

Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy Education, gender equity and social justice

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The UK is an unequal society and the education system plays a role in reproducing, as well as potentially challenging, inequities of gender, race and class. This paper sets out some of the key issues of gender inequity in education in the UK.¹ There are persisting areas of gender inequity in compulsory, further and higher education, relating to: funding and its implications; gender pay gap; achievement; subject choice and participation; curriculum and learner identities; sexual harassment and violence in education. Further, and crucially to our position, inequities in education are produced by intersections between gender and a range of other characteristics, including - but not limited to - race, class, sexual orientation, religion, disability and gender identity. These are also markers of hierarchy, and they differentially shape people's experiences of education (as educators and as students). In sum, we need consistently to ask 'which girls, which women' when discussing gender inequalities, to ensure that white, middle class women are not centred as the sole objects of our analysis and concern, and to commit to questioning and troubling categories of gender.

Global trends in education have been towards commodification, privatisation and marketisation² (involving e.g. performance cultures, testing regimes, an arguably narrowed curriculum, reduced autonomy and creativity in teaching and learning, increased fragmentation through competition between and hierarchical grading of educational institutions; more pressure for parents and students to 'choose' from the market; exclusion of 'undesirable' students). There has been a shift towards practices which are conventionally associated with 'masculinity', in terms of curriculum delivery, assessment, discipline and, particularly, management.³

Schools, colleges and universities are the sites where children and young people gain both education and much of their knowledge on how to navigate adulthood, which has huge implications for gender and social equity throughout their lives. What is deemed important enough to teach children about? What behaviour is acceptable between peers? Does teacher diversity matter in student learning and achievement? Who is in charge, and why? What career paths are open to/intended for whom? All of these questions have significant gendered, racialised, classed and social implications. This paper outlines some of the key issues in the education system and presents some proposals for change.

Funding

Women face the brunt of cuts to the education system as part of sustained cuts to public services. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) reports that, between 2010-11 and 2015-16, education spending across the UK fell by 14% in real terms.⁴ Looking specifically at schools in England, cuts since 2009-2010 equate to 8%, 'the biggest real-terms fall in school spending per pupil for at least the last 30 years', according to the IFS.⁵ Real terms cuts in school spending per pupil have been largest in Northern Ireland (11%), where pupil numbers have also grown. Cuts have been smaller in Wales (6%) and Scotland (2%), where pupil numbers have been steady.⁶ This is in a context where the government's own figures also show that relative child poverty increased by 600 000 between 2011/12 and 2018/19.⁷ A 2017 poll of head teachers by the Sutton Trust found that 80% had cut the number of teachers or teaching assistants as a result of funding cuts and almost a third

¹In this paper we use the terminology of equity rather than equality because equity enables a discussion of structural and systemic issues and the mechanisms in which individuals can gain access to resources and opportunities in order to level the playing field. *Inequality* refers primarily to the condition of being unequal, and it tends to relate to things that can be expressed in numbers. *Inequity*, in its main sense, is a close synonym of *injustice* and *unfairness*, so it usually relates to more qualitative matters.

² See e.g. Rizvi, F. and B. Lingard. 2010. *Globalizing education policy*. Routledge.

³ Kulz, C. 2017. *Factories for learning*. Manchester University Press.

⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2017. Long-run comparisons of spending per pupil across different stages of education Available: <http://bit.ly/2zF4pA1> (p9).

⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2018. *Annual Report on Education Spending in England*. Available: <https://bit.ly/2D5G3EW>

⁶ Sibieta, L. Seven charts on the £73,000 cost of educating a child. *BBC News*. 2 December 2019. Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-46180290>

⁷ Children's Commissioner. Fact checking claims about child poverty. 22 June 2020. Available: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/22/fact-checking-claims-about-child-poverty/>

(30%) said they were using money from the pupil premium, intended to support the most disadvantaged pupils, to plug gaps in their school's budget.⁸

These cuts affect women as employees (for instance, many schools have cut teaching assistants who tend to be women⁹). Cuts also affect them in their role as primary carers of children, having to manage reductions in the school day (as has happened in Birmingham, for example) or fight for support of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, support for which is falling far short of what is needed.¹⁰ Within this analysis, these cuts have also disproportionately affected the poorest families, including Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families.¹¹ While the government announced a boost to the education budget in its 2019 Spending Review, not only may it not be enough to reverse the impact of the cuts since 2010, but much depends on where the money is allocated.

The gender pay gap and debates about education as a 'feminised' profession

Across the UK, 85% of primary teachers are women and 61% of secondary teachers are women,¹² leading to a perception that it is a 'feminised' profession. However, there is a gender pay gap and women tend to occupy lower status positions, while men tend to be in leadership and management positions. Teaching is relatively low paid compared to similar professions. NASUWT, the teachers' union, reported that in 2015 the salaries of comparable professions were 20.2% above those of secondary school teachers, and 32.4% ahead of average earnings for primary school teachers.¹³ The average pay for all women teachers in all state-funded schools in England, including academies, is £2,900 less than for their male counterparts every year (£37,700 compared to £40,660).

As well as a gender pay gap, there is evidence of an ethnicity pay gap in general employment which by extrapolation is likely to affect education: Black African, Caribbean or Black British, Other and white Other ethnic groups on average earned 5%-10% less than their white British counterparts and Bangladeshi employees on average earned 20.2% less, between 2012 and 2018.

