Impact of COVID-19 on Education & Children Services
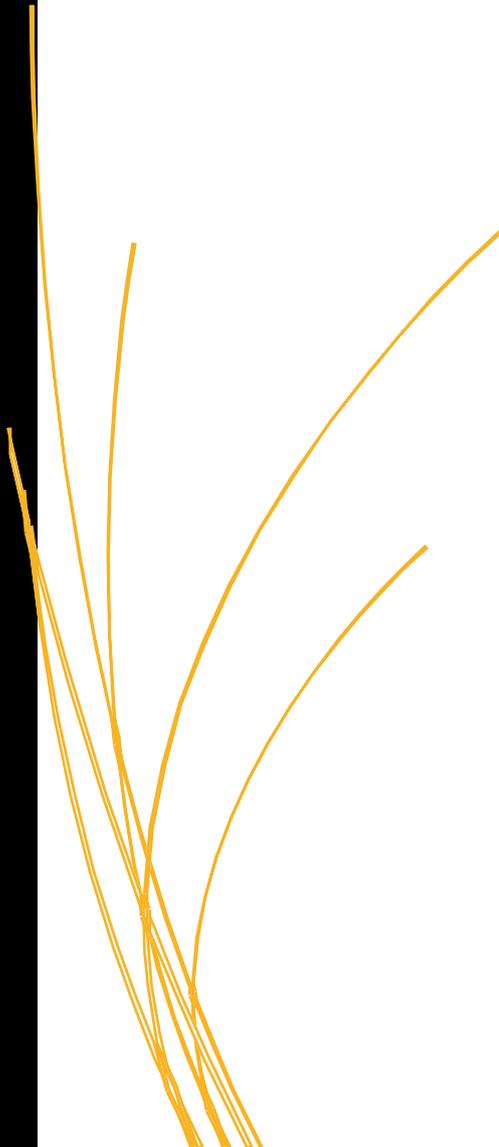
Introduction

This submission was created by No More Exclusions (NME), a UK grassroots coalition of over 140 teachers, teaching assistants, trade unionists, social workers, lawyers, youth workers, faith leaders, local councilors, journalists, academics, education researchers, SEND specialists, mental health practitioners, parent advocates, parents, and young people. More than 40 people worked together to gather the first person testimony and academic research that informs this piece, which was written collaboratively after a series of digital meetings.

NME has a race equality and an inclusion focus in education - our work is about addressing institutional racism, unconscious bias, negative stereotyping and low teachers' expectations as well as the wider structures and practices that create the context within which school exclusions exist.

NME would like to offer a particular thanks to the Pupil Power Campaign, a youth-led organisation campaigning on educational issues, who worked tirelessly to gather many of the first person testimonies quoted below.

What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people who had been due to take formal exams in summer 2020?

Recently published data by the Centre for Social Justice revealed that only 4% of excluded pupils pass GCSE English and Maths compared with 64% in mainstream education (CSJ, 2020). The cancellation of the 2020 summer exam series as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate these gaping inequalities.

Young people who had previously flourished on vocational pathways now struggle to fulfil their potential when limited to exam-based courses that value exam proficiency and rote learning over the more practical skills in which they may excel. There is abundant evidence that the exam system and increasingly narrow success criteria are having a negative impact on the

mental health of young people (Roome, 2019; NSPCC, 2019). The unnecessary burden of stress created by this system, and the uncertainty caused by the cancellation of exams are both described eloquently by this young person:

> *"My mental health was being strained due to the upcoming exams I had… the pressure and stress caused me to become quite unhappy. It also felt as if time was going at a very fast pace which I would say overwhelmed me… The reasoning for the emotions I felt was probably down to how much pressure the teachers put on you to do well, it just became a lot to handle… At first lockdown was a relief as it felt like a pause to the fast pace we were moving at before. The closing down of school was a positive for me as all the stress stopped and I could have time for myself. However, when finding out GCSEs were being cancelled I was quite upset up to the point I was crying. This is because I felt as if the previous 3 years of my GCSE course went to waste and that all the times I was angry and stressed was pointless".* **A., 16.**

The current exam system results in one third of students being labelled as failures, with students with special education needs, physical and cognitive disabilities, and social emotional and mental health challenges being disproportionately affected. These students make up more than two thirds of excluded pupils educated in alternative provision. The cancellation of Summer 2020 exams has led to increased anxiety for all students, but is likely to affect those who have been excluded and otherwise marginalised even more than their peers. As described by one young person:

> *"I wouldn't say I wholeheartedly trust that I'll be given a fair grade. Especially not from the same people who actively contribute to an exam culture that is such a stressful burden that children and young people are expected to carry. It's an unrealistically high standard to hold us to. The fact that the fate of my GCSE result depends on how high or how low I am ranked compared to my classmates, just doesn't sit right with me".* **T., 15.**

Alongside the stress and inequalities created by the exam system, questions about "unconscious bias" and grade parity emerge here. Research is clear that young people from Black Caribbean and mixed white and Carribean backgrounds are routinely discriminated against when placed in sets and in regards to the exam tiers they enter (Connolly et al, 2019; Francis & Taylor, 2018). The academic capacities of this group of young people are systematically underestimated and hence, their opportunities are reduced. Even more pertinently, we know that teachers typically underpredict the performance of Black students at A-level, and that this underprediction on average is more than a whole grade lower than the grade predictions of their white peers. (Wyness, 2016; Millard et al, 2018).

