Where critical reflection meets collective possibility

AN ARGUMENT FOR POSSIBILITY

April 2025

Testifying Against Deficit Ideology:

A courtroom-style takedown of the most persistent lie in education: that young people are the problem - featuring expert testimony from **Dr Ian Cushing.**

COMES WITH 3D GLASSES!

The McDonaldisation of Education:

A feature essay exposing how standardisation, surveillance, and "efficiency" have hollowed out the soul of education.

The Slow Work of Real Change:

While everyone else is sprinting, we're betting on the tortoise - read how we're building something that ***lasts.***

CLASS 13

Page 66 The Equity Oracle Education's agony aunt says the quiet part out loud.

How to use this report

This report is not a traditional research paper. It is a reflection of who we are and how we believe we journey toward systemic change. Crafted to provoke and challenge, it invites you not just to read but to engage — for transformation is born of participation, not passive observation. Here's how to approach this report to feel its full weight and impact:

If you are looking for quick fixes, we'll save you the time now: there aren't any. The kind of change we need is not about minor policy adjustments or celebrating the exceptional teachers who work within an inequitable system. It requires a complete reimagining.

1. ## Multiple voices, one purpose

Different sections have different tones and styles, reflecting our commitment to collaboration. Class 13 is not about one singular voice—it's about collective insight and action.

2. ## Expect discomfort

We won't be minimising ourselves or softening the truth to make it more palatable. Our responsibility, to each other and to the children, is to speak honestly, even when it's uncomfortable.

3. ## Read it your way

You don't need to read this report cover to cover. Each section can stand alone, allowing you to dip in and out based on what sparks your interest.

4. ## Designed for reflection

Throughout, you'll find call-out boxes, guiding questions, and visual elements. Use them to pause, reflect, and apply ideas to your own context.

5. ## Take your time

Change doesn't happen overnight. Read in chunks, return to sections, and allow the ideas to develop over time. Remember: the enemy of equity is pace.

6. This is an invitation

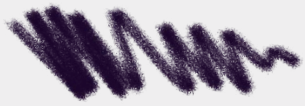
You are not just a reader, you are a participant. We invite you to engage with these ideas, challenge your own practice, and take action.

7. Be open to challenge

You may not agree with everything in this reader. That's okay. We're not asking for agreement. After all, too much agreement kills chat (Cleaver, 1968) — and the chat is important.

8. Engage with us

This report is part of an ongoing conversation. If you have thoughts, challenges, or want to collaborate, reach out (hello@class13.org). Transformation happens together.



Find the names – a wordsearch with a twist

C J E V V V F V M A K L T F O X A O C F
H J B U E H N W S S C F K I W N P D Z A
K G X H Y U I I P R K A Q D D A K C N M
Y Z V N E K V P D I U R C R K P H O H A
Z I I N E L J B M O J J E N L U Y I A L
O Z P W I I P L C T H W B I L F R F L I
N G W S H V E A C O R C Q A L I C E A A
I A A Z A I D A N X U X M H Y V W K S Q
Z Y D L D U N B P U V J A R I F V V D X
F E S V F A U F W A Y M P L R S I H A K
R S T C B I A D R I U H U A B E N A I P
D H C O G X E A B Y Z M A Y Q M J Y R N
N A E Q V C A H J U P D P E O O X Y J L
Y O T U Z K O W L Q Y G Y H R R T P I D
P V P Y B D N A L E J A N D R O L R P E
B O H V H N J K V R R N O H K R N U Q V
J V W O Q V P O W N K V J J L R D B O Q
C E C J N F Y T E W W P H U G L Y R C F
S T V E C Q O O X J R W B V X B O P O U
F K H C C Z T H R H X P D S V G R K P F

Alfie
Alejandro
Aarav
Ayesha
Arif
An
Amália
Abena
Andre
Alice
Aidan
Aeron
Alasdair

Take a moment to find the 13 names above, and notice which ones you find effortlessly and which ones take a little longer.
What does that say about the names we recognise, and the ones we don't?

Contents...

Forewords from our friends

We're grateful at Class 13 to be in community with such powerful advocates for equity and transformation. Each foreword reflects a different facet of this work—personal, political, and pedagogical—and we're honoured to share their voices with you.

Foreword

Our education system is in crisis—not just of resources, but of purpose and values. For too many, schools are sites of institutional harm and deep-rooted suffering. Rather than spaces of imagination, critical inquiry, or collective flourishing, they often serve as mechanisms of control. Students are policed: in their movements, their speech, their clothing, even their hair. The curriculum is too often uninspiring, hollowed out by technocratic targets. Teachers are overworked, undervalued, and increasingly driven out of the profession. Meanwhile, student mental health continues to deteriorate, and the most marginalised face disproportionate punishment and exclusion—pushed into alternative provision, internal isolation, or out of the system altogether.

This is not a malfunction, but a feature of an education system structured around neoliberalism, competition, and deficit thinking. A system that locates problems in individual students, rather than in the institutions and ideologies that shape their experience. Interventions that merely tinker around the edges—diversity training, behaviour programmes, quick-fix mental health initiatives—do little to confront the roots of the problem. We need more than piecemeal reform. We need radical transformation.

That means reckoning with how racism, capitalism, ableism, and other oppressive structures manifest in education. It means understanding how power operates in schools and in society—and insisting on approaches grounded in care, democracy, and justice.

Informed by critical pedagogy and drawing on thinkers like bell hooks and Paulo Freire, the work of **Class 13 resists the isolating logic of individual solutions.** They recognise that meaningful change only comes when we understand how issues interlock, and when our interventions are collective, intersectional, and rooted in love. Their analysis is sharp, their vision is long-term, and their praxis is urgent. They remind us that a better education system is possible—but only if we're willing to fight for it.

Remi Joseph-Salisbury

Remi Joseph-Salisbury is a Reader in Sociology at the University of Manchester. His work explores race, education, and policing, with a focus on institutional harm and abolitionist alternatives. He is committed to critical, community-informed research that challenges injustice and imagines radical possibilities for education and society.

Silenced. We fear those who speak about us and do not speak with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in the voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, and unfilled longing. Only speak your pain. This is an intervention. A message from the space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/Silenced. Marginality as a site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.
(hooks, 1990: 343)

We know how very much has changed in the more than 60 years since that time of post WW2 rebuilding. I thought about the heady days of progressivism and the child-centred pedagogy in the 1960s in the wake of the Plowden Report. In this pedagogy, students followed their own ideas and timetable and often engaged in group work. I was a young primary school teacher then and remember well how the supposedly 'remedial' class in East London thrived on the buzzy classroom with its range of activities and spaces that I created and the children's engagement and learning was often very moving. But by the 1980s, in the wake of Margaret Thatcher's victory, a set national curriculum with tests and standards began to be introduced. However, child-centredness fell far short of the whole community approach that Class 13 are proposing. Thus, I think that now it is crucial to support initiatives such as Class 13 that are attempting to transform the conclusions and experience of current schooling.

There have been many attempts to foster community development in de-industrialised and impoverished communities. But supporting change is difficult because, above all, everyone needs to feel heard. All of the members of a school. It is, for me, a principle of good research – not to judge but to listen, to make sure everyone feels heard and sure that they have been understood. Only when that is achieved in humility and non-judgement on the part of the researcher, is it possible to bring together those whose views and lives differ so much in order to support community, using what Studdert and Walkerdine (2016) called 'meanings in common'. We cannot support communities without a deep engagement with the meanings and feelings generated in the lives and experience of all participants.

Class 13 aims to start at the grass roots and foster community and mutuality and, on the basis of that, to produce an educational practice of mutual support and attainment. State schools and education are threatened in terms of funding as never before. The crisis of poor mental and physical health and bullying is endemic. In developing a 'community of practice' a school is often part of a hurt and fragmented locale, with myriad problems and never enough funding. Now is an absolutely critical time. And I do not wish to minimise the challenges that this pilot will face. But bringing everyone together, using **Class 13's four principles, seems to me the only possible way to approach this crisis.**

Valerie Walkerdine

Valerie Walkerdine is Distinguished Research Professor Emerita in the School of Social Sciences Cardiff University and Visiting Professor of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics. She has worked on gender and class issues for most of her career and more recently worked with deindustrialised and impoverished communities in Wales.

We can't tinker our way to equity. We can't mitigate and equivocate our way there. If this is our equity goal—to make schools a little less inequitable and a tad bit more humanising, to baby step toward something fair and just for all students—we have no shot at achieving equity. There's something more to do than sprinkling diversity programs and practices into dehumanising systems.This is the very challenge that Class 13 refuses to shy away from

Unfortunately, but not unpredictably, when I visit schools, including those full of kind and 'equity'-minded adults, most of what I see is tinkering. Most of what I see is what I've come to call high-optics, low-impact approaches to equity. These approaches that are full of high-profile programs and curricular add-ons to which leaders can point and say, "Look at all we're doing in the name of equity!" Sure, sometimes tinkering is all we can do in the immediate term when we don't have the power to transform a system with the snap of a finger.

But eventually, sooner rather than later, when we know the harm being done, when we find ourselves in a system that is fundamentally dehumanising and inequitable, we're called to get to the heart of the matter. Eventually we need to reimagine and rebuild rather than tacking little bits of belonging onto big unjust systems.

Katy Swalwell and I constructed the equity literacy framework with this distinction in mind. We often write and talk about the difference between responding to inequity and redressing inequity. Responding is reactive. We identify an inequitable policy or practice and try to make it equitable. Redressing requires root cause analysis, a more serious interrogation of how a process or system produces inequity. It requires fundamental change to a process or system.

Recently while I was supporting a school's leadership team as it conducted an equity policy analysis, we identified several policies that locked economically marginalised students out of learning opportunities due to fees, scheduling issues, and other factors. We responded by discussing how we could remove these barriers. But that was only the beginning of the transformative process. We then had to do the redressing. We examined how such inhumane, unjust policies—the kinds of policies that guaranteed inequitable access and opportunity—made their way into school policy in the first place. If all we did was change the policies, we would be leaving the inequitable thinking and dehumanising institutional culture that created the policies to inform future policies.

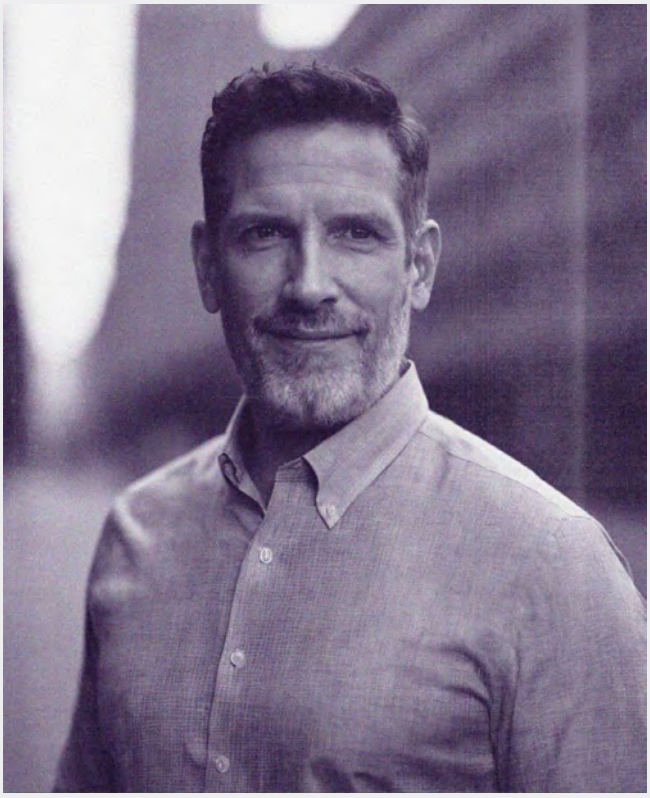
Without the redressing, the responding would be a kind of tinkering, making a fundamentally inequitable and dehumanizing place a little less inequitable and dehumanising. That's a troublingly low bar.

What I find most powerful, most inspirational, about Class 13's report is the insistence of starting with a high bar. The organisation's vision begins where most equity visions and actions never quite manage to go: the transformative, the systems level. There's no baby-stepping here, no tinkering at institutional margins.

Class 13 demonstrates the depth we can reach when we build a vision around transformative principles and commitments rather than disconnected practices and trendy programs. I'm energised when I imagine the progress we could make if we all had the courage to embrace this vision.

Paul Gorski

Paul Gorski is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute. He has written several books and 80 or so articles on equity and justice in education. His most recent book, co-authored with Katy Swalwell, is Fix Injustice, Not Kids and Other Principles for Transformative Equity Leadership. Paul is also a toddler dad, a gardener, an occasional poet, and a black belt in Tae Kwon Do.