In education, the gender pay gap widened between 2018 and 2019 in 10 of the largest 16 academy trusts in England:¹⁴ academisation has been rapidly expanded under the current government. An element of the gender pay gap within a marketised education system is the bonus gender pay gap: The Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT) had the largest bonus gender pay gap, with women paid just 14p for every £1 earned in bonuses by men. In September 2019, the government announced that salaries for new teachers would rise to £30,000 by 2022-23.¹⁵ While this move is welcome, it does not address gender and ethnic disparities in distribution of work, power and pay within the teaching profession. There is far greater likelihood of a male teacher securing promotion, especially to headships. In all state-funded primary and nursery schools in England, 14% of all teachers are men, but 27% of head teachers are men. In secondary schools, 36% of teachers are men, yet 62% of head teachers are men.¹⁶ Previous campaigns to increase the pay of teachers have been linked to the recruitment of male teachers in particular, including the offer of additional or higher bursaries for male applicants to Initial Teacher Education programmes, and fast-track promotions for male teachers.¹⁷ The need to recruit more male teachers is often framed in terms of providing 'diverse learning experiences' or 'positive role models' for students. However, this potentially discriminates against women, while the need for diversity in terms of sexuality, class, gender identity or disability is less frequently mentioned. Moreover, there is

⁸ The Sutton Trust. Teacher Polling 2017. 11 April 2017. Available: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/pupil-premium-polling-2017-teachers-school-budget/>

⁹ National Education Union. Schools forced to cut teachers and teaching assistants posts to make ends meet. 7 February 2018. Available: <https://neu.org.uk/schools-forced-cut-teachers-and-teaching-assistants-posts-make-ends-meet>

¹⁰ Jayanetti, C. and Savage, M. 'Devastating' cuts hit special educational needs. *The Observer*. 10 April 2018. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/10/councils-face-crisis-special-needs-education-funding> and National Education Union. Supporting special education needs and disabilities. 16 April 2019. Available: <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/supporting-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities>

¹¹ Women's Budget Group & Runnymede Trust. 10 October 2017. *Intersecting inequalities: The impact of austerity on Black and Minority Ethnic women in the UK*. Available: <http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Intersecting-Inequalities-October-2017-Full-Report.pdf>

¹² OECD figures. 2017. Available: https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EAG_PERS_SHARE_AGE

¹³ NASUWT. 2017. Pay gap between teaching and other professions harming education. Available: <http://bit.ly/2lpI58O>

¹⁴ Dickens, J. England's largest academy trusts see gender pay gap widen. 15 April 2019. *Schools Week*. Available: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/englands-largest-academy-trusts-see-gender-pay-gap-widen/>

¹⁵ Department of Education. £30,000 starting salaries proposed for teachers. 2 September 2019. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/30000-starting-salaries-proposed-for-teachers>

¹⁶ Department for Education. School Workforce in England: November 2016. 20 July 2017. Available: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2016 (Table 5). SFR21/2017 (Table 9a): www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2016

¹⁷ Cushman, P. 2005. Let's hear it from the males: Issues facing primary school teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(3): 227-240.

significant diversity in male teachers' practice and in their constructions of gender identity, so it should not be assumed that male teachers will teach or relate to pupils in specific ways solely because of their gender.¹⁸ Some of the more significant barriers to men entering the profession tend to be centered on socio-cultural barriers around the perception of teaching as a feminised career and gendered norms around masculinity, and this might be especially true for primary teaching.^{19 20 21 22}

In 2018 among men and women, 85.9% of all teachers in state-funded schools in England were white British. Not only do senior positions tend to be taken by men, they are also more likely to be white: white British people accounted for 92.9% of headteachers and 89.7% of deputy or assistant headteachers and 85.1% of classroom teachers.

In **higher education** the average gender pay gap in 2018 is 15.9% with 30 universities reporting a 20% pay gap.²³ White academic staff at the UK's universities and colleges were also found to earn £7,000 more than their black peers, or 14 per cent more.²⁴ The results of a BBC Freedom of Information request received from 22 Russell Group universities showed the compounded issue of women of colour being subjected to a gender and ethnicity pay gap. There were significant differences between white (£52,000) and Black academics (£38,000), and academics from an Arab background (£37,000).²⁵ Reasons for these disparities include increased casualisation within the higher education sector, and the particular impact of this on women and ethnic minorities. According to a recent University and College Union (UCU) survey (2019): around 70% of the 49,000 researchers in the sector remain on fixed-term contracts, with many more on contracts which are nominally open-ended but which build in redundancy dates. There are 37,000 teaching staff on fixed-term contracts, the majority of them hourly paid. UCU estimates that this 'reserve army' of academic labour is doing between 25 and 30% of the teaching in many universities.²⁶

Participation and access

Currently, more women than men go to university and they graduate with better degrees. There is a five-percentage point difference between the proportion of female graduates getting a first or upper second-class degree (81 per cent) and the proportion of male graduates (76 per cent). This has remained the same since 2013-14.²⁷ However, this advantage does not continue as women experience a gender pay gap once they enter employment, even among those with similar qualifications: again, there is a big difference between gender as equality (as a numbers game) and gender equity (power differentials in society). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020) reported on 2018 graduates, where on average men were more represented in income brackets over £27,000 a year. Only 16% of women with a first degree earned more than £30,000 within 15 months, compared with 28% of men. Only half of Black university graduates were in full-time employment more than a year after they left, compared with more than 60% of white graduates. And while only 3% of white graduates were unemployed 15 months after finishing their first degree, twice as many Black graduates were, at 6%, as well as 7% of Asian graduates.²⁸ There has been a gendered impact of the introduction of tuition fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have been hiked considerably over the past decade, and particularly the widespread funding of these fees through loans – and only loans, after maintenance grants were scrapped by the government in 2015. UCU research demonstrates that, because of the gender pay gap in graduate occupations and time out of the workforce due to unpaid caring, women pay a significantly larger proportion of their income back in loan repayments than men, and over a longer period of

¹⁸ Francis, B. 2008. Teaching manfully? Exploring gendered subjectivities and power via analysis of men teachers' gender performance. *Gender and Education* 20(2): 109-122.

