularly as teaching assistants and support staff seems to have the most detrimental effect upon the outcomes and wellbeing of SEN children. From our interviews and surveys, the impact of these support staff seems to be a determinant to the educational outcomes of SEN children as the teaching staff themselves. The specifics of this will be discussed further in this report, but in terms of outcomes, the scope and outcome are clear. Firstly, support staff assists with the day-to-day management of children with a particular focus on secondary caregiving and management. Therefore, an absence of support staff is not directly detrimental to the educational outcomes of SEN children in terms of attainment. However, when performing a counterfactual analysis, SEN classes who are understaffed in this manner will always perform relatively poorer in terms of education outcomes. Therefore, there are secondary outcomes as a result of this, such as poorer classroom behaviour and poorer wellbeing that will impact educational outcomes.

### **The relationship between suspensions and special educational needs**

As quoted in the briefing for this report, suspensions and serious discipline occur at significantly higher levels in SEN schools than at state-run comprehensive schools. The exact reason for this is complicated to decode and specify within this report but our interviews with SEN have helped to clarify this. The particular difficulty with the investigation of this outcome is the sensitive nature of exclusions with SEN frameworks, as they are considered a last-resort option.

Exclusions are often considered as the last-resort option within the educational setting, and often have severely detrimental effects on the child's life prospects and wellbeing. Often exclusion can have spillover effects for the child, such as deteriorated mental health, isolation from friends and family, as well as the obvious implications for the child's educational outlook. We will examine these three key consequences in the context of SEN.

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<sup>34</sup> Department for Education, 2021, "[Special educational needs and disability: an analysis and summary of data sources](#)", (Pg.11)

Firstly, deteriorated mental health within children affected by SEN is likely to have exacerbated outcomes, relative to children without SEN. This is due to the fragile nature of conditions such as ASD, where hypersensitivity can exacerbate bouts of anxiety and negative outlets after exclusion. We also have to consider the effects of temporary suspension. Temporary suspension can lead to alienation among peers upon return and increased stress for parents during the period of suspension, due to the complex logistics and emotional toll of caring for children with SEN full time. However, the most significant consideration for this analysis is the complex and wide-ranging spectrum of disabilities and the widely differentiated characteristics these can have from child to child. Therefore, we must avoid any generalised conclusions when examining this issue, and conclude that the outcomes for children affected with SEN are particularly specialised and unique on this first point.

Isolation from peers and family can occur as a result of exclusion from SEN- specialist schools. This is particularly exacerbated in the context of SEN, due to the nature of the social contact for children within these schools. For most children, most of their social contact will occur within a classroom setting. As a result withdrawal from this, either on a permanent or temporary basis is likely to have at least short-term negative consequences for the child's mental wellbeing and social development. Children with SEN will find it more difficult than most to interact with peers outside of an educational setting and this serves a vital facility for the cognitive and social development of these children. These can obviously lead to worsening of symptoms of their respective conditions

### **The admission process for children with SEN**

At present the process for children with SEN to be admitted to primary and secondary education is complicated. Children with "Education and Health Care Plans" (EHC's) are able to express a preference as to which school they would like to attend. The usual procedure is that the child will normally be offered a place at this school and therefore most children with EHC tend to have their needs met. However, the key flaw with this system lies with children without an EHC. Many children require a school specialising in caring and educating children with SEN. However, children without an EHC will normally have to follow the standard preference procedure for entering a school. This means that the nearest and most suited schools often become the most oversubscribed. Therefore, many children will be allocated a school that does not suit their child's needs or may be too far for the child to access.

The theme of inequality is, therefore, more prevalent here than ever. Children who are unable to access an education hub with the facilities and staffing levels to cope with their needs are likely to find the learning process less engaging and fulfilling. The consequences of this can mirror the impact of suspensions. Namely, children will often fail to make the important strides and progress points in early years education that is so vital to them making the jump needed in order to advance to more advanced levels of education which will seriously aid their life chances. Even for children without the ability to advance to advanced levels of education, there can be serious circumstances in terms of mental and emotional wellbeing.

Therefore, it is a perfectly reasonable assumption to express the outcomes in terms of achievement and wellbeing for SEN children as a function of the admission process in the UK. From our interviews, staff and parents involved in the education and care of SEN children stressed the need for greater focus on the individual needs of each child, rather than the standardised process that is used for most children. The solutions for this are wide and varying. But certainly, the EHC regime used for certain children seems to operate effectively to the needs of the children who need them and inclusivity of this process for more SEN children could produce better outcomes for children.