Many NME members have shared concerns around how qualifications are being awarded and how this may affect young people from Black and mixed white and Caribbean backgrounds. How will potential teacher biases be accounted for when grades are awarded? Will the grades of 2020 pupils be seen differently? Will GCSEs and A levels of the 2020 cohort be weighed differently when it comes to university and job applications? Will their GCSEs be deemed more or less credible than those attained by other cohorts?

One young person described their concerns thus:

"The biggest concern is unconscious bias which almost definitely will happen to do with your class, your race, your gender, if you have additional learning difficulties or additional needs. Another thing is the teacher-student relationship. If a student has a good relationship with a teacher, that could affect my grades in comparison to when they were done anonymously which prevents bias from taking place... all of our work has been exam-based - all of our education and now all of our work is going to be graded by teacher assessments. Many students drastically improve… There are many teachers who say they have seen students improve by two grades". **B., 15.**

To date, young people have not been consulted and have not been able to express their views about the impact of the pandemic on their education, and how this should be managed. This is frustrating and, as reported by the Pupil Power Campaign, makes young people feel that they are not valued and that their opinions are worthless. This consortium of 26 young people convened in May 2020 found that: "Young people are frustrated with the fact that they have not had their say in anything. They feel they have not been consulted in regards to what happens with the exams being cancelled, next steps, how grades will be distributed, how the appeal system or process will work".

Recommendations

- Young peoples' voices must form a core part of the decision making process. They must be consulted about all aspects of policy making and reform which directly impact upon their futures - and in many cases their present! It is not acceptable that key decisions are made without consulting those most affected by their impact.
- The 2020 student cohort should be provided with a clear breakdown of why a grade has been awarded, and the process behind the decision.

- A clear process for appealing erroneous or unfair grades must be established and communicated to all students, including those no longer attending the centres responsible for awarding the grades.
- Students due to sit their exams in 2021 have missed nearly ⅓ of their face to face teaching time for their examination courses. We know that whilst some students (notably those at private schools) have had access to daily online lessons, others, particularly those with limited online access, have not been able to access any formal learning at all during this time, whilst others will have had severe restrictions placed on their ability to access formal lessons, as detailed below. There is no feasible way for schools to close this gap and overcome this injustice. 2021 examinations must be cancelled to allow teachers and educators to focus on student wellbeing rather than 'cramming'.
- Establish a committee of educators and practitioners to conduct an urgent review of the primacy of high stakes testing which facilitates a discriminatory 'one glove fits all' approach to learning and assessment. This must include a systemic review into alternative assessment methods to enable educators to appropriately evaluate the achievement of *all* students as accurately as possible. The success criteria of education must evolve to meet the needs of young people with varied strengths, needs and backgrounds. It is not acceptable that the total worth of a young person is deemed to be measurable by externally imposed standardised assessments.
- Better data collection is essential and we urgently call for a requirement to improve the monitoring of progress of pupils in Alternative Provision settings.

'Vulnerable' groups

How should we define who is 'vulnerable' in education? What needs to be done to support these young people during and after the pandemic?

NME is particularly concerned about the confusing and debilitating use of the term 'vulnerable' in policy, practice and public discourse. We reject suggestions that education should adopt a "matrix of childhood vulnerability" (the Children's Commissioner) as this leads to labelling, long-term stigma, humiliation and dangerous conceptualizations of 'at risk' and vulnerability of CYP, families and entire communities (particularly along race and class lines) who are then susceptible to bias and discrimination. The current concern for the welfare of 'vulnerable groups' lacks credibility, when we consider that these are seemingly the same groups who have historically suffered due to policies of separation, social and educational exclusion and marginalisation, ie. Black, mixed white and Carribean and SEND pupils. The language of

'vulnerability' scapegoats families, blaming them for arising difficulties. In actuality, the fundamental ideology of the education system often leads to their presentation as 'vulnerable'.