¹⁹ Cushman, P. 2008. So what exactly do you want? What principals mean when they say 'male role model?' *Gender and Education*, 20(2): 123-136.

²⁰ Skelton, C. 2001. *Schooling the boys: Masculinities and primary education*. Open University Press.

²¹ Skelton, C. 2003. Male Primary Teachers and Perceptions of Masculinity. *Educational Review*, 55 (3): 195-209.

²² King, J. 2000. The problem(s) of men in early years education. In N. Lesko (Ed.). *Masculinities at school*. Sage: 3–26.

²³ Pells, R. Gender pay gap: how much less are women paid at your university? *The Times Higher Education*. 6 April 2018. Available: <https://bit.ly/2JnyQ29>

²⁴ Busby, E. Black and minority ethnic academics less likely to become professors than white colleagues. *Independent*. 15 October 2019. Available: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/university-black-minority-ethnic-pay-gap-academics-professors-ucu-staff-a9155451.html>

²⁵ Cox, R. Ethnic minority academics earn less than white colleagues. *BBC*. 7 December 2018. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-46473269>

²⁶ UCU. 2019. Counting the costs of casualisation in higher education. Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10336/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-higher-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu_casualisation_in_HE_survey_report_Jun19.pdf

²⁷ Office for Students. Differences in student outcomes. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/>

²⁸ Adams, R. Gender pay gap begins for students straight after university. *The Guardian*. 18 June 2020. Available:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/18/gender-pay-gap-begins-students-straight-after-university-graduate-data-report-uk>

time.²⁹ The current interest rate for student loans for students who started their studies after 2012 is 5.4 per cent, which is higher than the average interest rate on a mortgage.³⁰

Gender and achievement

Since the 1990s, concerns in international educational policy frameworks have shifted from girls' educational experiences to boys' alleged underachievement. However, this debate oversimplifies the notion of achievement, inconsistently defines underachievement, and as a result limits understandings of inequities in the education system.

It is worth noting that while England and France share similar patterns in terms of the differential attainment of boys and girls, the boys' underachievement debate is non-existent in France, suggesting that other factors beyond 'facts' are at play here.³¹ Gender and educational achievement has been understood in binary gender formulas, creating a comparative logic (pitting girls against boys) which essentialises gender and deflects complex thinking about educational access, opportunities and outcomes for diverse groups.^{32 33} Politicians and the media have recently claimed that 'white working class boys' are uniquely disadvantaged in education³⁴. This phrase refers in fact to the 1 in 10 who are on Free School Meals (FSM), and is inaccurate in that other minority ethnic groups have higher rates of FSM as well as disadvantage.³⁵ Given that 60% of the white UK population self-identify as 'working class', this is a problematic terminology.

The notion of boys' achievement refers primarily to attainment rather than other forms of achievement and educational experience – it is a focus only enabled by league tables. In fact, boys' results improve year on year and there is no consistent gender gap in maths and science. Differences in attainment by ethnicity are larger than differences between girls and boys, and differences by social class are even larger, although these have attracted less attention. Girls who are performing below standards are not perceived as underachieving, rather as low achievers.³⁶ Meanwhile for some girls, striving for excellence can be damaging for their bodies and subjectivities.³⁷ Moreover there is evidence that the notion of (under)achievement by social groups shapes teachers' expectations of and responses to students from different social groups: in other words, that the debate may help generate the findings it then claims merely to uncover.³⁸ While successive governments have placed faith in school autonomy (Academies and free schools) and its associated marketisation to 'drive up standards', there is little conclusive evidence to suggest it achieves this, while removing schools (and assets) from local accountability and Local Authority oversight.³⁹

Gender, subject choice and curriculum

Both academic and vocational subject choices are gendered, which has implications for career paths and rewards. However, many approaches focus on 'fixing' individuals (e.g. changing girls' 'attitudes' to STEM subjects) rather than tackling a wider picture of sexism and racism in subject approaches, pedagogies, classroom cultures and practices. Generally, careers education is underfunded, patchy and patterned, systematically failing to reach those who need it most. Work experience is also often gender stereotyped.

²⁹ London Economics. 2017. The impact of student loan repayments on graduate taxes. Available: <http://bit.ly/2yVTpRz>

³⁰ Department of Education. Student Loans Interest and Repayment Threshold Announcement. 8 August 2019. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/student-loans-interest-and-repayment-threshold-announcement>

³¹ Moreau, M. 2011. The societal construction of 'boys' underachievement' in educational policies: a cross-national comparison. *Journal of Education Policy* 26(2):161-180.

³² Ringrose, J. 2013. *Postfeminist Education?: Girls and the sexual politics of schooling*. Routledge.

Francis, B. 2000. *Boys, girls, and achievement: Addressing the classroom issues*. Psychology Press.