## **The UK adult education regime perpetuates and reinforces inequalities present in childhood**

### **The failure of adult education to correct childhood inequalities**

People seek adult education and retraining for multiple reasons. Some use adult education courses to retrain and learn new skills in order to switch professions, reducing the impact of frictional unemployment. However, many adults in the UK are forced to undertake qualifications that they arguably should have gained during childhood, such as Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications. Of course, the cause of this issue is difficult to pinpoint, because a large contributor will be the education regime of the past 30-40 years which is far too broad and outside of the scope of the analysis of this report. However, this does not prevent us from analysing the failures of adult education to correct this gap.

This predominant failure does not lie with the actual structure of the adult education system, but rather the lack of abundance of it. Namely, the funding provided to adult education is simply too little to correct the failures of the past. Since 2002 spending on adult education has fallen by over 60%<sup>35</sup> in real terms and the latest announcements concerning the Adult Education Budget (AEB) will exacerbate this further. Whilst we can look to the current primary and secondary education regime to prevent further inequalities in the future, the failure to adequately fund adult education could risk leaving behind a whole generation of adults. This not only presents a moral argument but also an economic one too. The greater transferable skills an individual possesses, the higher their human capital, and therefore they are better able to produce output and wealth for the economy and this can help to fund future investments in the form of tax receipts and business profits. Therefore, we see a rational and economic argument for the need for greater investment in adult education.

A failure to adequately invest can reduce the life chances of those who are unable to find the courses needed to find a new profession. In an age of increasing importance of programming and IT literacy, the need for individuals to become more dynamic and skilled is greater than ever to remain economically active. Training courses can help to reduce structural unemployment which can enable redundant miners the ability to retrain and become system engineers for instance. Whilst this would present an extreme example of retraining, this should be the level of flexibility that our adult education system should aim for in order to reduce inequalities present within our society and to address the productivity shortage present within UK workers.

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<sup>35</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020, [“2020 annual report on education spending in England”](#), (Section 4)

### The importance of language in the 21st century

It is no coincidence that the UK is one of the few advanced economies that does not offer mandatory grammar and language lessons to children until the age of 16 and has one of the lowest levels of multilingualism in the world.<sup>36</sup> In a world where we are becoming increasingly economically interdependent on other nations, the importance of communication has become more vital to everyday life. We often need to be able to communicate with people in order to transact business, order products, speak with friends and engage in political activities. Therefore, the clearly present language barrier in the UK could explain a part of the UK's productivity problem. This has direct implications for the theme of inequality as those who did not receive formal language training as a child, may struggle to take up languages as an adult. This can restrict their job prospects in certain fields such as politics, financial services, and business, which tend to be the highest paying too. Once again, we can express the inequality in terms of material wealth and life prospects as a function of language ability.

A key finding that has heavy implications upon this theme of language inability is not just the lack of proficiency in other languages among adults, but also the lack of grammatical understanding of English among natives, both at a child and adult level. Currently, grammar and phonics are a vital part of the national curriculum at the primary level. However, upon entry to secondary school education, the English curriculum switches to a focus on the analysis of historic texts and creative writing. The emphasis placed upon a higher level of understanding of the English language at a secondary level dramatically falls and grammar lessons are not typically offered at a higher level. The consequences of this can be severe as it is the understanding of different grammatical terms and features, such as different tenses, clauses and cases that can help to improve one's own efficiency in learning other languages in the future. Therefore, the process of learning a new language can be, for some natives, the first time they have ever experienced advanced grammatical training, in any language.

As already discussed, the ability to learn and speak other languages can be expressed as a key input in the economic wellbeing and therefore the level of inequality prevalent in our society. Therefore, it is vital that UK native children continue to develop their grammatical abilities through a logical and taught method, rather than just their parent's tongues. This will aid in the likelihood of native UK adults becoming multilingual at a much earlier age when it can serve to help their life ambitions.