In addition, NME is extremely concerned that any continuation post-COVID-19, of the behaviourist approaches that have become increasingly common in our schools will be hugely damaging. Such approaches (which include zero-tolerance behaviour policies) will undoubtedly lead to a surge in school exclusions, particularly for children with SEND, those who have had traumatic experiences, and Black and working-class students. International evidence is clear that 'deterrent' approaches to behaviour management lead to the alienation and marginalisation of some young people (Winter, 2016). In contrast, approaches underpinned by centering belongingness and restorative practices, with a focus on relationship-building, have a stronger evidence base (Skiba et al., 2009).

A call for evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education in the midst of the pandemic is an exercise in frustration for educators, since quantitative data has not yet been gathered. In fact, even prior to the crisis, there is a dearth of research around the impact of race and ethnicity on educational outcomes, despite the decades of lived experiences of students and teachers explaining the impact of racism on Black, Asian, and other minoritised students. The little data that does exist, suggests that children of minoritised backgrounds are up to 2.5 times more likely to experience long term poverty than their white counterparts and are less likely to show progress between 11 and 16. We therefore note with dismay that the education committee has decided to make the initial focus of its inquiries into 'disadvantaged and left-behind groups… white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, including the white working class'. Given that Black and Asian communities have been significantly worse hit by COVID-19, to the extent that Black people are four times more likely to die from the virus than their white counterparts, the decision to prioritise white children over their Black and Asian peers in the initial inquiries is frankly breathtaking. Negative experiences within education were already deeply skewed along racial and class lines, and the logical inference (and initial evidence) is that the COVID-19 pandemic has only served to exacerbate this inequality.

Recent statistics for England and Wales show that 6.6% of homes have no fixed internet connection and approximately 5 million people do not access the internet at all (Allman, 2020). These numbers indicate a significant digital divide affecting almost 10% of the population. When we then put this into the context of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an estimated 1 million children who cannot access online education during the lockdown. This forces unconscionable choices upon some parents. For some this means deciding between

feeding their family or purchasing data to access online education during lockdown (Kelly, 2020).

While 8% of households do not have internet access because the cost of equipment is too high and 8% say that telephone/broadband subscriptions are too expensive (ONS, 2019), the digital landscape of education during the COVID-19 lockdown and beyond cannot be bridged with devices and data. While the government has made pledges and is supporting initiatives such as DevicesDotNow to "ensure vulnerable children and disadvantaged young people at vital stages of their education have access to essential resources at home" (DfE, 2020), this does not address the other issues. Issues such as:

- Appropriate space and time to use the equipment in households that are busy, noisy, do not have multiple devices (need for sharing), where routine is lacking due to the disruption of the pandemic.
- Digital literacy. Knowing how to safely and successfully navigate online spaces, source and critically assess information, and locate additional/supplementary resources.
- Literacy and comprehension that is normally alleviated by the presence and support of teachers and teaching assistants, now exacerbated by their absence. This will especially impact SEND students.
- Lack of space for social, emotional and academic learning normally done with peers within the school environments.
- Information normally volunteered or gleaned through daily interactions, which may highlight safeguarding issues or a child/family in crisis, is even more unlikely to be discovered.

The children of frontline workers are more likely to be poor and disproportionately from minoritised backgrounds. 21% of the NHS workforce comes from minoritised backgrounds, as opposed to 14% of the national population (NHS Digital, 2020). This leaves them in the terrible position of likely not having one or both caregivers at home to provide learning support because of work commitments. Worse still, these children are also more likely to have experienced a COVID-19 related death. We can only extrapolate then, that post lockdown, these children will not only be significantly behind their peers in academic and social development, but also victims of extreme stress and trauma. Pre-pandemic, students in this position from these backgrounds were disproportionately labelled as having behavioural issues and excluded from their learning environment. Post-pandemic, this disparity will only worsen if resources and alternative empathic approaches are not deployed.

Short term solutions such as devices for disadvantaged households and WiFi buses for neighbourhoods are helpful (although many of the promises made so far, such as laptops for students in schools years 10 and 12, are yet to be delivered on), but these don't effectively deal with the systemic issues that predate the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. What is necessary is the preparation and equipping of school leadership, teachers, support staff and buildings to effectively manage the school environment and experience with the students and their parents/carers. The current approach of a system that requires essentially a communal collaboration being run like an assembly line cannot continue.

Exclusions as a means of managing behaviour and progression of the majority of students only serves to create long lasting issues for the individual and a breakdown in society as it pushes them towards undesirable outcomes e.g. unemployment, poverty, incarceration. Black children with SEND have disproportionately experienced exclusion and isolation for decades. There is overwhelming evidence that Black Caribbean, mixed white and Caribbean, and children with SEND are more likely to be excluded from school. The pandemic may exacerbate the marginalisation of young people from these backgrounds.