³³ Ellwood, J. Pitting boys vs girls at school won't close the gender gap. *The Conversation*. 5 March 2015. Available: <https://theconversation.com/pitting-boys-vs-girls-at-school-wont-close-the-gender-gap-38345>

³⁴ For example: Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May. 13 July 2016. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may> Also see Adams, R. White working-class boys in England 'need more help' to go to university. *The Guardian*. 10 May 2018. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/10/white-working-class-boys-in-england-need-more-help-to-go-to-university>

³⁵ Crawford, C. E. 2019. The one-in-ten: quantitative Critical Race Theory and the education of the 'new (white) oppressed'. *Journal of Education Policy* 34(3): 423-444.

³⁶ Arnot, M., David, M. & Weiner, G. (1999). *Closing the Gender Gap: Postwar Education and Social Change*. Polity Press. Osler, A. & Vincent, K. 2003. *Girls and Exclusion: rethinking the agenda*. Routledge

³⁷ Francis, B. Read, B. and Skelton, C. 2012. *The identities and practices of high achieving pupils: Negotiating achievement and peer cultures*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

³⁸ Connolly, P., Taylor, B., Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Mazonod, A., & Tereshchenko, A. 2019. The misallocation of students to academic sets in maths: A study of secondary schools in England. *British Educational Research Journal* 45(4): 873-897.

Campbell, T. How stereotypes reinforce inequalities in primary school. 15 June 2015. *The Conversation*. Available: <https://theconversation.com/how-stereotypes-reinforce-inequalities-in-primary-school-43127>

³⁹ Keddie, A. 2019. Context matters: primary schools and academies reform in England. *Journal of Education Policy* 34 (1):6-21. Gunter, H.M., and McGinity, R. 2014. The politics of the Academies Programme: natality and pluralism in education policy-making. *Research Papers in Education* 29 (3): 300-314.

One area of focus has been closing the gender gap in STEM.⁴⁰ Science and technology are highly valued fields of knowledge and practice, and gendered participation patterns contribute to gender inequality. In 2019, for the first time ever, more girls than boys took A levels in science subjects in England. However, this is not equally spread among sciences, as more girls (63%) took Biology, slightly more girls than boys took Chemistry, and more boys (77%) took Physics. Boys also continued to dominate computing and maths.⁴¹

- In 2017/18, women made up 35% of those studying degrees in STEM subjects; in engineering and technology women made up just 19% of students.⁴²
- In the labour market women make up only 22% of those working in STEM, 12% in engineering,⁴³ contrasted with 46.9% of the overall UK workforce, with 8.1% of the engineering workforce being from ethnic minority groups (compared with 12.7% in non-engineering sectors, and 12.2% of the broader population). England has one of the worst percentage rates of professional women engineers in the world.⁴⁴

Research shows continued sexism and differential gendered support/encouragement by teachers and families of boys and girls to continue with STEM, as well as how educational practices play a key part in stopping many girls/women continuing in STEM (especially physics). While it is critical to address the skills shortage in STEM subjects, widening participation is also important for active citizenship and well-being: making informed decisions about health, climate emergency, reproductive health rights, assessing the trustworthiness of 'fake' science news stories, etc. And diversity by itself brings value in making STEM more inclusive.

Gendered learning identities and educational practices

Simply in terms of attainment, we have already noted that it is simplistic to assume that 'girls are doing better than boys'. If we understand learning as extending beyond exam performance, and examine on the ground experience, we need to note that classroom conditions may be less favourable towards girls and boys in different circumstances. For instance, disruptive behaviour may be seen as 'normal' for boys but few positive identities exist for boys. Boys and girls are both aware that girls are expected to be 'nice', kind, more mature, focused, and independent in schools: these expectations of 'femininity' are shaped and upheld by pupils and by teachers themselves. However, they are also complex and contradictory (requiring prettiness but not vanity or promiscuity, independence but not being a 'loner', for example).⁴⁵ When girls disrupt norms around conventional gender this is viewed more negatively by teachers than when boys do.⁴⁶ Expectations around gender are also racialised and classed; for example, idealised femininity is implicitly white, middle-classed and able-bodied.⁴⁷ This means that it is harder for minority ethnic students to be perceived and to 'perform' as 'good' students and that they may be unjustly or over-disciplined for their behaviours.⁴⁸ Sites and spaces for learning, including museums, may ask students to demonstrate engagement (e.g. physical engagement, active interaction) in ways that are culturally incongruent with acceptable gender behaviour in some minority communities, where appropriate 'girl' behaviour might rely on physical passivity, quietness and a more introverted studiousness.⁴⁹ Research on boys and attainment indicates that some boys may disengage from recognising academic progress as part of their performances of masculinity and 'laddishness', and that this disengagement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵⁰ Policing of appropriate gender behaviour occurs for boys too, as boys are expected to perform traits associated with hegemonic masculinity and the threat of being

⁴⁰ WISE. Industry led 10 steps. Available: <https://www.wisecampaign.org.uk/resources/2016/11/women-in-the-stem-workforce-2016>

⁴¹ Adams, R., Weale, S. and McIntyre, N. Female students outnumber males in A-level science entries. *The Guardian*. 15 August 2019. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/aug/15/female-students-outnumber-males-in-a-level-science-entries>

⁴² STEM Women. Percentages of women in STEM statistics. 26 September 2019. Available: <https://www.stemwomen.co.uk/blog/2019/09/women-in-stem-percentages-of-women-in-stem-statistics>

⁴³ WISE. 2018 Workforce Statistics. Available: <https://www.wisecampaign.org.uk/statistics/2018-workforce-statistics/>

⁴⁴ UK Government. *Engineering skills: Perkins review*. 4 November 2013. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/engineering-skills-perkins-review> and Royal Academy of Engineering. 2019. *Engineering skills for the future: The 2013 Perkins Review revisited*. Available: <https://www.raeng.org.uk/publications/reports/engineering-skills-for-the-future>

⁴⁵ Skelton, C., Francis, B. and Read, B. 2010. "Brains before 'beauty'?" High achieving girls, school and gender identities. *Educational Studies*, 36(2): 185-194.

⁴⁶ Reay, D. 2006. Compounding inequalities: Gender and class in education. In C. Skelton, B. Francis and L. Smulyan (Eds). 2006. *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Education*. Sage: 339-349.

⁴⁷ Allen, K., Harvey, L., & Mendick H. 2015. 'Justin Bieber Sounds Girlie': Young People's Celebrity Talk and Contemporary Masculinities, *Sociological Research Online*, 20(30): 12.

⁴⁸ Showunmi, V. 2017. The Role of the Black Girls' Club. In J.L. Martin, A.E. Nickels and M. Sharp-Grier (Eds). 2017. *Feminist Pedagogy, Practice, and Activism: Improving Lives for Girls and Women*: 229-246.

⁴⁹ Dawson, E., Archer, L., Seakins, A., Godec, S., DeWitt, J., King, H., Mau, A. & Nomikou, E. 2019: Selfies at the science museum: exploring girls' identity performances in a science learning space. *Gender and Education* 32(5): 664-681.

⁵⁰ Jackson, C. 2003. Motives for 'Laddishness' at School: Fear of Failure and Fear of the 'Feminine'. *British Educational Research Journal* 29(4): 583-598.

labelled a 'sissy' or as 'unpopular' is a common fear for male school pupils.⁵¹ ⁵² Meanwhile we know that Black boys tend to be given more negative feedback and to be perceived as more challenging to teach and resistant to being taught.⁵³

Arguably many curricula are normative in reflecting white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied values and perspectives. Forms of assessment have also shifted in recent years, emphasising more 'high stakes' end of course exams, which some claim will address the supposed underachievement of boys. We have also seen the rise of 'off-rolling' students whose poor results or disruptive presence might reduce schools' league table positions,⁵⁴ strict ('zero tolerance'⁵⁵) behaviour and discipline policies, involving higher rates of exclusion and the use of isolation within schools. Permanent exclusions in England rose 60% between 2013/14 and 2017/18. They particularly affect those with SEND,⁵⁶ boys, students on free school meals⁵⁷ and Black Caribbean⁵⁸ students, to such an extent as to be described as institutional racism:⁵⁹ but they are used by a minority of schools, with 10% of schools in 2017/18 accounting for 88% of the total number of permanent exclusions, but only 23% of the total school population.⁶⁰ Such measures may limit the range of positive identities available to *all* young people at school. There also appears to be declining mental health among students, with rising reports of anxiety, self-harm and even cases of suicide – against a backdrop of inadequate support in schools. In a survey of 8,600 school leaders, teachers and support workers, 83% said they had witnessed an increase in the number of children in their care with poor mental health, rising to 90% among students in colleges. Survey participants identified real-terms funding cuts (57%), cuts to teaching assistants (51%), an "exam factory" assessment system (53%) and problems accessing external support services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (64%) as obstacles to offering proper support.⁶¹

Discrimination, harassment and sexual violence in schools and higher education

Sexual harassment, sexual violence, bullying (including cyberbullying) is an issue that disproportionately impacts women and girls. However, students of all gender identities and sexualities experience this form of discrimination and violence and for BME students this is compounded by racism. Sexual harassment and violence is prevalent across a range of educational contexts, including in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Studies across the UK⁶² have found that 1 in 7 college and university women students have experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their time as a student and that 37% of female and 12% of male students surveyed had experienced unwanted sexual advances at university. Barriers to reporting exist, with 76% not believing their experiences was serious enough to report.⁶³ Further, a 2018 survey of 1,839 current and former HE students found that 40% of respondents who were current students had at least

⁵¹ Skelton, C., Francis, B. and Read, B. 2010. "Brains before 'beauty'?" High achieving girls, school and gender identities. *Educational Studies*, 36(2), pp. 185-194.

⁵² Allen, K., Harvey, L., & Mendick H. 2015. 'Justin Bieber Sounds Girly': Young People's Celebrity Talk and Contemporary Masculinities, *Sociological Research Online*, 20 (30): 12.

⁵³ Gillborn, D. 2003. *Race, ethnicity and education: Teaching and learning in multi-ethnic schools*. London: Routledge.

⁵⁴ Children's Commissioner. Children's Commissioner for England calls for a compulsory register of "off grid" children. 4 February 2019. Available: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2019/02/04/huge-increase-in-children-disappearing-from-schools-to-be-educated-at-home-childrens-commissioner-for-england-calls-for-a-compulsory-register-of-off-the-grid-children/

⁵⁵ Busby, E. Zero tolerance approach to bad behaviour in schools amount to 'child abuse', teachers claim. *Independent*. 31 March 2018. Available: www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/strict-behaviour-school-punish-children-child-abuse-teachers-national-education-union-a8283276.html

⁵⁶ Hatton, C. 2018. School absences and exclusions experienced by children with learning disabilities and autistic children in 2016/17 in England. *Tizard Learning Disability Review* 23(4): 207-212.

⁵⁷ Children's Commissioner. 2019. Five things you need to know about exclusions. Available: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/five-things-exclusions.pdf>

⁵⁸ Demie, F. 2019. The experience of Black Caribbean pupils in school exclusion in England. *Educational Review*: 1-16.

Joseph, A. Navigating neoliberal school spaces: Parent and school staff perspectives on racially disproportional school exclusions in England. *International Social Work* 63 (4): 445-458.

Osler, A. and Vincent, K. 2003. *Girls and exclusion: Rethinking the agenda*. RoutledgeFalmer

⁵⁹ Gillborn, D. 2005. Education policy as an act of white supremacy: whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Education Policy* 20(4): 485-505.

⁶⁰ Children's Commissioner. 2019. Five things you need to know about exclusions. Available: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/five-things-exclusions.pdf>

⁶¹ Weale, S. Mental health of pupils is at 'crisis point', teachers warn. *The Guardian*. 17 April 2019. Available:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/17/mental-health-young-people-england-crisis-point-teacher-school-leader-survey>

⁶² National Union of Students. 2010. *Hidden Marks*. Available: https://www.nus.org.uk/Global/NUS_hidden_marks_report_2nd_edition_web.pdf

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⁶³ NUS-USI Northern Ireland. Survey results being launched show more than 1 in 4 students in NI experience unwanted sexual behaviour. Available: <https://nus-usi.org/2019/03/27/survey-results-being-launched-show-more-than-1-in-4-students-in-ni-experienced-unwanted-sexual-behaviour/>

one experience of sexualised behaviour from staff and 1 in 8 current student respondents had experienced being touched by a staff member in a way that made them uncomfortable.⁶⁴

Sexual harassment and violence are also prevalent experiences for school-aged children. The 2016 Women and Equalities Select Committee report into sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools noted that:⁶⁵

- Almost a third (29%) of 16-18 year old girls have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school.
- Nearly three-quarters (71%) of all 16-18 year old boys and girls hear terms such as "slut" or "slag" used towards girls at schools on a regular basis.

The Girlguiding's Girls' Attitudes Survey 2017 found 64% of girls aged 13-21 had experienced sexual violence or sexual harassment at school or college in the past year. This included 39% having their bra strap pulled by a boy and 27% having their skirts pulled up within the last week.⁶⁶ Over a third (37%) of female students and 6% of male students at mixed-sex schools have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school.⁶⁷ As with the climate strikes, young people have been learning about and taking action on some of these issues already through feminism and social media, yet schools' approaches to digital cultures can be a barrier to interventions and initiatives.⁶⁸

Much weight has been placed on recent moves in Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), although these differ markedly in the four nations. The government has now made relationships education (at primary) and RSE (at secondary) statutory in England, although it has been statutory since 2007 in Northern Ireland's religiously and gender-segregated system.⁶⁹ In Scotland, comprehensive sexual health and relationships education is not yet statutory, but materials are being developed and the Scottish Government has announced that teaching on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights is to be embedded across the school.⁷⁰ Wales is currently developing an innovative new RSE curriculum, and the Welsh government's Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 led to the production of the *Good Practice Guide: A Whole Education Approach to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence in Wales*, which outlines specific tools and strategies for educators. Across these contexts, relationships education is to be taught within the context of the Equality Act with due regard to 'protected characteristics' including LGBT identities. However, there is a limit to what RSE can achieve without other problematic aspects of school cultures being addressed too.⁷¹

While schools have statutory safeguarding measures for under 18s, including on sexual violence and harassment, there are no such measures for **higher education** students/over 18s. Women between the ages of 16-19 are especially at risk of sexual violence, and universities therefore play a key role in addressing and preventing forms of violence and discrimination.⁷² However, work by universities to address social inequities and discrimination has been conducted separately on these issues. Sexual harassment and misconduct have been prioritised over racial discrimination and hate crimes, which means the intersections of racial and sexual harassment of women of colour require focused attention.⁷³

2. What are possible solutions to these issues?

⁶⁴ National Union of Students. 2018. *Power in the Academy: Staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education*. Available: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-staff-student-sexual-misconduct-report>

⁶⁵ House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee. 'Widespread' sexual harassment and violence in schools must be tackled. 13 September 2016. Available: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/news-parliament-2015/sexual-harassment-and-violence-in-schools-report-published-16-17/>

⁶⁶ Girlguiding Girls' Attitude Survey 2017, in Department for Education. 2018. *Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges: Advice for governing bodies, proprietors, headteachers, principals, senior leadership teams and designated safeguarding leads*

⁶⁷ NEU and UK Feminista. 2017. 'It's just everywhere': a study on sexism in schools and how we tackle it. Available: <https://ukfeminista.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Report-Its-just-everywhere.pdf>. In Department for Education. 2018. *Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges: Advice for governing bodies, proprietors, headteachers, principals, senior leadership teams and designated safeguarding leads*

⁶⁸ Kim, C. and Ringrose, J. 2018. Stumbling Upon Feminism. *Girlhood Studies* 11(2):46-62.

⁶⁹ Wilkinson, D. C. (2017) 'Sex and relationships education: a comparison of variation in Northern Ireland's and England's policy-making processes' *Sex Education* 17 (6): 605-620

⁷⁰ Patterson, S., McDaid, L., Hunt, K., Hilton, S., Flowers, P., McMillan, L., Milne, D., and Lorimer, K. (2020) 'How men and women learn about sex: multi-generational perspectives on insufficient preparedness and prevailing gender norms in Scotland' *Sex Education* 20 (4): 441-456

⁷¹ Sara Bragg, Ruth Ponsford, Rebecca Meiksin, Chris Bonell, Lucy Emmerson (2020) 'Dilemmas of school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education for and about consent' *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681811.2020.1788528

⁷² Universities UK. 2016. *Changing the Culture: Tackling gender-based violence, harassment and hate crime*. Available: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/changing-the-culture.pdf>

⁷³ Universities UK. 2018. *Changing the Culture: Tackling gender-based violence, harassment and hate crime: Two years on*. Available: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/uuk-changing-the-culture-two-years-on.pdf>

Whilst education inequalities and inequities existed long before the present moment of marketisation, we question whether this currently dominant model can deliver more than superficial equality (such as more women in positions of power), especially when institutional reputation and risk mitigation may be driving change rather than an understanding of and commitment to addressing inequities in education. Moreover, social mobility generally is in decline, and schools and universities alone are not able to ‘fix’ this: its causes and solutions lie in broader economic and employment policies. Long term and beyond education, we should address the (non)conversion of girls’ educational capital in the labour market and how women’s employment is characterised by higher levels of precarity and lower levels of pay and responsibility. Our proposed solutions and strategies need to be read in this context; they are in any case inevitably limited in a paper of this length.

Democracy, mutuality and accountability

- Education is – and must be seen as - a public good that delivers societal rather than only private, individual benefits.
- Schools, colleges and universities need to be democratically accountable, mutually responsible and transparent organisations.⁷⁴
- Activities engaged in by educational institutions to achieve different forms of equity should be encouraged and supported through this framework of the public good, rather than solely through aversion to risk and fear of punitive measures.

Funding

- Plug funding gaps in the education system: in England alone £12.6bn for schools, £1.2bn for 16-19 education, £330m for early years provision, and £1.7bn for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- Ensure that funding follows need.
- Abolish or drastically reduce tuition fees in the parts of the UK where they still exist
- Significantly increase teachers’ salaries, aiming to reduce the gender pay gap and with a focus on teaching assistants and support staff, in recognition of the work they do.
- Limit or abolish bonus and performance pay.

Training and recruitment / workforce

- Rather than promote ‘role models’, focus on staff’s views and understanding of equality issues. Critical work around inequity, injustices and discrimination should be a fundamental aspect of teacher and lecturer training.
- This should go along with efforts to increase workforce diversity with respect to many dimensions: ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability as well as gender. But hiring a more diverse workforce should not be seen as a or the only panacea for solving all of the inequities in education⁷⁵.
- More/better equalities education /training as part of all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) but especially in STEM subjects, in order to help challenge the gender stereotypes and inequities reproduced in everyday STEM teaching.
- Social justice/anti-sexist professional development for all teachers in compulsory and post-compulsory education.
- Address the concentration of women in the less rewarded and prestigious segments of the teaching profession.
- Create promotion pipelines for under-represented teachers to progress to senior leadership and headship positions, alongside many of the recommendations in other Commission discussions around flexible working, equal parental leave and childcare provision.
- Ensure managers consider staff welfare in assessing and changing work practices.

Access and curriculum pathways

- Provide impartial, student-centred, high quality and equitable careers provision and work experience for all students.

⁷⁴ These issues are discussed in more depth than can be included here, in Holmwood, J., et al. 2016. *In defence of public higher education: Knowledge for a successful society. The alternative White Paper for higher education*, London: Convention for Higher Education

⁷⁵ Joseph-Salisbury, R. 2020. *Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools*. Runnymede Perspectives. Available: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Runnymede%20Secondary%20Schools%20report%20FINAL.pdf>

- Develop a system of life-long learning opportunities enabling women to update existing skills or retrain. A life-long training infrastructure could be provided by a combination of public sector education and employers giving back to the community by contributing to training.
- Support businesses that provide excellent training with back-up college courses; and possibly subsidise their training if the skills they provide are transferable.
- Require employers who don't train to raise their game or pay into a central fund (more than the current training levy).
- Particularly target women who currently take unskilled work over skilled, because it is more compatible with caring responsibilities.
- Ensure childcare is provided alongside training programmes.
- Support part time study.
- Create funded apprenticeship schemes targeted specifically at encouraging girls and women into STEM apprenticeships, and boys and men into health and social care apprenticeships.

Education practices

It is worth noting that many proposed 'solutions' to gender and achievement have been discredited (e.g. gendered 'learning styles') or have potential negative impact and alienate many students (e.g. when narrow / macho versions of 'masculinity' and competitive practices are promoted as necessary to increase boys' achievement alongside a denigration of the contribution of women teachers). We need a wider notion of achievement that encompasses exclusions, subject choice, aspirations, employment⁷⁶ and to challenge the patterns of gender in school, particularly those associating school work with femininity and idealising effortless achievement.⁷⁷ To support this work needs to be done to:

- Develop cultures that support educational institutions as collaborative learning organisations.
- Challenge practices which are usually associated with 'masculinity', in terms of curriculum delivery, assessment and, particularly, management.
- Create contexts that do not encourage conformity e.g. to a laddish, macho image for boys / young men.
- Develop coherent and vibrant pedagogies that do not homogenise students by gender.
- Focus on teaching and learning where both students and teachers can become more autonomous and feel respected/valued.
- Support Decolonising Curricula movements e.g. Decolonise STEM movement,⁷⁸ which challenges current and exclusive dominant epistemologies, practices and representations in STEM.
- Help educators to take a social justice perspective and to think about their practice in these terms.
- Review and address sexist curricula and practices: ensure that they recognise and value diverse students and their varied knowledges, experiences and identities.
- Ensure that sexism, consent, harassment and violence are addressed explicitly in Relationships and Sex Education, while ensuring that schools are also safe places for RSE to address these issues.
- Develop a broad, student-centred and inclusive range of approaches to discipline and behaviour (such as attachment or restorative justice), avoiding exclusion, blanket policies, and unjust discrimination.⁷⁹
- Create a more cohesive (though not necessarily centralised) educational system: for instance, develop oversight mechanisms to ensure that schools, including free schools and Academies, are accountable to and reflect their diverse communities, particularly in relation to school exclusions / off-rolling.
- End forced Academisation, particularly against parent and community wishes.

Within these education practices, there are further specific actions that can be undertaken in relation to STEM:

- Redress the differential marking and grade severity in A level physics which is both unfair and disproportionately dissuades girls from continuing.
- Address gatekeeping practices that prevent students from continuing with science, such as the stratification in England of science routes at Key Stage 4 into 'Double' and 'Triple' science: replace this with a revised common route for all.

⁷⁶ Jackson, C. 2006. *Lads and laddettes in school: gender and a fear of failure*. Open University Press

⁷⁷ Younger, M., Warrington, M. and McLellan, R. 2005. *Raising boys' achievement in secondary schools: Issues, dilemmas and opportunities*. OUP; McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

⁷⁸ Decolonise STEM website: <https://decolonisestem.home.blog/>. Examples in other disciplines include University of Cambridge Decolonise Sociology: <https://decolonisesociology.com/>.

⁷⁹ Lifting Limits encourages teachers and pupils to apply a gender lens to everything they do in the classroom – language, wall displays, books used and the curriculum: <https://www.liftinglimits.org.uk>. See also Ferguson, D. A year to clean five schools of sexism – shouldn't others do the same? *The Guardian*. 12 November 2019. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/nov/12/clean-five-schools-of-sexism-teachers-pupils-gender-equality>. See also <https://www.fearlessfutures.org/>, and on RSE: Sexplain <https://sexplain.org.uk/> and Agenda Wales <http://agenda.wales/>

- Focus on changing STEM educational systems and practices that privilege masculinity and that naturalise the link between science and masculinity.
- Support teachers to address sexist practices in science, especially addressing the marked gender disparity in participation in Physics (challenging who/what gets recognised as legitimate physics participation).⁸⁰

Discrimination, harassment and sexual violence in schools and higher education

A whole institution approach involving students and staff that includes financial investment is required to address and prevent discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. The Equality Act 2010 imposes a requirement to address and prevent forms of discrimination based on protected characteristics. UK Research and Innovation's (2019) review of bullying and harassment in the research and innovation sector provides useful guidance for key areas requiring further knowledge and action that could be extended to both schools and higher education:⁸¹

- Prevalence studies in the UK of bullying and harassment, and clear, standard definitions.
- More research on the experiences of specific groups including LGBTQ+, BME and disabled students and staff.
- Greater knowledge of perpetrators and their behaviour to help develop strategies to address and prevent bullying and harassment.
- Addressing cause and effect of bullying and harassment and the relationship to cultures and practices and how and why behaviour stops.
- Understanding and challenging enablers of bullying and harassment such as power imbalances, workplace cultures and the role of competition and job security.
- Providing clarity around acceptable behaviours and professional boundaries.

In addition to this, we propose:

- Supporting young people in schools to take action for themselves on these issues. This can be done through clubs and groups as well as in the classroom.
- Utilising social media as a tool for use and as a learning strategy by students and educators.
- Investing in training and support for teachers to understand social media tools in the classroom, including for social justice purposes.

Equally Safe in Higher Education (ESHE) is a project funded by the Scottish Government that aims to eradicate gender-based violence in Higher Education.⁸² Its recommendations for universities include:

- Developing a strategy and implementation plan to tackle gender-based violence
- Establishing a strategic group to oversee the implementation of the strategy and appoint a named champion or co-ordinator to report on progress
- Introducing guidance and training for staff to help them respond to any disclosures of gender-based violence and provide support for victims
- Developing a secure data collection system to record incidences of gender-based violence
- Ensuring well-publicised points of contact for students reporting gender-based violence
- Introducing policies for staff and students - including a clearly-established code of conduct, disciplinary procedures and sanctions for perpetrators

In addition to this, we propose:

- Creating a dedicated, long-term budget focused on forms of violence, including funding for trauma-informed trained staff
- Providing support services and working with and funding local partners such as Rape Crisis
- Developing specific policies on sexual harassment and misconduct

⁸⁰ See the Science Capital research at UCL: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/departments/education-practice-and-society/science-capital-research> and the Institute of Physics research and work on gender balance and under-representation of girls in physics post-16: http://www.iop.org/education/teacher/support/girls_physics/page_41593.html and https://www.iop.org/education/teacher/support/girls_physics/file_58196.pdf

⁸¹ UK Research and Innovation. Bulling and Harassment in Research and Innovation Environments: An evidence review. October 2019. Available: <https://www.ukri.org/files/about/policy/edi/ukri-bullying-and-harassment-evidence-review-pdf/>

⁸² See the work being conducted by the University of Strathclyde, which has been used as a pilot site for developing the Equally Safe in Higher Education toolkit: <https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofsocialworksocialpolicy/equallysafeinhighereducation/eshetoolkit/>

- Implementing reporting pathways and systems that respond effectively and efficiently to complaints
- Ensuring fair investigations for students and staff
- Delivering accountability for perpetrators through transparent disciplinary procedures
- Eliminating non-disclosure agreements
- Providing public reporting of complaints and outcomes, including how the institution will work to address and prevent the repetition of these issues.