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<sup>36</sup> European Commission, 2006, "Europeans and their languages", (p.13)

## CONCLUSION

- Economic and social factors such as wealth, social class, and ethnicity are a root cause of inequality within the UK state education system. These inequalities are present within academic outcomes for children, which are then exacerbated upon consideration of private tuition.
- The UK education system places too many constraints on teachers and children alike which can be detrimental to their performance. This can be tied to inequality, as children from marginalised backgrounds see the most harm from this in terms of their academic achievement.
- Children with SEN lack the appropriate funding and resources to properly aid their integration and independence. Children without EHC's are most severely affected by this fact and are more likely to drop out of school or face suspension.
- The adult education system itself is a useful mechanism to correct inequalities present during childhood education, however, it lacks the appropriate resources and funding to effectively do so.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## OVERVIEW

During our interviews, the experts made some policy recommendations of their own. We have 5 policy recommendations:

- **ACTION 1** - Increase education spending on state schools to 6.5% of GDP by 2030
- **ACTION 2** - raise the starting age of formal education for all children to 7 years old, and establish pre-schools for under 7s.
- **ACTION 3** - reform the national curriculum
- **ACTION 4** - Reform the admission process for SEN children into primary and secondary education
- **ACTION 5** - Introduce mandatory language and grammar lessons until the age of 16

These policies aim to correct the inequalities that have been observed and investigated throughout the report and we believe these policies best aim to correct the breadth of the education system across multiple levels.

## **ACTION 1:**

### **Increase public spending on education to 6.4% of GDP by 2030**

Current levels of public education spending as a percentage of GDP are 4.4% (£96.8 billion a year). As outlined in the 2021 budget, the government has promised to increase education spending so that by 2025 it is at the same level as in 2010. In 2010, 5.4% of GDP was spent on education, which is equivalent in today's money to £105 billion. We welcome the government's plans, and although we would have liked to see more money sooner, we understand the immense pressures on public finances. Government obviously doesn't have stashes of cash to spare, nor should it increase taxes, nor should it increase borrowing.

Consequently, we seek to be pragmatic and realistic in our policy suggestions. Our main suggestion in terms of funding is that the government continues to increase education spending beyond 2025, with the aim of reaching 6.4% of GDP by 2030. Based on 2020-21 prices, this would mean an additional £44 billion pounds a year by 2030, taking the total to £140 billion a year. This would require an increase of 0.2% each year (£4.4 billion) on top of existing levels.

We believe that the consequences of such spending are only going to be positive. More money on education is only going to mean better educated children, meaning a highly skilled workforce and more responsible citizens. By making this approach more gradual, we believe that it will give time for the UK economy to recover and grow, making such an increase in spending possible. Furthermore, we believe that significantly more investment in the UK education system will help break the cycle of poverty, which ultimately is the single biggest and most important barrier to creating meritocracy. More children from deprived backgrounds will have access to higher paying jobs, which could ultimately lead to a reduction in the number of people using benefits. Furthermore, by helping people develop more transferable skills, this reduced the threat of long term unemployment. All of this frees up spending that would have been spent on welfare. The consequence is a much more efficient society.

In terms of what should be done with the money, we believe that a significant proportion should go towards:

- 1) Training more teachers and hiring more teaching assistants. Ultimately we want all primary schools to have classes of no more than 20 students with every class having a teacher and a teaching assistant. This will enable maximum support for students from deprived backgrounds. Increases in funding should also go towards
- 2) Making extra-curricular activities, after school clubs and schools. This would be essential in improving deprived children's cultural capital and raising their aspirations. Also we believe that another significant proportion of this funding should go towards
- 3) Establishing pre-schools, which shall be explained in the next section.



## **ACTION 2:**

### **Raise the starting age for formal education to 7 years olds, and establish pre-schools for under 7s**

Based on the findings in our insight, children start formal education too early. This prevents deprived children from catching up in terms of soft skills, meaning the race has already begun before they are at the starting line. Therefore we believe that formal education shouldn't start until 7. Not enough is done to tackle the inequalities that exist when children start school.

This policy isn't a radical idea, instead it is standard practice across the continent. Children in the vast majority of European countries don't start formal education until 6, with Sweden and Estonia (both with renowned education systems) not starting until 7. The later starting age in Finland is a reason why The World Economic Forum regards the finish education system as the best in the world. Therefore one has access to the best possible evidence for this policy's success. The UK is quite an outlier in having its starting age so young. By having less school years in primary school, you make room for more and smaller classes, enabling the possibility of a previous policy recommendation. Consequently, primary school wouldn't start until what is today Year 2.

However we do believe raising the starting age to 7 won't alone solve the problem, and with deprived children spending more time in deprived settings, this could make the divide wider. Therefore, pre-schools have to be established simultaneously. The aim of Pre-schools would be to ensure that all children are at an equally high level of language development and social skills before they start formal education. These foundations are imperative to ensure that every child starts education with an equal chance of success. Attempts to help year 11s catch up won't be necessary, since they would have already done so in pre-school. This practice will be much more cost effective, as the efforts required to close the gap earlier will be less.