Education *as the* **practice of freedom**

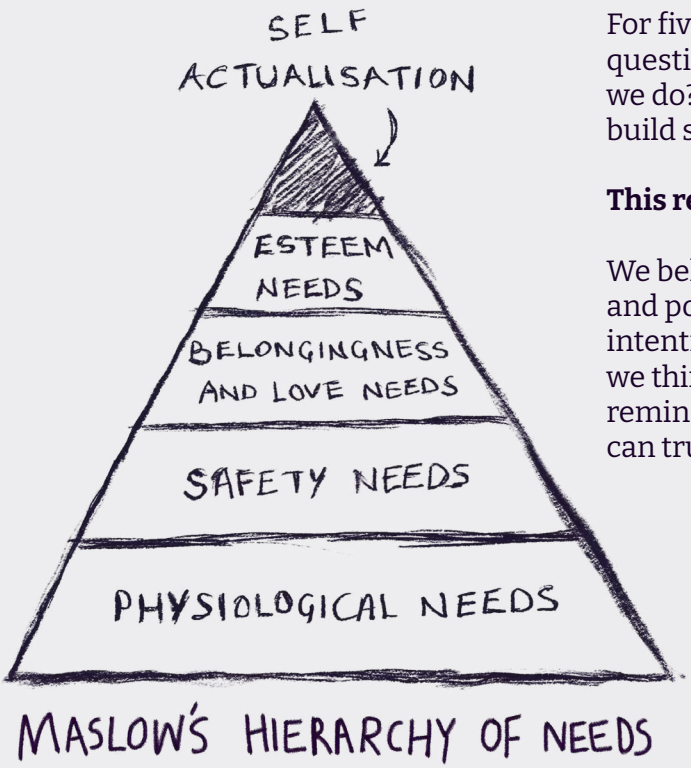
At Class 13, we refuse to accept that harm in education is inevitable.

- ☐ Have you ever looked around a school and thought, "Surely this could be different"?
- ☐ Have you ever questioned why young people are expected to shrink themselves just to fit in?
- ☐ Have you ever felt that schools are designed for something other than real learning?

We refuse to accept that this system is the best we can do. **Do you?**

☐ **YES** ☐ **NO**

If you ticked any of those boxes — you're in good company



MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

For five years, Class 13 has existed to explore those very questions. We've often been misunderstood: "what do we do?" "why do we do it?", and "what does it mean to build something different?"

This report is our answer.

We believe education should centre equity, humanity, and possibility. This requires more than good intentions, it demands a fundamental shift in how we think about education itself. As Maslow (1943) reminded us, basic needs must be met before any of us can truly thrive. ***This is an argument for possibility!***

Did you know ?

In 1938, Maslow spent six weeks with the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation in Alberta, Canada. Their communal values and emphasis on collective well-being sharply contrasted with Western individualism—and quietly shaped his thinking on human needs and flourishing.

Who are we?

Unfortunately there's no elevator pitch for tackling systemic inequity—only a deeper conversation, and a long walk together. We're often asked: "what was the moment?" And for that, we usually return to a jarring incident during a mentoring project in East London, when a school served fried chicken to mark Black History Month. The gesture, though perhaps well-intentioned, revealed just how deep the misunderstanding runs and the harm that happens when institutions fail to reflect critically on their own practices.

We often describe this as the *moment* that clarified the need. The epiphany: if we truly wanted change, we couldn't keep focusing on '*fixing*' young people. We had to work with educators, families, and communities to challenge the system itself.

But the truth is, it wasn't just that moment. We weren't born overnight, or in reaction to the events of 2020. Class 13 started in the conversations our founder and staff were having years earlier with educators, youth workers, community organisers, parents, young people —and you. If you have engaged with Class 13 before, you have shaped us—even when you disagreed with us. If you are new, welcome to the community. We look forward to your contribution.

We don't do this work because it's easy. We do it because standing still in a system like this isn't neutral—it's part of the problem. We're trying to be honest. Critical. And connected. We believe in asking better questions, even when the answers are messy. We believe in collective action, even when the path forward isn't clear.

Our work has always been about more than one organisation or one moment in time. These conversations—sometimes affirming, sometimes challenging—all grappled with the same reality: schools are not designed to be spaces of human flourishing. Or, as our good friends bell and Paulo would say, **"education as the practice of freedom."**

Negative progression

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, schools and organisations across the UK made big declarations. They pledged to become anti-racist. They promised equity. They announced commitments to doing better. But despite the fanfare, inequity in schools has remained largely unchanged.

We might feel that things are improving—that change is happening in pockets, that individual teachers are championing inclusion, that certain schools have progressive behaviour policies. But individual success stories are not proof of systemic change. They are proof that some people have managed to survive an inequitable system.

Let's say the bold thing now: **schools, as they currently exist, are sites of harm . Yes, all schools.**

We are told that the system works for a select few. But does it? A system built on control and compliance does not create success—it creates survivors. And those survivors are held up as proof that the system works—mask the deep inequalities at the heart of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The truth is, the system doesn't work for anybody. Let's repeat that: **the system doesn't work for anybody.**

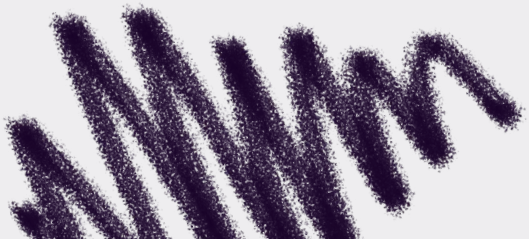
This is not to say that all schools or teachers are bad. But as Michel Foucault (1984) reminds us, the issue is not that *everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous.* A car isn't inherently bad—but it is always dangerous. Schools, too, are dangerous. They hold immense power over young people's lives. And when that power is wielded without due care and attention, when discipline trumps humanity, when control is mistaken for support, schools become sites of profound harm for all children and adults.

This report might feel like pulling off the plaster quickly. That's because it is. It won't offer comfort—but it will offer possibility.

A wake up call

This report is a response to these questions, and more. It is not an invitation to feel despair, but a challenge to see clearly. To move beyond empty rhetoric. To stop mistaking survival for success. Real change does not happen in the wake of tragedy. It happens when we stop waiting for the next moment of reckoning and start demanding transformation—right here, right now.

If you're with us, keep reading ...

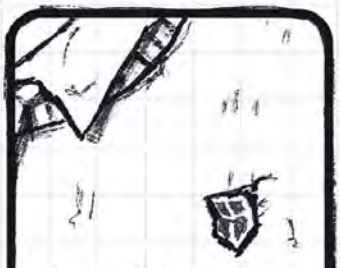


Badges & Boundaries

You could always tell who was who at school.

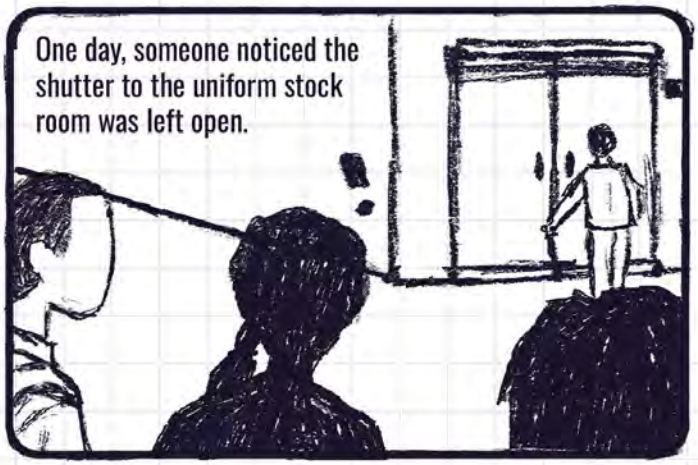
Two things gave it away: your shoes and your uniform.

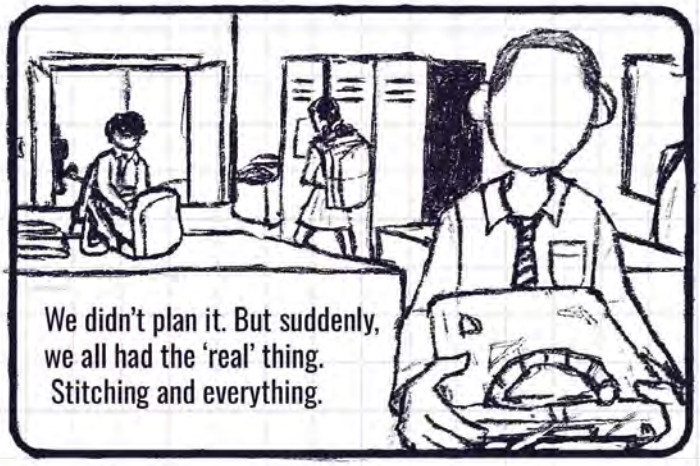
There was a school shop selling the 'authentic' uniform—stitched badge, right shade of blue.



But most of us on free school meals went to the spot on Barking Road. Press-on logos. Faded jumpers.

One day, someone noticed the shutter to the uniform stock room was left open.

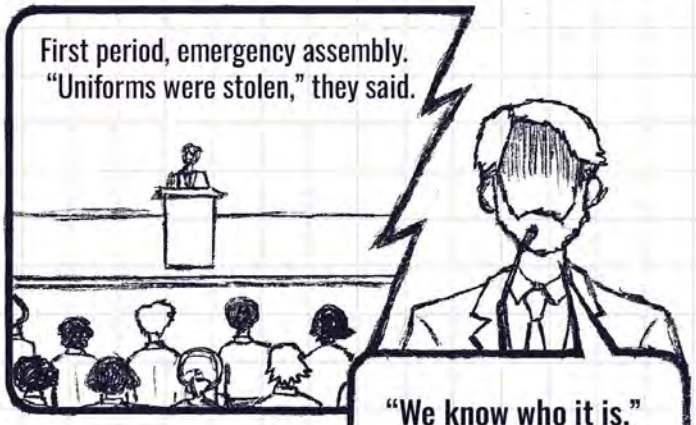




We didn't plan it. But suddenly, we all had the 'real' thing. Stitching and everything.

Next morning, I put it on. My parents didn't even clock. "You look smart," they said.

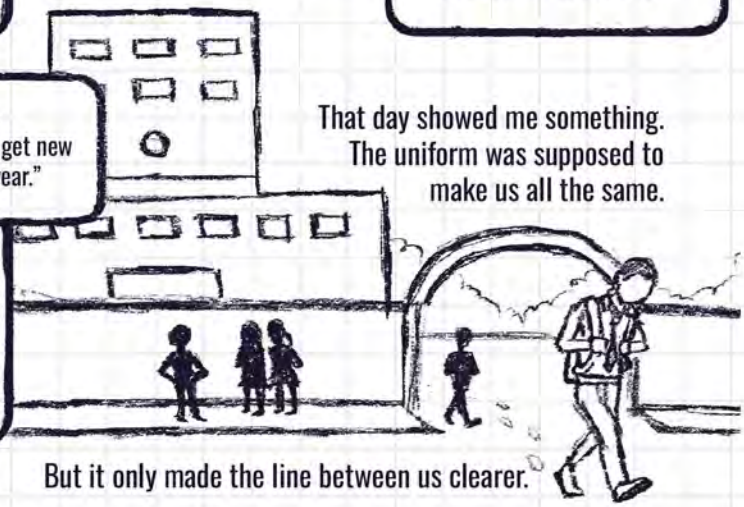
First period, emergency assembly. "Uniforms were stolen," they said.



"We know who it is."

They didn't need proof. Just our postcode, our lunch status. Our timing.

That day showed me something. The uniform was supposed to make us all the same.



But it only made the line between us clearer.

Beyond anti-racism

Understanding Schools as Systems of Dehumanisation

Inequity in education is often framed too narrowly. Schools are seen as neutral, albeit imperfect, spaces; fixable, with better policies, more representation, or anti-racist training. This framing misses a fundamental truth: schools are part of a system of dehumanisation. The daily experiences of young people and educators—whether through rigid discipline policies, exclusionary practices, or deficit narratives—are not just unfortunate side effects; they are baked into the design of the system itself.

Why we are not an anti-racist charity

At Class 13, we are often asked whether we are an anti-racist charity. The assumption is that because we talk about race, inequity, and injustice, our work must focus on racial disparities alone. But the education system, like many other institutions, perpetuates oppressive* systems, a system which harms everyone. We understand that no single issue can be tackled in isolation (Lorde, 1984). The system forces us to confront multiple, overlapping systems of harm.

> **Oppression is the culmination of formal, informal, interpersonal, and cultural structures and practices that restrict freedom, safety, and resources for some, while compounding the social and institutional power of others. In the process, it degrades the humanity of everyone.*

Current attempts to make schools anti-racist, feminist, or trauma-informed, when disconnected from an intersectional understanding will remain fertile ground for racism and allow other forms of discrimination to take root.

More than training

Malcolm X once said, "Racism is like the Cadillac car; every year they bring out a new model" (1964), meaning that racism is constantly adapting and therefore a permanent feature of society (Bell, 1992; Warmington, 2020).

This is why, we believe an understanding of whiteness* is important. We reject the idea that racism can be trained out of individuals (Andrews, 2023). This individualisation is not accidental; it reflects what philosopher Charles Mills (2007) called an "epistemology of ignorance" — a purposeful, system-wide forgetting.

Whiteness survives by keeping structural violence hidden, replacing accountability with awareness-raising and personal reflection. Whiteness is not born out of personal bias. It is:

- **A systemic force** embedded in institutions.
- **An organising principle** shaping how schools function at every level.