Recommendations

- Young people and families should not be labelled as 'vulnerable' based on a pre-designated checklist of 'risk factors'. Vulnerability does not assign itself to simple categories and assuming so can lead to certain families being scapegoated and blamed for arising difficulties. A person's relative 'vulnerability', and how this is labelled, should be decided by young people and families in cooperation with their teachers and, when appropriate, other workers. This is particularly important during a pandemic, which is a unique social scenario which might expose otherwise safe families to significant distress. Who is and is not vulnerable is unpredictable in the face of novel social situations such as those created by lockdown.

- Schools must recognise that classroom learning is difficult for some children and attempting to transport the physical classroom in its entirety, with its discriminatory and biased practises, to the virtual classroom, may compound difficulties for Black and Mixed White Caribbean children and those with SEND.

- Learning is a social experience, a complex interplay between a young person, their teacher and peers. In lockdown scenarios where a child has not had access to a social environment supportive of academic learning (eg. re-explanation of tasks, visual supports, differentiation of work, teacher/peer discussion, questioning, non-verbal

cues), they may experience significant difficulty accessing tasks. This has implications both for their self-esteem and academic progress and must be considered both during and after lockdown, which will impact on families in divergent ways depending on their capacity to engage with learning online.

- Some children will be returning to school having experienced significant adversity during lockdown, such as bereavements and emotional distress. Returning immediately to 'business as usual' and in some cases, punitive/ 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies will be counterproductive and lead to exclusion and marginalisation of the students who most need support. There is an opportunity for the pandemic to precipitate improved school-family relationships; a chance for educators to move closer to young people, listen to their views and devise whole-school policies that focus on wellbeing and psychological health. School belongingness and social connection must be prioritised above academic outcomes.

- We know from existing EPI research that disadvantaged young people are far more likely to be excluded or subject to an unexplained move out of their school than their peers. This will need to be carefully monitored by Local Authorities and government to ensure that disparities do not further increase.

- We also strongly recommend that equality data be collected and published by all institutions (including academies) and local authorities monthly in relation to exclusions (including internal exclusions) and managed moves. Only then can a comparison of pre- and post- pandemic rates of exclusions (including managed moves) be generated.

Appendix 1: **Bibliography**

Allman, K., 2020. Covid-19 is increasing digital inequality: We need human connectivity to close the digital divide. [Blog] The Oxford Digital Inclusion Project, Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-and-subject-groups/oxfordshire-digital-inclusion-project/blog/2020/04/covid-19-increasing>

Centre for Social Justice, 2020. Warming The Cold Spots Of Alternative Provision A Manifesto For System Improvement. [online] Centre for Social Justice. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CSJJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf>

Connolly, P., Taylor, B., Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Mazenod, A. and Tereshchenko, A., 2019. The misallocation of students to academic sets in maths: A study of secondary schools in England. British Educational Research Journal,.

Department for Education, 2020. New Major Package To Support Online Learning. London: Department for Education.

Francis, B. and Taylor, B., 2018. The Problematic Interface Between Research, Policy And Practice: The Case Of Attainment Grouping. [online] Chartered College of Teaching. Available at: <https://impact.chartered.college/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Problematic-Interface-between-Research-Policy-and-Practice_-the-Case-of-Attainment-Grouping.pdf>

Kelly, A., 2020. Digital divide 'isolates and endangers' millions of UK's poorest. The Guardian, [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/28/digital-divide-isolates-and-endangers-millions-of-uk-poorest>

Millard, W., Bowen-Viner, K., Baars, S., Trethewey, A. and Menzies, L., 2018. Boys On Track: Improving Support For Black Caribbean And Free School Meal Eligible White Boys In London. [online] LKMCo. Available at: <https://cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/LKMco-and-GLA-Boys-on-Track-FINAL-version-for-web.pdf>

NHS Digital, 2020. NHS Workforce. London: NHS Digital.

NSPCC. 2019. Young People Struggling To Cope With Exam Stress Turn To Childline. [online] Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/young-people-struggling-cope-exam-stress/>

Office of National Statistics, 2019. Internet Access – Households And Individuals, Great Britain: 2019. London: Office of National Statistics.

Roome, T. and Soan, C., 2019. GCSE exam stress: student perceptions of the effects on wellbeing and performance. Pastoral Care in Education, 37(4), pp.297-315.

Skiba, R., Reynolds, C., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Garcia, E., Conoley, J., Garcia-Vasquez, E., Subotnik, R., Edmiston, A. and Palomares, R., 2008. Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools?: An evidentiary review and recommendations. American Psychologist, 63(9), pp.852-862.

Winter, C., 2016. Amid Evidence Zero Tolerance Doesn't Work, Schools Reverse Themselves. [online] Apmreports.org. Available at: <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2016/08/25/reforming-school-discipline>

Wyness, G., 2016. Predicted Grades: Accuracy And Impact. [online] University and College Union. Available at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf>