



Better support for schools to discuss race inequality and young citizens' wider concerns

Executive summary

Schools are important places for young people to address sensitive issues, given the clear generation gaps in how young people access news and what causes they support. For example, Ofcom states 28% of teens use Tiktok most as their news source, and Yougov indicated in November 2023 that 41% of youth sympathise with Palestine. But schools are often not trusted to address social issues affecting youth. The Black British Voices survey found less than 2% believe education institutions take racism seriously.

The requirement for Ofsted to inspect schools on race equality standards [disappeared](#) early in the post-2010 government period. Schools instead came under severe scrutiny about being 'too' concerned with race equality. For example, without evidence of a system-wide problem, government has warned schools who take an anti-racist stance about 'promoting' concepts such as ['white privilege'](#). [Political impartiality guidance](#) created in response to these alleged concerns offered no reassurance to schools about actively addressing systemic racism or wider systemic inequalities.

Citizenship education, where many of these issues can be sensitively addressed, has been undermined by being [deprioritised in teacher training policy](#), and has been unequally treated as a subject in school inspection. The narrowed 2014 National Curriculum [de-emphasised free speech, human rights and equalities](#) as topics of study. As it stands, in government policy [there are only two instances](#) where pupils' views must

be solicited: in the event of a safeguarding concern, and during Ofsted inspections.

Policy recommendations

1. **In a proposed Race Equality Act, include the expectation for inspection and funding policy** that schools address, and are supported to address (a) understandings of race inequality across their curriculum and school culture (b) the reporting of incidences of identity-based bullying and harassment, and actions to address such bullying and harassment.
2. **Update Political Impartiality guidelines** to reassure schools that they are justified in actively challenging systemic inequalities, including systemic racism, and that such action can complement a culture of open and dialogic discussion.
3. **Update Equality Act guidance and safeguarding guidance for schools** to support them to address the fact that certain forms of lawful speech (including texts, images and symbols) can still be harmful to particular pupils and staff because of race or faith inequalities they experience. Schools should be supported on how to address such speech with explicit reference to caring for those experiencing systemic inequalities.
4. **Put citizenship education on an equal footing** in terms of subject-specific inspection and teacher training policy, and expand the citizenship education curriculum to engage questions of equalities, human rights, and youth voice and to teach constructively both about

institution-centred (e.g. parliamentary) and non-institution-centred (e.g. peaceful protest) forms of civic and political action.

5. **Make space in national school curriculum, assessment and teacher training frameworks** to support expert-led, rewarding, subject-based discussion of sensitive political and ethical issues, as issues that young people feel strongly about can arise in any subject area.
6. **Formally endorse and support [Rights Respecting Schools](#) and [‘Smart’ school council](#)** schemes at central government level as elements of a new drive for supporting the engagement of young people’s views in school policy, in ways that mean those views have genuine influence, and are heard by both by their school leaders and respected by their peers.

About the research

The above recommendations arise from our survey of 3156 diverse Year 10 (14-15 year-old) pupils across state-funded schools in England as part of our wider [Youth Engagement with Race and Faith at School](#) study.

Findings revealed:

- Only 39% agreed that pupils feel confident to tell teachers about racism or religious intolerance happening at school.
- Only 47% agreed that the history of people from their racial or ethnic

background is accurately taught in their school.

- 37% of pupils from white British backgrounds viewed unfair treatment of ‘people like me’ on the basis of skin colour, ethnicity, religion, or nationality as a big problem in England.
- Social media was where the largest proportion (75%) learned most about social and political issues, which is concerning due to social media’s potential for spreading misinformation. The Prevent agenda has not solved this problem, as only 38% reported feeling safe to express their views on social and political issues at school. Only 10% of young people said they would contact a politician to express their views in future.
- 47% disagreed they had a voice in changing school policies when needed. Only 40% agreed their school is a place where pupils feel safe. More than half (54%) disagreed that pupils treat each other with respect in their school.

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See more about the survey at <https://more.bham.ac.uk/youth-engagement/project-findings/>