> **Whiteness is not about individual identity—it is an organising system of power. It is gendered, racialised, and classed, dictating who is granted autonomy, whose behaviour is normalised, and whose knowledge is valued.*

Increased proximity to whiteness expands a person's autonomy and, in turn, their humanity. This is why misogyny persists in schools despite the fact that 70% of the workforce are women. And it is why simply increasing the diversity of the workforce will not, on its own, challenge inequity. Representation without structural change merely decorates the system, even those with lived experience are made agents of the same harm.

"Whack-a-mole" anti-racism

The dominant approach to anti-racism in schools is **reactive**. When racism 'shows up' schools scramble to address the incident. This is what Paul Gorski (2019) calls the **"whack-a-mole" approach:** responding to individual acts of racism without ever questioning the conditions that make them inevitable. Schools are often encouraged to adopt carceral zero-tolerance policies to interpersonal racism, such as:

- the racist comment made in class;
- advocating against the exclusion of a Black student for the same behaviour that earns a white student a warning;
- the ~~micro~~aggressions* that chip away at a racialised teacher's sense of belonging.

> **What may seem ~~micro~~ to the perpetrator is, for the recipient, part of a relentless pattern — a death by a thousand cuts.*

These moments are real. They matter. But this approach doesn't go upstream to interrogate the practices and structures that dehumanise and produce racial harm in the first place. Instead, the system offers guides for whiteness that focus on feelings over power. These approaches comfort those complicit, allowing institutions to claim progress while leaving the core structures of harm intact.

Did you know ?

"Three-fifths of a human" refers to the U.S. Constitution's Three-Fifths Compromise, where enslaved people were counted as three-fifths of a person to determine state representation in Congress.

More than anti-racism

At Class 13, we do not believe in training racism out of individuals. We do not believe that adding representation into the workforce or curriculum is enough. We do not believe that more training, more policies, or more punitive responses will ever be a substitute for fundamentally reimagining education.

A system that polices girls' bodies, dictates when young people can go to the toilet, or removes an item of clothing is not a system built on equity—it is a system built on control. It cannot be anti-racist, feminist, or trauma-informed if it continues to deny young people their full humanity. And to deny even a fraction of a young person's humanity is to deny their humanity altogether. **A person who is three fifiths human is *still* not human at all.**

Beyond this generation

This is not *just* about the young people in schools today. As they will become the educators and leaders of the future. If they experience schools that deny their humanity, they will either replicate that harm or spend their lives unlearning it. Imagine if they never had to unlearn it. Imagine if the next generation of teachers had only known schools that affirmed their worth. If they had never sat in classrooms where their identity and basic needs were seen as a problem to be managed.

This is not about fixing schools. It is about building something entirely different. A world where education is built on equity, humanity, and possibility. That is what we are fighting for. That is who we are, we are not here to make schools kinder. We are here to make them just.

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Welcome to the maze

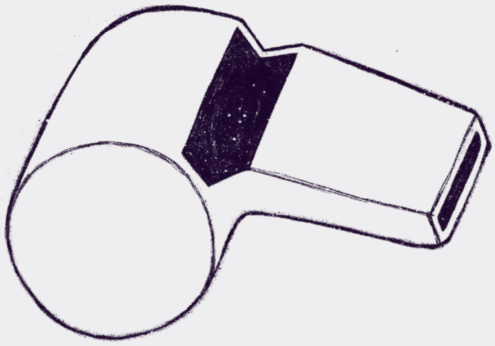
The sad truth is schools today are not designed for humans to flourish, they are designed for compliance. From the moment young people walk through the gates, they are subject to a regime of control that chips away at their autonomy. Rules govern how they dress, speak, move, and even when they can access basic needs like using the toilet. This culture prioritises control over connection, uniformity over individuality, and submission over curiosity. What was once thought of as a space for radical possibility has become a site of ***daily policing.*** *This doesn't just stifle learning—it distorts every part of school life, from young people's wellbeing to teacher morale.*

Dehumanisation* as daily practice

> ***Dehumanisation** is the process of denying someone their full humanity—treating them as objects to control rather than people to understand, relate to, or respect.*

Many seemingly innocuous practices in schools are actually dehumanising and therefore harmful. As an example nearly half of young people report being denied access to toilets during the school day. Over a third avoid drinking water to escape the embarrassment of asking (Eric, 2025). Children as young as five develop UTIs. Teachers' access is also restricted. We've heard examples of teachers keeping prescriptions ready for their next infection. Bodily autonomy is treated not as a right, but as a privilege.

Uniform policies are another form of control—reinforcing gendered, racialised, and classed expectations under the guise of discipline and aspiration. Young people, particularly girls, are taught their clothing is a "distraction" reinforcing narratives around gender-based harm.



These policies don't just echo the logic of victim-blaming—they are victim-blaming. It is no surprise, then, that **37% of female students report experiencing sexual harassment in school** (UK Feminista and NEU, 2017), or worse still, that the lasting effect of gender-based violence experienced in school linger well into adulthood, often through victims being blamed by schools' own policies and practices (Everyone's Invited, n.d.).

Even regulating one's own body becomes a struggle: in some schools, removing a blazer in sweltering classrooms is forbidden without explicit permission. Imagine trying to learn while dehydrated and overheating and then being blamed for failing to focus. Schools do not function as neutral spaces, they act as training grounds in learning to endure harm.

From a contextual safeguarding perspective, these practices matter. Outside of school gates, denying someone access to water, toilets, or temperature regulation would be considered abuse. Within this logic, there are only two positions—you are either being harmed, or witnessing harm.

And we know too well that witnessing abuse is abuse (Barnardo's, n.d.). This is why we say: Schools are harmful and violent places, for children, and for teachers.

Teachers trapped in the same system

This logic of control harms teachers too. Increasingly, they are being asked to follow behaviour scripts telling them what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. Framed as 'consistency,' this rigidity strips away autonomy and erodes the relationships that make teaching meaningful. This judgement is key to safeguarding. Without it, educators can't respond with the nuance needed when rigid policies fall short, leaving young people more vulnerable to harm.

The system is losing good educators, not because they are uncommitted, but because the work they are asked to do no longer aligns with the values that brought them to the profession. Instead of nurturing minds, teachers are tasked with policing bodies. Instead of building trust, they enforce compliance.

Choose your own adventure:

Where will you go first?

In a system this broken, it's hard to know where to begin. Class 13 recognises the three core challenges facing schools today—but we do not see them as separate. These are not isolated issues; they are interlocking forces that sustain inequity. All are symptoms of a very poor theory that ends in opportunity and hope.

You don't need to follow a set path. Each section offers a different entry point: one might take you through the challenges facing young people, another through the structures that push them out, and another through the pressure placed on teachers.

Read in whatever order feels most urgent to you. However you choose to explore, you'll begin to see how these forces are connected—and why they demand a collective response.

Mental health and wellbeing of young people	Disproportionate school exclusions	Teacher recruitment and retention
Continue	**Go to page 19**	**Go to page 20**

The mental health and wellbeing of young people

Schools have become increasingly punitive in their pursuit of results—a response to the erosion of meaningful relationships within education. Where trust weakens, control tightens. Without relationships, systems fall back on rules. As a result, young people's mental health has deteriorated. Rigid expectations, relentless discipline, and high-pressure environments fuel anxiety and distress. According to Young Minds (2023) academic pressure, behaviour policies, and bullying are now key drivers of the declining mental health of young people in schools.

Despite growing evidence from organisations such as the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2023) that punitive behaviour policies actively cause harm, many schools have not changed course. They've doubled down, tightening rules. Reinforced by organisations offering resilience programmes that ask young people to adapt to harmful conditions, rather than transforming the conditions.

Where would you like to go next ?

Explore how mentoring is used as a band-aid solution	Explore how exclusion fuels anxiety - for children and the people who love them.
Go to page 18	**Go to page 21**

Mentoring cannot fix a broken system

I know from personal experience that mentoring cannot undo systemic harm. Supporting one young person at a time does nothing to change the conditions that harm entire cohorts. A programme for "at-risk" Year 9 boys does nothing for the Year 7 or 8 boys walking the same path, facing the same injustices. Schools continue to function in ways that create distress, treating harm as an individual failing rather than a structural issue.

Looking back, I can see how my own practice reinforced the very systems I wanted to challenge. I worked with young people—especially those who looked like me—on anger management and emotional regulation. But what I didn't address, either out of fear or pragmatism, was how their racialisation itself was shaping their school experiences.

I worried that if I named the injustice they faced—if I gave them the language to call it what it was—it might lead to even harsher punishment within an oppressive system. I also feared that by giving them that language, I'd be placing the responsibility for change on their shoulders, asking them to challenge a system they had no power to escape. So, in an effort to protect them, I leaned into the "keep your head down, work twice as hard" narrative that had been passed down to me.

But I see it now: when harm is systemic, working harder doesn't change the system. It just ensures that inequity remains untouched.

The exclusion rate and its disproportionality

Exclusion is not just a punishment—it is a systemic failure.

Rather than adapting to meet young people's needs, schools force them to adapt—or remove them when they can't. The result? Decades of relatively unchanged exclusion data for racialised children, children entitled to free school meals, disabled students, those with support needs, and those experiencing poor mental health (DfE, 2023).

Gillborn (2008) argues these patterns are not new. And they are not accidental. The disproportionality is wholly predictable. But this isn't a conspiracy with clandestine meetings in the staff room; it's policy functioning as intended. Racism, ableism, classism: schools don't just reflect social hierarchies, they legitimise them. Racial inequities persist because of an embedded ideology baked into the everyday practices, cultures, and expectations of schools. Instead of addressing the systemic conditions that make school unliveable, many schools rely on exclusion as a behaviour management tool—to quietly remove 'difficult' students from their rolls. As the Pinball Kids report (RSA, 2020) warns, exclusions are not just rising—they are becoming the default response. A recent longitudinal study confirms what many already know: **poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of exclusion** (Ford et al., 2020). Exclusions do not fix the problem. They **deepen it.** They disrupt learning, isolate young people, and reinforce the very conditions that led to distress in the first place. They compound the challenges faced by marginalised young people and their families—ensuring those furthest from power stay in their place.

Where would you like to go next ?

See how inclusion hubs mirror exclusions without calling it by name **Continue**	**Discover how the exclusion crisis drains teachers - and drives them out.** **Go to page 20**

The false promise of internal alternative provision

In response to growing criticism of formal exclusions, many schools have introduced internal alternative provisions (IAPs) as a 'solution'. But instead of challenging the logic of exclusion, IAPs risk becoming a new way to achieve the same result.

The catch-all term IAP—'Nurture Unit', 'Inclusion Hub', 'Isolation Room', 'Unit', 'Base', 'Bridge' (The Difference, n.d.)—is an educational sleight of hand. While some schools use these terms to describe genuine support spaces, others quietly segregate students without the transparency of a formal exclusion process.

These unmonitored spaces bear a troubling resemblance to the Educationally Subnormal units of the 1970s (Coard, 1971), where racialised young people were removed from mainstream education under the guise of support, with little oversight or accountability.

Both The Forgotten Children report (2018) and the Internal Alternative Provision Impact Evaluation (EEF, n.d.) caution that many IAPs function as little more than holding spaces for students labelled 'challenging'. While they may appear less severe than exclusion, their purpose is often the same: removing students deemed too disruptive for the mainstream classroom.

Without standardised oversight, students can be placed in IAPs indefinitely, with no clear learning structure or reintegration plan. As a result, IAPs contribute to 'hidden exclusions', where young people disappear from mainstream education without official records or appeal rights.

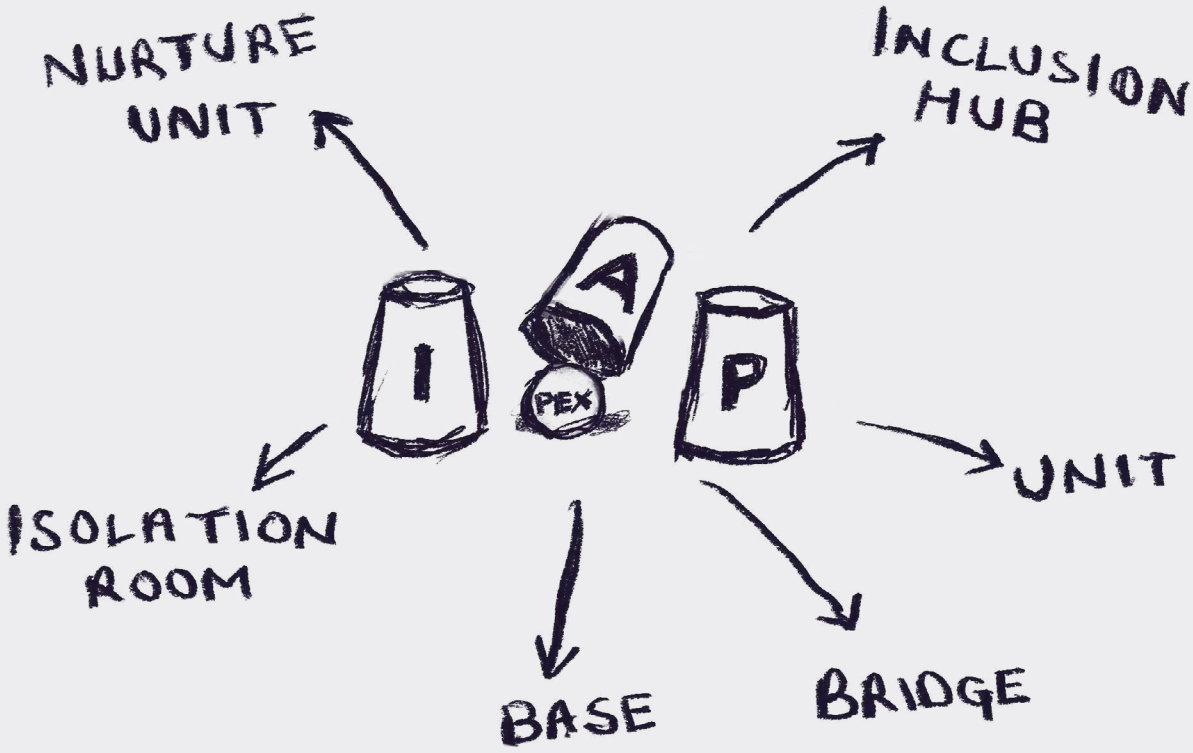
With that said, standardised oversight hasn't prevented harm to young people historically, so believing it will work now, without addressing the underlying logic of exclusion, edges close to the definition of insanity. It's not just the structure that needs scrutiny, but the assumptions it rests on.