This program would require funding for 1) more trained staff (as younger children need more staff). When hiring more staff, the EYFS child to staff ratios. Also funding should go towards 2) providing locations for this to take place. If new buildings need to be built or old ones converted, then a suitable time frame for implementing this policy would be 2030. We believe it is essential that those working in pre-schools receive extensive training and obtain adequate qualifications. Pre-schools should be seen as equally important to other stages of the education system; a core institution.

## **ACTION 3:**

### **Reform the National Curriculum**

Another key issue raised in our insight was how there is too much academic content in the national curriculum. This reduces the time for life skills and learning about current events, as well as making learning less organic. The consequence is that it doesn't help deprived children attain cultural capital, nor does it inspire a love of learning. The excessive focus on content does little to help children develop transferable skills which are essential in the workplace; a career is based just as much on what you can do as what you know.

One policy recommendation which should be relatively inexpensive to introduce would be taking out parts of the curriculum that aren't necessary in order to make space for non-academic subjects. Children don't go to school solely to become academics; they go to school to become good citizens. We believe that teachers themselves should play an active role in shaping the national curriculum, identifying topics which they believe are less relevant. Teachers often talk of the dictatorial nature of the national curriculum, which prevents them from teaching to each individual child's needs.

Obviously we understand that a new national curriculum has not long been introduced. Even though we disagree with the nature of the current national curriculum (such is its exam heaviness), we believe it would be unfair for teachers to have to make changes so soon afterwards. A greater focus on non-academic subjects would require replanning and the creation of new resources. To remain consistent, we believe setting a target of 2030 for when the new changes come into place would be realistic.

## **ACTION 4:**

### **Reform the admission process for SEN children into primary and secondary education**

One issue we explored in our insight was the issues present within the SEN admission process for children into primary and secondary education. In particular, the process for children without Education and Health Care plans (EHC's). Essentially, the process is the same standardised preference-ranking system for other children. This however does not take into account SEN children without such plans, as they are simply allocated a school mostly on proximity and availability. For children who do not have their first preference, they face being allocated a school that does not suit their needs.

Therefore, the admission process for SEN children needs to be reformed so that EHC's are introduced as a mandatory requirement for all SEN children applicable. This will help to ensure that children receive the school they feel best suits their needs. For those schools that do not have the capacity for the children that make a stated preference, a simple allocation of greater funding is required. Children of all backgrounds should be able to attend the school that they feel will most benefit their academic outcomes and wellbeing. Furthermore, children with SEN should be given extra dispensation to attend the school that they feel would benefit their education. This will help to reduce the inequality gap further, which as we have seen, most severely affects children with SEN.

## **ACTION 5:**

### **Mandatory grammar and language lessons until the age of 16**

The insight explored the staggering misallocation of skills in language abilities among native children and adults. This is most present and noticeable among natives, who have a difficult time learning other languages. Introducing mandatory grammar lessons both in English and another language such as Spanish, French or German will help to correct this. An understanding of conditionals and the different cases will help children to understand to better apply this understanding to other languages. This will also help to improve the human capital of students and give them a greater edge when trying to apply to specialised professions such as investment banking and finance, which are the key to advancing up the social ladder.

This can be achieved through the existing English Language regime through teaching in classrooms. Teachers will likely need extra training to achieve this, but the costs of this should be fairly negligible, as teachers should have the transferable skills required to teach this, except maybe just the knowledge. The teaching of other languages is perhaps a more difficult aim to achieve in the short-run. Whilst the UK already has a modern-foreign language regime in place through GCSEs and A levels. This would need to be widely expanded in order to facilitate mandatory language lessons until at least GCSE level. Of course, this does not have to be examined in the case of children who do not feel confident to take examinations. However, holding a qualification in a foreign language is a highly useful asset and can help with university application and jobs.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this report we have aimed to address each level of the UK education system. We have aimed to address the theme of inequality throughout this report, not just from an outcomes perspective but also through the scope of teachers and other stakeholders, as well as their wellbeing. Whilst these recommendations ask for ambitious and bold action by the government, we believe that this is achievable and realistic. Afterall, children are the future of our economy and our society. Surely they have to come first when it comes to commitment and support, and this is why we call for this radical action. Supporting our children will enable us to address the inequalities present in our society from the bottom-up and to truly pride the British education system upon social justice and achievement, as well as the wellbeing of our students and teachers alike.