Challenging the logic of exclusion

IAPs do not disrupt the logic of exclusion—they reinforce it, making it harder to see and even harder to challenge. The belief that certain young people do not belong in mainstream education remains intact. The problem is still framed as the child's inability to conform, rather than the system's failure to accommodate them.

The irony is that the very features that define a 'good' IAP—a clear purpose, strong relationships, and tailored support—are exactly what mainstream schools should already be doing. Expecting IAPs to flourish inside the broken system that created them is wishful thinking.

Instead of questioning how to make IAPs successful, we should be asking: ***Why aren't schools focused on inclusion for all instead of attempting the impossible task of making exclusion inclusive?***



The teacher recruitment and retention crisis

The current education system is hostile for educators. Many enter the profession with a passion for teaching and connection. But instead of being supported to build relationships, they are conscripted into a system that prioritises compliance over care. The role becomes one of enforcement. Teachers are expected to juggle unmanageable workloads, navigate under-resourced environments, and enforce behaviour policies that devalue connection in favour of control. The result is burnout, disillusionment, and high attrition—leaving behind a profession in crisis and a workforce too exhausted to sustain itself.

According to the National Foundation for Educational Research (2024), teacher working hours surged during the 2022/23 academic year. As a result, the number of teachers considering leaving the profession citing behaviour management pressures as a major driver of stress increased (Education Support, 2024).

Where would you like to go next?

See how constant "resets" mask a lack of meaningful change **Continue**	What happens when teacher turnover breaks the bonds young people rely on? **Go to page 17**

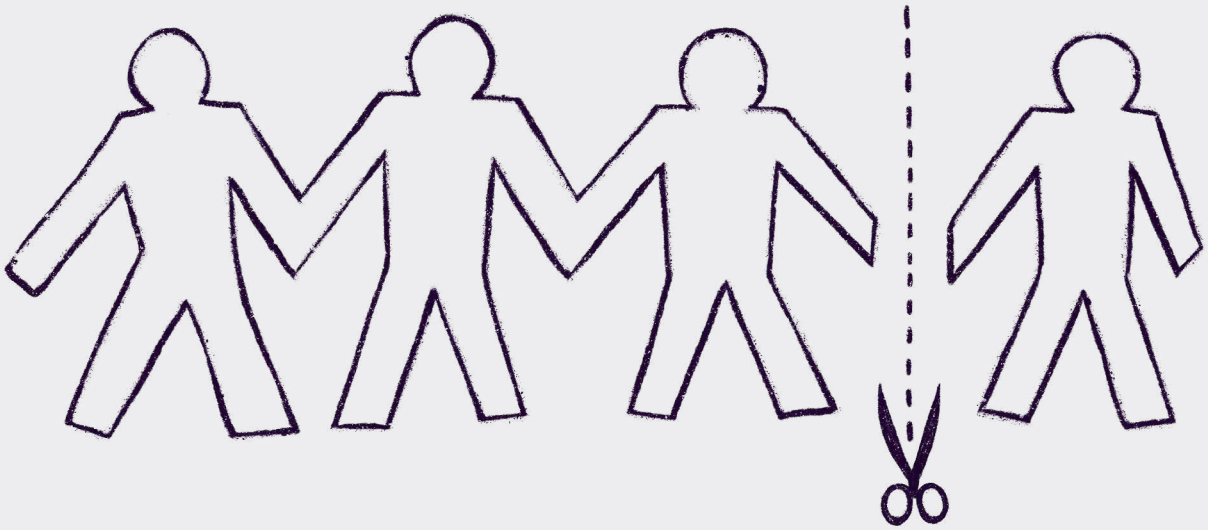
Respond, reset, repeat

The current system leaves little time to invest in building relationships, trust, or connection. Schools continue to implement practices that were originally designed as short-term fixes—responses to specific incidents—but these practices quickly become permanent features of school life.

Take line-ups, for example. Many schools ask young people to line up outside classrooms to encourage calm transitions and prevent pushing in corridors. But over time, this becomes a daily ritual of control. Mornings begin with calls of, "8C, we're not going in until you're all quiet!" or, "This line makes me happy—well done, Miss."

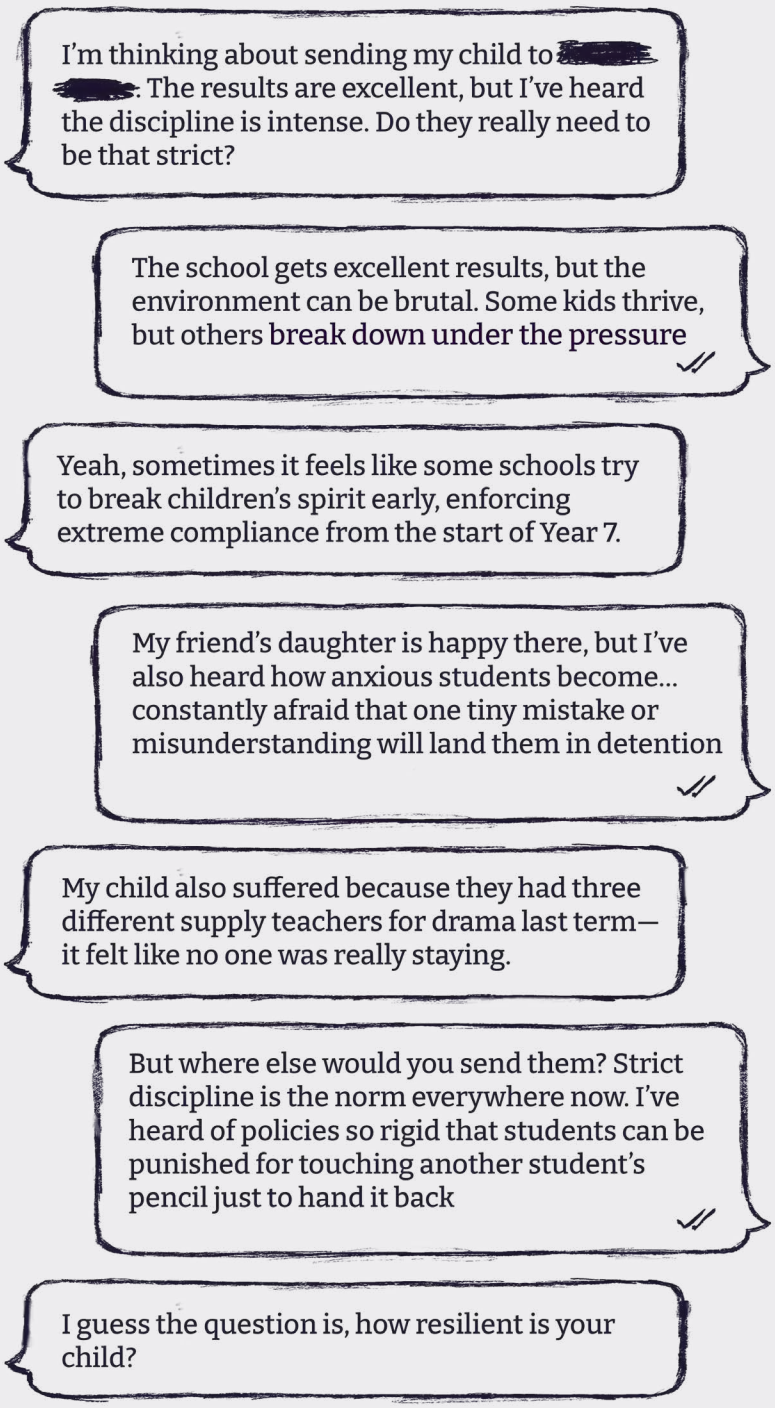
But what does this actually teach young people—or staff? The original aim may have been to foster calm. But instead of fading out over time, it becomes a performance of control. Young people are never given the opportunity to practise moving with care and agency. What could have been a scaffold for learning becomes a barrier to belonging.

This is the pattern. Schools tighten discipline as a default response to disengagement. The result? A constant cycle of termly resets—each one promising a fresh start, but never addressing the deeper conditions that drive disconnection in the first place.



The parents' perspective

We've heard countless versions of this conversation — whispered at school gates, traded over text, shared in desperation.



Where would you like to go next?

What happens when families' power is undermined? **Go to page 19**	**What happens when families don't trust schools?** **Go to page 20**	**Move forward to see how we challenge the system itself in *Too Sick to Reform*** **Continue**

Too sick to reform

The three core challenges facing education today—declining mental health among young people, rising and disproportionate school exclusions, and the teacher recruitment and retention crisis—are not separate issues. Nor are they policy failures. They are the interconnected, predictable outcomes of a system that, from its earliest iterations, was never designed to nurture curiosity, but to sort, control, and discipline. They are symptoms of a system too sick to cure with reform. **It must be transformed.** The question is not whether the system needs to change, but whether we are willing to challenge the ideology that created it.

According to the report Understanding Teacher Retention (RAND Europe, 2021), while salary plays a role, what matters most to teachers is the culture they work in. Many are willing to trade higher pay for a school environment that values wellbeing, reduces pressure, and offers meaningful growth. Teachers aren't leaving because they don't care. They're leaving because what the work has come to represent is misaligned with their purpose.

This signals hope. Many educators, leaders, and policymakers want something different. They want to build environments where young people are affirmed, supported, and seen as inherently valuable—not as problems to be controlled.

At Class 13, we believe the time has come to reject the ideology that narrows these corridors in the first place. The burden cannot remain on young people or teachers to 'build resilience' in the face of systemic harm. We must dismantle the barriers that constrain them.

Schools must move beyond the belief that control and punishment are necessary conditions for learning. They must embrace a radically different vision—one that centres relationships, wellbeing, and intellectual freedom over compliance.

This shift is not just possible. It is necessary. *Without it, we cannot hope to transform the state of play for teachers, or for the children and young people they are responsible for.*

The People vs Deficit Ideology

Public education has pulled off what Arciniega (1977) called "the perfect crime". So seamlessly executed, fingerprints are nowhere to be found—yet the consequences are everywhere: in exclusion rates, punitive discipline, and the silent distress of young people and teachers alike. Most don't even recognise it as a crime. Instead, blame is pinned on teachers, families, and young people themselves. Class 13 identifies this crime for what it truly is: Deficit Ideology.

Deficit ideology: the perfect crime

A perfect crime leaves no suspect—only victims convinced of their own guilt. Deficit ideology operates in precisely this way. Though rarely acknowledged in British education, its damage is widespread. It quietly shifts blame from systems onto the shoulders of marginalised young people, convincing us that their struggles stem from personal failings rather than structures built to hold them back.

It begins with victim-blaming—the first of six defining features (Valencia, 2010). It's the logic behind asking "But what was she wearing?" when discussing violence against women, or declaring "Caribbean families don't care about education" in response to educational disparities.

It's the ultimate trick: a system that harms young people, then whispers, *"This is your fault".*

The cover-up: how deficit ideology hides in plain sight

Like any good con artist, deficit ideology doesn't announce itself. It masquerades as common sense, slipping quietly into the language of policy, the logic of interventions, and the stories we tell about success and failure.

Using a tactic Valencia calls heterodoxy—or as we refer to it negative progression—it creates the illusion of forward motion while keeping inequity firmly in place. It's like ordering something that looks brilliant on Wish.com—a sleek, powerful intervention promising transformation—only for it to arrive two months late, doll-sized, and completely useless. It sounds like progress. But it was always a trick.

It tells us:

- *"We're building resilience in young people,"* when really we are championing their ability to endure harm that should never have existed in the first place.
- *"We're creating targeted interventions,"* while upholding systems that exclude, then blame individuals for failing within them.
- *"We're closing the gap,"* while reinforcing the very structures that created that gap.

And like all good scams, it has an excellent defence and expensive legal teams. When challenged, it hides behind pseudoscience—projects branded as "evidence-based" that aim to help young people overcome barriers, instead of questioning why those barriers are there at all. Deficit ideology doesn't stay in education. It's threaded through wider systems of oppression—from colonisation and enslavement, to inequities in housing, health, and justice (Gorski, 2011). And all the while, it stays undetected. Unquestioned. Uninterrupted.

Valencia's 6 characteristics of deficit thinking:

- **Victim Blaming:** Attributing disparities to individual or family traits, overlooking systemic issues.
- **Pseudoscience:** Using research to support deficit assumptions giving them a veneer of legitimacy.
- **Temporal Changes:** Evolving to fit current political climates while maintaining the same harmful focus.
- **Educability:** Assuming certain groups are inherently less capable due to cultural, class, or gender-based biases.
- **Oppression:** Reinforcing power structures by focusing on individual 'fixes' rather than systemic change.
- **Heterodoxy:** Presenting interventions as progressive while subtly maintaining deficit-based perspectives.

These characteristics are not just academic observations—they are evidence of an ongoing injustice.

Remember these with this mnemonic:

very poor theory that ends in opportunity and hope.

The red herring: strengths-based approaches

Every crime has its diversion—a misleading clue, designed to send investigators in the wrong direction. In education, that red herring is the strengths or asset based approach. At first glance, strengths-based frameworks seem like the antidote to deficit ideology, focusing on what young people can do, rather than what they lack. But look closer, and the scheme falls apart. The problem? Not all strengths are valued equally. Deficit ideology and strengths-based approaches both accept the same flawed premise: **that worth must be measured against a dominant standard.** This doesn't challenge inequity. It simply changes the terms of assimilation.

Exhibit A

Multilingualism is an "asset" when it sounds like French or Mandarin, but a "barrier" when it sounds like Somali or Jamaican Creole.

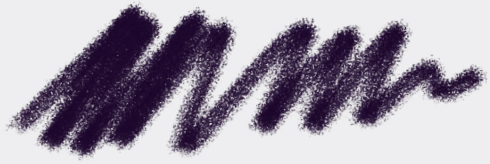
Deficit ideology says:
"These are all the ways you are not like the successful group, and that is what holds you back."

Strengths-based approaches respond:
"Let's build on all the ways you are like the successful group."

You may be welcomed to the table—but only if you leave parts of yourself at the door. Those who conform are rewarded with fragile acceptance. Those who resist are cast out. The message is clear: this is what happens when you refuse to play the game. As James Baldwin (1969) once testified:

> ***"What whiteness has always tried to do is accommodate me into a system which means my own death. You want me to become an accomplice to my own murder. That's what you really mean by integration."***

Deficit ideology does not simply exclude—it co-opts. It demands not only that young people adapt, but that they participate in the very system designed to erase them.



Resisting deficit thinking about language in the pursuit of linguistic justice

Ian Cushing, senior lecturer in critical applied linguistics, Manchester Metropolitan University

Between 2022-2024 I conducted ethnographic-orientated fieldwork which involved regular visits to a secondary school in south Manchester. During each visit I spent time talking to a Black Caribbean boy, Benjamin, who was in his twelfth and final year of compulsory education. He was apathetic about school, and told me that school had never been a place where he felt truly comfortable in his own linguistic and racial identity. It was clear that his 12 years' experiences of school had taught him one thing: that his language and his knowledge of language had been ignored and overlooked. When I spoke to his teachers, they described his language in terms of things that it allegedly did not have – he 'lacked academic vocabulary', 'struggled to speak appropriately', and 'needed extra support with his writing'.

Yet outside of school, Benjamin's linguistic abilities were central to his emerging profile as a writer. Inspired by Black literary sagas such as Roots, he had recently completed a script for television which charted the intergenerational lives of four Black families living through Windrush, the Brixton uprisings, Thatcherism, austerity, Brexit, and Black Lives Matter mobilisations. The script made heavy use of Black vernacular, with Benjamin meticulously researching shifting temporal linguistic styles to sonically represent different decades of Black life in Britain. Using YouTube tutorials, he was teaching himself Jamaican Creole in his efforts to forge linguistic connections with his ancestors and reclaim a core aspect of his heritage. Put simply, Benjamin had remarkable linguistic dexterity, acumen, and knowledge, but over 12 years, the institutional boundaries of school had done an efficient job of quietly and slowly suppressing it.

Like so many other children from minoritised backgrounds, Benjamin's school perceived his linguistic abilities in terms of a deficit. This long-standing, stubborn, and pervasive ideology is a victim blaming narrative which locates alleged faults within marginalised individuals, and in doing so, deflects attention away from the broader systems of intersectional injustice. As part of this ideology, marginalised children are routinely told that the modification of their own language is in their own interests, and is a viable means for them to undo the discrimination they face in society and experience social justice.

But whilst deficit thinking about language is pervasive, it has always been met with resistance. From Bernard Coard's 1971 exposé of the racist deficit thinking underpinning so-called 'Schools for the Educationally Subnormal' through to contemporary efforts by teachers to combat linguistic injustice, there is a rich history of communities, activists, and teachers pushing back against dominant discourses of linguistic deficit.

What might it mean for children like Benjamin to experience linguistic justice? Educating teachers about linguistic variation is a start. But that is not an adequate solution. True linguistic justice in schools is not simply about training teachers to be more accepting and aware of different linguistic practices. Linguistic justice is about challenging and transforming inequitable systems. In the work of teachers I have collaborated with, the most powerful anti-deficit efforts were those that drew on the principles of cross-movement solidarity to forge connections between language and other social justice struggles, such as decolonisation, racial justice, and disability justice. Linguistic justice is about rejecting ideologically-laden labels such as 'non-standard' or 'non-academic' and questioning to what extent these reflect actual linguistic reality. Linguistic justice is about focusing on the linguistic strengths that all children are already in possession of, rather than trying to fix what is allegedly broken. Linguistic justice is about grassroots organising and collaborative efforts between teachers, children, communities, activists, and academics. Linguistic justice is a long-term, slow project which remains to be realised, but a world into which we already have glimpses.

The witnesses:
how deficit ideology harms us all

We would now like to call our expert witness: *The Power and Control Wheel.*

Developed by the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in the 1980s, this widely recognised framework is used globally in domestic violence prevention, safeguarding, and trauma-informed practice. The wheel shows how abuse operates not just through physical violence, but through patterns of coercion— **intimidation, emotional manipulation, isolation, and the denial of autonomy.**

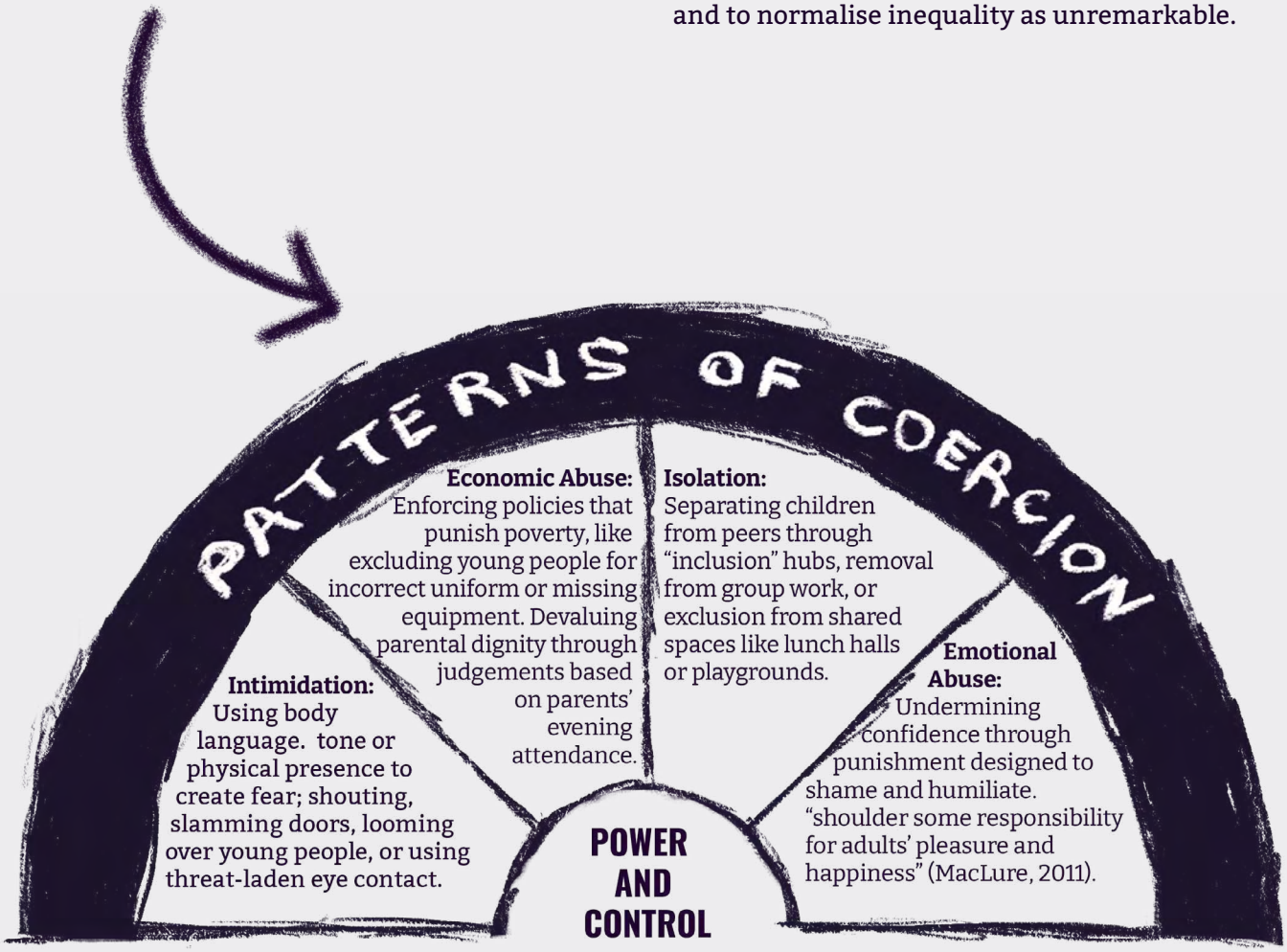
These tactics don't only exist in homes or adult relationships. They show up—quietly, routinely—in our schools. Subtly in primary school when we say "When you do that, it makes me sad".

Below, we adapt the Power and Control Wheel to expose how sanctioned forms of institutional violence operate in schools.

These are not signs of a system breaking down. They are examples of how school systems, as currently designed, can sanction harm in the name of order—codified in policy, enforced in practice, and justified under the banner of 'good behaviour'.

These practices don't teach discipline. They model domination. They show that power doesn't need to explain itself. That control is its own justification. That resistance will be punished—and emotional compliance rewarded. And the harm doesn't end with the child being disciplined. Even those who witness it are affected. They internalise the message: *this is how authority works.*

Research shows that witnessing abuse can be as psychologically damaging as experiencing it directly (Margolin & Vickerman, 2007). In schools, this means entire peer groups are shaped by the presence of sanctioned control—learning to suppress their voice, to comply without question, and to normalise inequality as unremarkable.



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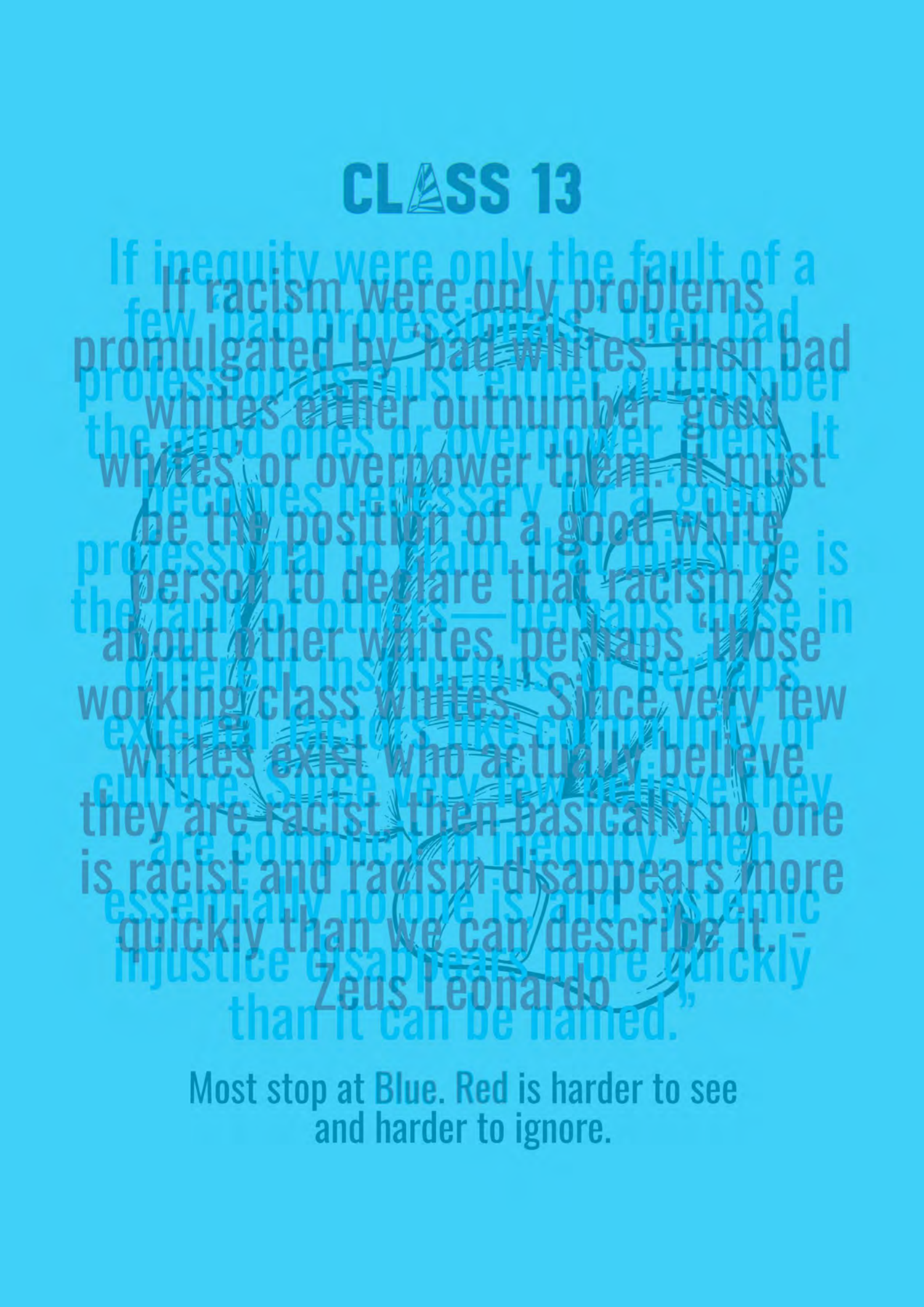
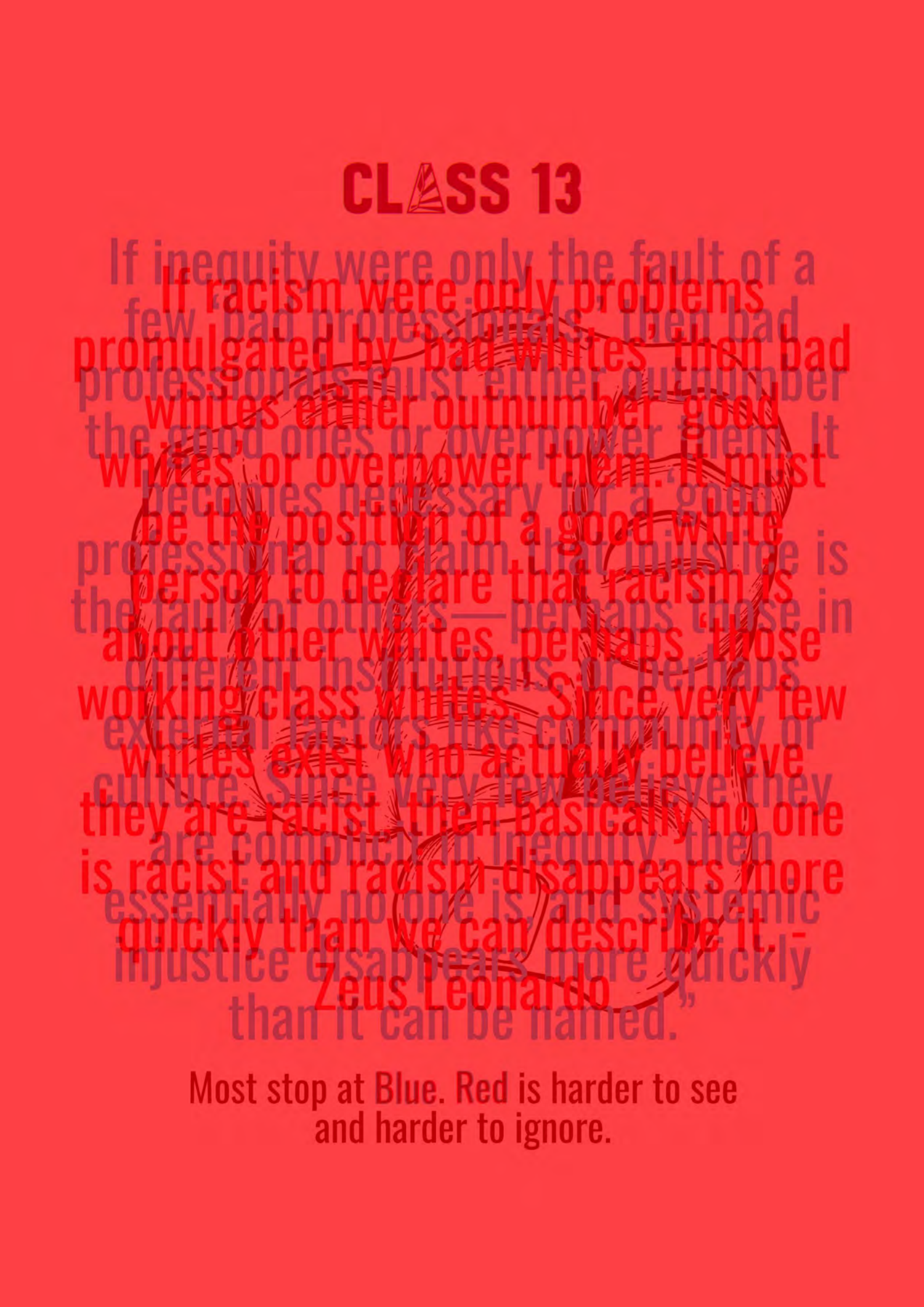


If racism were only problems promulgated by "bad whites" then bad whites either outnumber good whites, or overpower them. It must be the position of a good white person to declare that racism is about other whites, perhaps "those working class whites." Since very few whites exist who actually believe they are racist, then basically no one is racist and racism disappears more quickly than we can describe it.

Zeus Leonardo

Most stop at Blue. Red is harder to see and harder to ignore.

CLASS 13



If racism were only problems promulgated by bad whites, then bad whites either outnumber good whites or overpower them. It must be the position of a good white person to declare that racism is about other whites, perhaps those working class whites. Since very few whites exist who actually believe they are racist, then basically no one is racist and racism disappears more quickly than we can describe it. –

Zeus Leonardo

If inequity were only the fault of a few bad professionals, then bad professionals must either outnumber the good ones or overpower them. It becomes necessary for a good professional to claim that injustice is the fault of others—perhaps those in different institutions or perhaps external factors like community or culture. Since very few believe they are complicit in inequity, then essentially no one is, and systemic injustice disappears more quickly than it can be named.”

Most stop at Blue. Red is harder to see and harder to ignore.

Unmasking the perpetrators: ideology, not individuals

A crime this seamless cannot be the work of a few bad actors. It is not a failing of individual teachers, school leaders, or policymakers. It is the predictable result of an ideology that has gone unchallenged.

This ideology justifies harm by normalising it, making dehumanisation appear necessary, even virtuous. As in abusive relationships, victims internalise their suffering as deserved, while perpetrators rationalise their actions as being in the victim's best interest. Instead of ***I do this because I love you, I do this because it's necessary for learning***.

These are not justifications. They are excuses. They are the narratives that uphold an ideology designed to control, punish, and dehumanise.

The moral reckoning: when is it ever justifiable?

When is it ever acceptable to treat a child as less than a human being?

This question is uncomfortable—but it's also unavoidable. We must answer it honestly. Because if we accept dehumanisation as a necessary condition of education, then we have to ask: **What is education really for?**

The comparison between school and abuse isn't made lightly. No doubt, as a reader, this doesn't feel comfortable. But discomfort is not the same as inaccuracy. We are rightly outraged by statistics about how many women experience coercive control, intimidation, and harm. We recognise these as forms of abuse—not because they leave bruises, but because they violate dignity, autonomy, and safety. And yet, when those same tactics are enacted in schools, they are rarely seen for what they are.

Bettina Love (2016) calls this *spirit murdering*—the systemic, institutionalised, and often racialised harm that strips Black children of safety, inclusion, imagination, and belonging. This is not a metaphor. It is sanctioned abuse, written into policies, normalised through practice, and enforced in the name of education. If we wouldn't accept this treatment in a home or at work, we cannot justify it in a classroom.

The closing argument: beyond interventions, toward transformation

People of the jury:

We are often told the solution lies in interventions—programmes to teach young people how to manage their emotions, regulate their behaviour, and "cope" better with the system. But we do not believe young people are the ones who need fixing. **Young people are not broken.** The system is. Class 13 offers a different approach.

We are not here to tweak the margins or soften the blow. We are here to challenge the very logic that allows deficit ideology to survive. Because the goal isn't for young people to simply build resilience, comply, or survive within a broken system, it's to pursue justice, drive transformation, and rebuild that system with them. We must move beyond the illusion of progress and toward the reality of transformation. Not just by changing policies, but by changing the story we tell about what education is for—and who it is meant to serve. As James Baldwin (1962) wrote: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." This is our moment to face it. If schools can be sites of harm, they can also be sites of healing.

You now hold the evidence. The testimony is complete.

As you go to deliberate, ask yourself not what would make schools more manageable. But what would make them more human?

Start here:

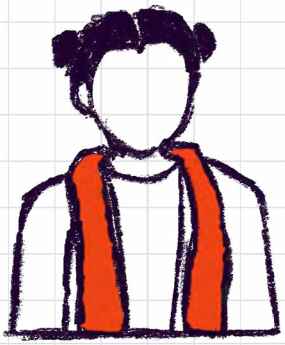
Do you feel you have worked hard to achieve success?

→ **No** → **Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.**

↓ **Yes**

↓ Does systemic inequity exist in education?

→ **Yes,** therefore education is not a meritocracy.

→ 

You are bell hooks

bell hooks was a renowned cultural critic, feminist theorist, and social activist whose work **explores the intersections of race, gender, and class oppression.** She argues that disparities in education and society are **not due to individual failings but are the result of systemic inequities** embedded in institutions designed to uphold **white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal power structures.**

↓ **No**

↓ **Do we live in meritocracy?**

→ **No**

↓ **Yes**

→ **Why do disparities persist across groups defined by race, class, gender?**

It's systemic ← | → **It's biological**

You are Paulo Freire

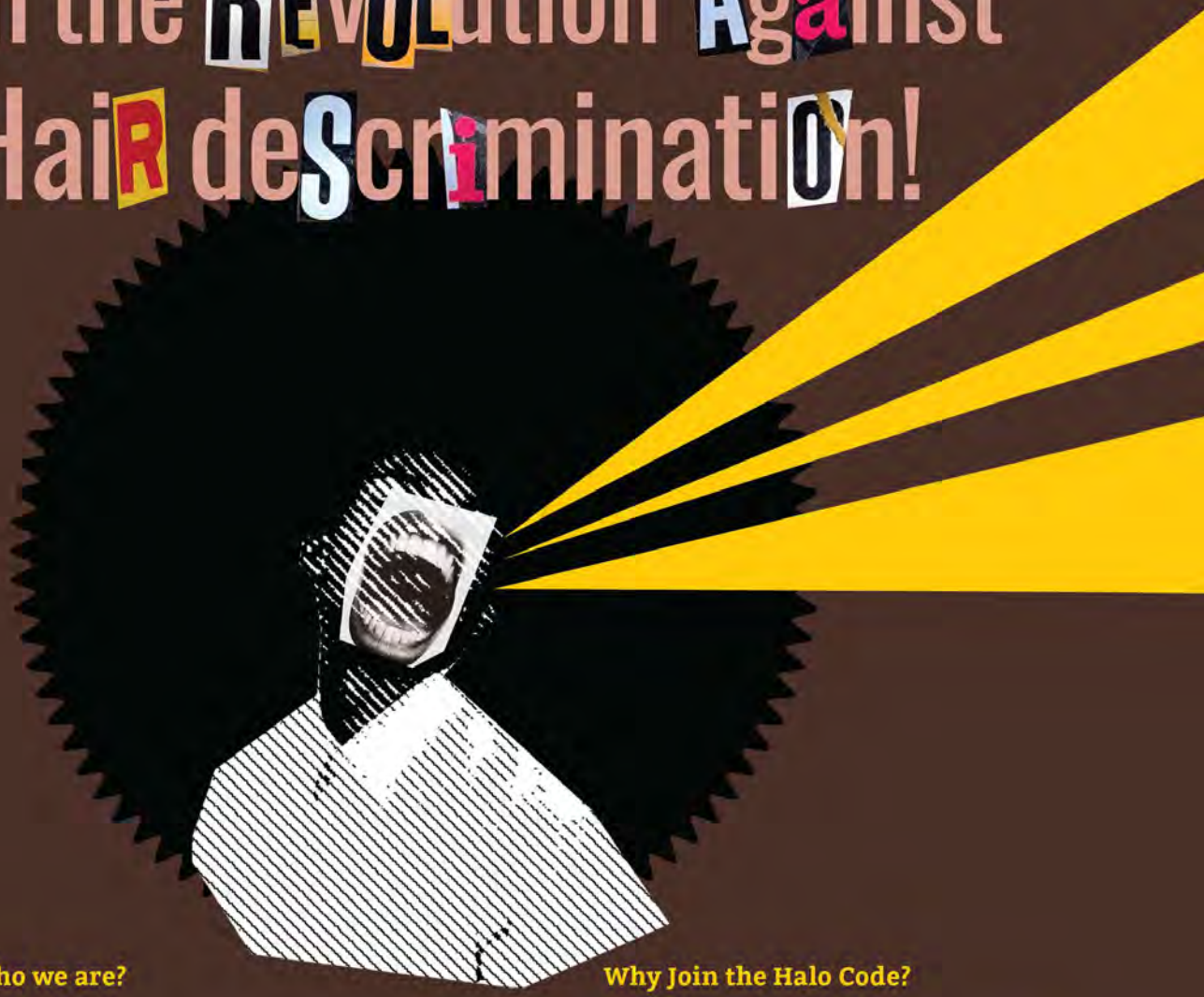
Paulo was a Brazilian educator and philosopher best known for his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)*. He argued that traditional education systems are tools of oppression, designed to maintain social hierarchies by silencing marginalised voices and promoting conformity. However, Freire also believed in human agency and the potential for liberation through critical consciousness.

You are Charles Murray

Charles Murray is a political scientist and co-author of The Bell Curve (1994), a controversial book that argues that intelligence is unequally distributed across racial and socioeconomic groups. He suggests that these disparities are biological in origin, leading to the rise of a "cognitive elite" who dominate society due to their inherent intellectual abilities.

HALO
COLLECTIVE

Join the Revolution Against Hair deScrimination!



Who we are?

Halo Collective is an alliance committed to ending hair discrimination in schools and beyond.

Founded by young Black advocates, we aim to create a future where every student can embrace their natural hair with pride.

Why Join the Halo Code?

- Protect and Celebrate: Ensure your students and staff can express their cultural identities without fear.
- Stand Against Injustice: Take a proactive stand against outdated and racist policies.
- Inspire Confidence: Foster an inclusive environment that boosts self-esteem and acceptance.

Join the Halo Code today and make your school a beacon of inclusivity and respect. Together, we can end hair discrimination!

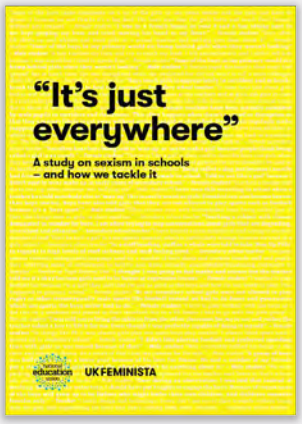
Equity review

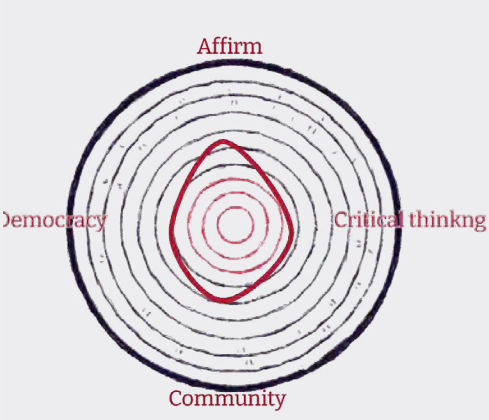
Lessons learned: progress and pitfalls

Transformative change rarely begins from scratch. At Class 13, we believe in standing on the shoulders of giants—drawing from the wealth of existing reports, policies, and practices that have sought to address inequities in education. In this section, we reflect on what has been tried, highlight what works, and critique where deficit ideology and surface-level reforms have limited the impact of well-intentioned efforts. This exploration demonstrates how we have shaped our project by learning from both the successes and the blind spots of these works.

Many reports effectively document inequity, providing compelling data, personal testimonies, and urgent calls for action. However, too often, the proposed solutions fail to interrogate the underlying ideologies that sustain these inequities. Instead of dismantling systemic power imbalances, many recommendations focus on individual-level interventions—like teacher training, behaviour management reforms, or representation increases—that tinker at the edges while leaving the core ideologies intact. These reports often assume that awareness leads to change, rather than recognising that institutions protect their hierarchies by design, not by accident.

Instead of asking whether a report is well-intentioned, we ask: does it seek to modify existing systems, or challenge the ideologies that uphold them? Does it reinforce paternalistic, top-down solutions, or does it reimagine education?





"It's just everywhere": a study on sexism in schools - and how we tackle it

By UK Feminista & National Education Union (2017)

Like a horror film where the monster is unseen but omnipresent, "It's Just Everywhere" is a damning exposé of the sexism embedded in UK schools.

What the report does well

Drawing on powerful testimony from students and teachers, the report exposes how sexism permeates school culture—from harassment to gendered stereotypes. It brings visibility to experiences often dismissed as trivial, affirming that sexism in schools is not exceptional, but routine.

Where it falls short

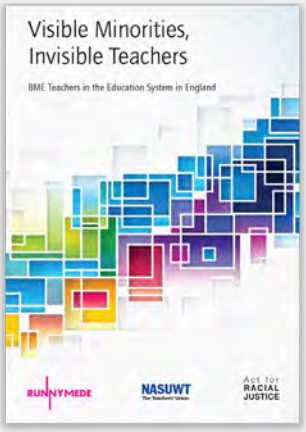
The report lacks intersectionality, overlooking how race, class, disability, and sexuality shape experiences of sexism. It highlights gender gaps in male-dominated fields but avoids asking why sexism persists in a profession dominated by women—demonstrating that representation alone is not enough. Its call for a zero-tolerance approach echoes carceral logic that often harms marginalised students and sidelines alternative discipline models rooted in care. In seeking rigid enforcement, it risks undermining both teacher autonomy and student agency—when what's needed is structural change.

Verdict

It's Just Everywhere compels schools to confront their role in normalising sexism. Yet, without an intersectional lens or systemic critique, it risks treating gender oppression as a standalone issue. If sexism is "everywhere," the solution can't be a policy patch—it must reimagine the structures through which power and exclusion operate in schools.

Visible minorities, invisible teachers: BME teachers in the education system in England

By The Runnymede Trust, NASUWT The Teachers Union & Act for Racial Justice (2017)



Like a locked door with no key, Visible Minorities, Invisible Teachers exposes how racial barriers in education keep BME teachers out of leadership, despite their qualifications and ambitions.

What the report does well

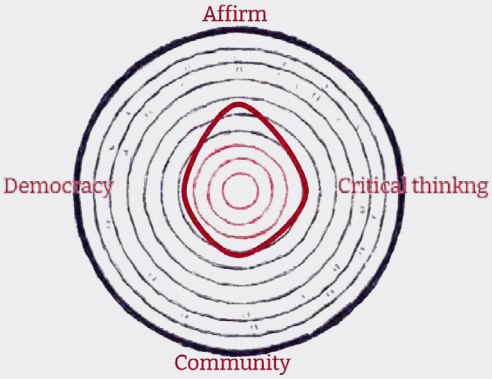
The report delivers a damning critique of racial inequity in education, showing how BME teachers face systemic barriers to recruitment, retention, and career progression. Its use of data is compelling, exposing racialised performance reviews, pay gaps, blocked leadership opportunities, and a culture of exclusion that drives BME teachers out of the profession.

Where it falls short

The report leans too heavily on representation as a solution, implying that increasing the number of BME teachers will inherently reduce racism. It doesn't interrogate the power structures that sustain exclusion, instead offering policy-driven reforms without community accountability. By excluding support staff and teaching assistants—often BME workers in precarious roles—it reinforces their invisibility. Its reliance on government-led strategies overlooks the importance of grassroots organising and places too much trust in institutions that have historically failed to deliver meaningful change.

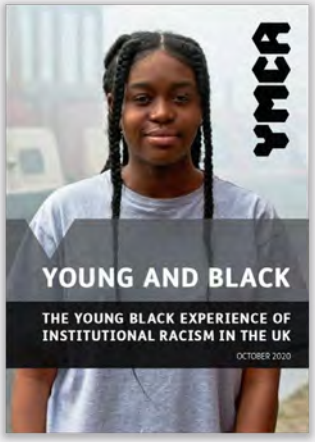
Verdict

A necessary but incomplete report. It offers a powerful critique of racial injustice in education, but without addressing the underlying power structures, policy tweaks alone won't lead to real transformation.



Young and Black: the young Black experience of institutional racism in the UK

By YMCA (2020)



Imagine a rigged game where the goalposts keep moving, Young and Black lays bare how systemic racism shapes every aspect of Black youth's lives—from school to work to mental health.

What the report does well

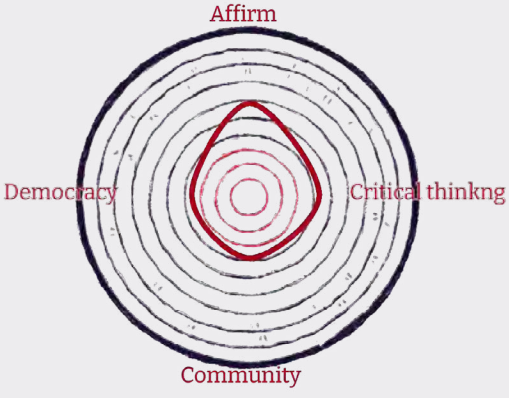
The report amplifies the voices of Black youth through first-hand testimony and clear data, offering a multi-sectoral breakdown of institutional racism. It refuses to let racism be dismissed as isolated incidents, presenting findings that are both urgent and damning—from 95% of young Black people witnessing racist language in school to 54% feeling employer bias blocks their job prospects.

Where it falls short

Despite its strengths, the report lacks a structural critique of power. It documents discrimination thoroughly but doesn't ask why institutions remain invested in racial exclusion. A striking contradiction emerges in the data: teacher perceptions were identified as the biggest barrier to Black students' success (50%), yet lack of training ranked among the lowest (28%).
Despite this, the report recommends unconscious bias training, alongside recruitment reform and educational tweaks—even though its own data suggests the issue isn't training, but the need for deeper cultural and structural change in schools.

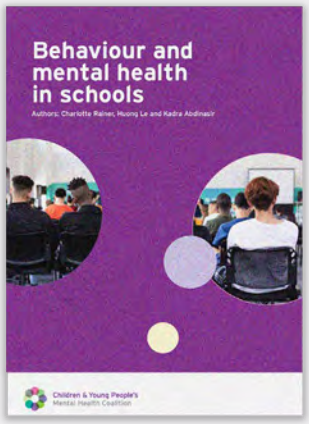
Verdict

Young and Black should be applauded for its critical exposé of institutional racism . However, it stops short of challenging the power structures that uphold it. Without a broader structural lens, the solutions risk treating symptoms rather than dismantling the system.



Behaviour and mental health in schools

By The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2023)



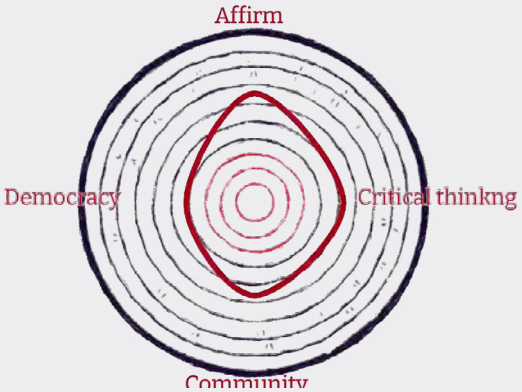
Like a pressure cooker with no release valve, this report reveals how punitive school discipline worsens mental health issues rather than addressing their root causes.

What the report does well

The report makes a strong case for rethinking school behaviour policies, arguing that punitive approaches disproportionately harm young people with mental health challenges, special educational needs, and those from racialised backgrounds. It draws clear links between unmet needs and behavioural issues, reinforcing the case for trauma-informed and relational approaches. Including young people's voices and expert testimony adds weight to its call for a more compassionate model of discipline.

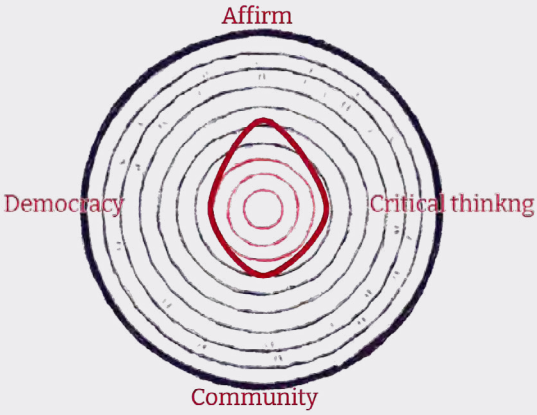
Where it falls short

While the report critiques punitive behaviour, it stops short of naming the structural forces that sustain it. Zero-tolerance policies and behaviour hubs reflect a system that prioritises control over care. Without addressing the political and economic incentives behind them, the recommendations remain surface-level. Though it highlights the harm of exclusions, it doesn't fully confront the role of Ofsted and the DfE in reinforcing a high-stakes culture that drives punitive approaches. By focusing on school-level tweaks without challenging the ideologies behind them, it misses the deeper work needed for lasting change.



Verdict

This report validates what many young people, educators, and families have long known: punitive discipline harms mental health. By evidencing these harms and amplifying young people's voices, it lays a vital foundation for change. Class 13 is glad to carry the baton forward—moving beyond identifying the problem to challenging the ideologies that keep punishment in place.



A 5-point intervention approach for enhancing equity in school discipline

By Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (2018)

Like trying to get rid of smoke without putting out the fire, this report addresses the symptoms of inequity in school discipline but stops short of confronting its ideological roots.

What the report does well

This report illuminates persistent disparities in exclusion rates and disciplinary practices across schools, and it advocates for adaptable, context-specific solutions rather than one-size-fits-all policies. By emphasising a whole-school approach, it acknowledges that school culture plays a significant role in shaping young people's experiences. The flexibility built into its recommendations allows schools to respond to local needs while working toward broader equity goals.

Where it falls short

Although this report advocates for challenging inequity, it stops short of addressing the heart of the issue: seeing people's full humanity. Without an ideological shift, we get stuck in viewing young people as the problem and suggesting solutions that seek to "fix" them.

Verdict

There are some areas of alignment with Class 13's work, particularly the whole-school approach, but ultimately, we believe that if we do not seek to change ideology when tackling inequity, there will continue to be a perceived need for interventions and disparities will persist.

Framework for developing an anti-racist approach

By National Education Union (2024)

Like a well-organised map with key landmarks missing, the NEU's Framework for developing an anti-racist approach offers a structured tool for schools—but leaves out some of the most critical directions for meaningful change.

What the report does well

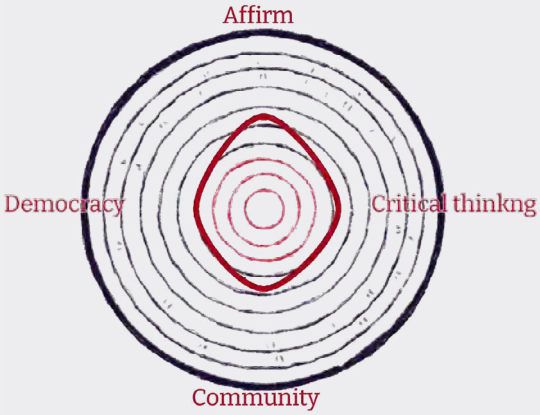
The framework acknowledges the structural nature of racism, linking racial disparities in schools to broader political forces, including anti-immigrant narratives and colonial legacies. It explicitly rejects deficit-based approaches that place responsibility on racialised students rather than the systems that marginalise them. By promoting a whole-school approach, it moves beyond piecemeal interventions towards systemic change.

Where it falls short

The framework names structural racism but avoids naming the ideologies that sustain it. It rejects deficit language yet fails to critique frameworks like Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), which also pathologise individuals over systems.
It also contradicts itself: while stating that anti-racism shouldn't depend on pupil demographics, it later implies a school's approach should vary based on racial makeup—risking permission for predominantly white schools to deprioritise anti-racism altogether.

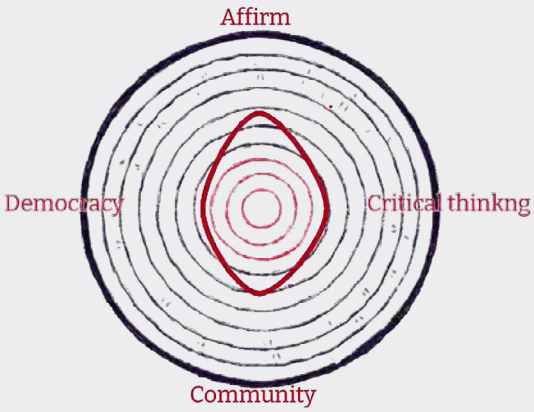
Verdict

The framework offers a strong starting point, especially in advocating for whole-school approaches. But without naming whiteness and deficit thinking, it pulls its punches. Some of its tools risk encouraging performative compliance over meaningful transformation.



Inclusive & nurturing schools toolkit

By The Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (2019)



Like a first-aid kit for recurring injuries, the Inclusive & Nurturing Schools Toolkit offers early intervention tools without addressing what's causing the harm in the first place.

What the report does well

This report recognises the importance of taking a holistic approach, bringing in the voices of practitioners, young people and families to be part of the solution. It includes tools to centre children and advocates for thinking about problems in a systemic way, reflecting on structural and behavioural factors as well as mindsets that underpin persistent issues.

Where it falls short

Despite its strengths, the toolkit offers surface-level fixes rather than tackling root causes. It doesn't ask practitioners to reflect on their own role, making it easy to centre the child's context over systemic change. Without naming deficit ideology, there's a risk this becomes another intervention that pathologises young people.

Verdict

The toolkit includes the right ingredients—systems thinking, inclusion, and nurture—but the case studies fall short. Without challenging existing beliefs and practices, it risks reinforcing the very patterns it aims to disrupt.

Taken together, these reports reflect a field in tension: rich with insight, but often limited by the very ideologies they aim to challenge. At Class 13, we honour their contributions while refusing to stop at reform. Equity cannot be achieved through tweaks or toolkits alone, it requires a full reckoning with the roots.

Deep dive: The McDonaldisation of Education

When the Tail Wags the Dog

By Dr Penny Rabiger and Natasha Samrai - Edited by Curtis Worrell

INTRODUCTION

The question "how did we get here?" regarding the education system is often posed rhetorically, implying that policy decisions have determined the conditions of our schools. While this is true in part, it overlooks a crucial reality: many harmful educational practices were implemented long before they became formal policy. Schools, driven by increasingly commercialised competition and standardisation, introduced practices prioritising control and efficiency—often at the expense of equity and well-being. Over time, these practices became institutionalised, shaping the very policies that now govern education.

However, beyond policy and practice, it is ideology that underpins both, sustaining inequities in education. Understanding the ideological roots of these approaches—how they have been shaped by colonial legacies, deficit thinking, and market-driven imperatives—is essential to dismantling them. Without this ideological shift, even well-intentioned reforms risk being co-opted or reinforcing existing hierarchies.

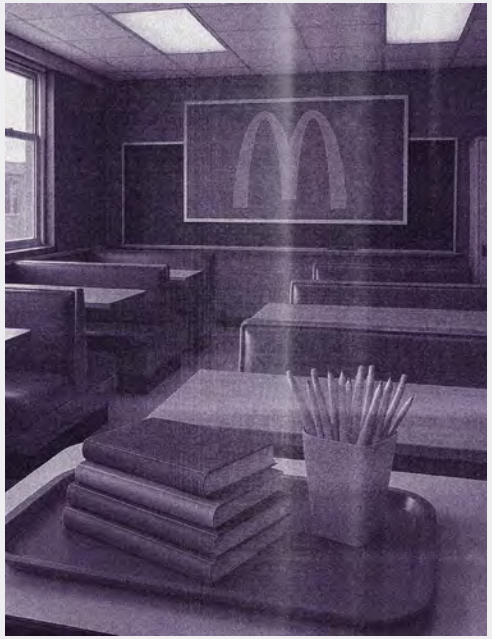
THE LIMITATIONS AND WEAPONISATION OF POLICY

A useful way to explore the limitation of policy reform is through existing policies that claim to advance equity, such as the Equality Act 2010. While the Act legally prohibits discrimination in hiring, pay, and workplace treatment, research consistently shows that women still earn less than their male counterparts, with the gender pay gap in the UK standing at 7% for full-time employees and 13.1% for part-time workers (for whom women make up a larger proportion) (ONS, 2024). Similarly, racial disparities in hiring persist, with studies showing that job applicants with traditionally African, Asian, or Muslim-sounding names are significantly less likely to be invited to interviews (West, 2025). Despite the legal frameworks in place, systemic inequities remain embedded in practice, proving that policy alone cannot mandate equity.

However, beyond its failure to eliminate structural inequities, the **Equality Act 2010 has been actively weaponised to prevent conversations about racial injustice.**

The 2021 report, "The Forgotten: How White Working-Class Pupils Have Been Let Down, and How to Change It", explicitly instructed schools to:

> ***"consider whether the promotion of politically controversial terminology, including White Privilege, is consistent with their duties under the Equality Act 2010." (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021)***



This use of the Equality Act to silence discussions of systemic racism does exactly what Gillborn and others cautioned against in 2014 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014)—allowing dominant groups to reshape equity policies to serve their own interests while preventing conversations about historical and ongoing racial injustice. This not only erases the realities of racial discrimination but also creates a false equivalence between structural oppression and the discomfort of those in dominant positions.

Thus, instead of being a tool for equity, the Equality Act has been mobilised to suppress anti-racist education while allowing exclusions, discriminatory discipline policies, and racial bias to persist in practice.

THE MCDONALDISATION OF EDUCATION

The weaponisation of policies like the Equality Act 2010 illustrates how legislative frameworks designed to advance equity can be reshaped to entrench existing hierarchies. However, policy is not the only tool reinforcing these inequities. The standardisation of education —through an increasing emphasis on efficiency, surveillance, and control—has created an environment where exclusion is an inevitable byproduct of the system's design. This is best understood through the lens of McDonaldisation.

Sociologist George Ritzer (1996) coined the term McDonaldisation to describe the spread of fast-food industry principles—efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control*—into other areas of society, including education.

Efficiency:
The pursuit of the most "optimum" and cost-effective method of education delivery. Schools now rely on setting, streaming, and multiple-choice testing to sort and measure students quickly, often at the cost of deep learning (Gillborn, 2005).

Calculability:
Emphasis on quantifiable results over quality, prioritising exam scores, league tables, and Ofsted rankings, despite the fact that these often fail to measure meaningful education outcomes (Ball, 2003).

Predictability:
Standardisation ensures that curricula, uniforms, and behaviour systems remain identical across academy chains, making demonstrative compliance a marker of scholarship and discouraging experimentation and creativity.

*CONTROL:
The use of technology, surveillance, and rigid behaviour management strategies reduces teacher autonomy and dehumanises both staff and students. Strategies such as Teach Like a Champion (TLAC) (Lemov, 2021) script teacher-student interactions to ensure performative compliance in place of genuine engagement.

Ritzer also highlights the "irrationality of rationality", arguing that despite their intent, highly rationalised systems often become self-defeating—leading to dehumanisation, loss of creativity, and increased inequality. Schools, in their pursuit of efficiency, have increasingly treated students as units of production, where achieving test score thresholds has become the primary goal at the expense of holistic development.

THE COLONIAL ECHOES OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The pursuit of standardisation, efficiency, and control in schools is not a neutral phenomenon; it is deeply embedded in colonial ideologies of governance, assimilation, and discipline. Just as colonial administrators arrived in "uncivilised" territories with the explicit goal of reshaping populations as a means of establishing domination/control, education reform in historically underprivileged areas has been framed as a civilising mission—one that assumes the need to "fix" deficit communities rather than address systemic inequities (Gordon & Kabo, 1989).

From the Roman Empire to the British Empire, colonial dominance has relied on more than brute force. A consistent strategy has been the enforcement of cultural hegemony—imposing dominant norms while suppressing local ones. This includes controlling dress, centralising language, and labelling certain social practices as either acceptable or deviant. Today, many schools adopt similar tactics under the guise of regulating behaviour. Strict uniform policies, standardised oracy expectations, and punitive discipline systems—often disproportionately applied to racialised students—reflect this same logic. In academy schools especially, students are taught that success is contingent on their ability to conform to middle-class white norms.
Much like the justification of empire, proponents of this model struggle to provide evidence that academisation has improved educational outcomes.

There is still no evidence that academies produce better results than other schools with similar intakes (Gorard, 2025), nor that punitive discipline produces better outcomes than relational strategies. Instead, there is a growing body of research indicating that such punitive environments have detrimental effects on both student and teacher mental health (Duarte et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2023; Page, 2016).

By framing certain communities as 'failing', educational institutions justify the expansion of standardised, punitive schooling practices, much like colonial administrations justified their presence in the lands they occupied. In doing so, schools do not merely exclude students who do not conform—they actively dehumanise them, reinforcing a system where success is predicated on the suppression of identity rather than the

A CASE STUDY: HACKNEY'S IDEOLOGICAL DOUBLING DOWN

Hackney serves as a blueprint for the future of academisation, with all but one of its secondary schools converted into academies. Some celebrate this transformation as a policy success, but in reality, it exemplifies how exclusion, surveillance, and carceral education models become institutionalised under the guise of progress.

HACKNEY'S TRANSFORMATION: A SUCCESS OR A CRISIS?

By 1990, Hackney's schools were widely considered to be among the worst in the country. Rather than investing in systemic solutions, the borough adopted punitive, market-driven reforms. Hackney Downs School was demolished and replaced with Mossbourne Community Academy, which became the model for the borough's approach.

- Students were subjected to **silent corridors, rigid behaviour policies, and surveillance-heavy environments.**
- Uniforms were redesigned to **mirror private school aesthetics,** reinforcing **assimilation over cultural affirmation** (Kulz, 2017).
- **Sir Michael Wilshaw,** Mossbourne's first headteacher and later Chief Inspector of Ofsted, declared "structure liberates"—a philosophy that justified **rigid control at the expense of student autonomy** (Kulz, 2013).

But this structure was not neutral. It was built on the ideological pretext that what children needed liberation from was not poverty, racism, or systemic exclusion—but a lack of domestic discipline. In doing so, it positioned children navigating the realities of social deprivation like criminals-in-the-making - to be corrected, contained, and controlled, rather than understood or supported. The reforms did not dismantle the matrices of social stratification that limit access to housing, healthcare, and opportunity; instead, they reimagined those inequalities as individual moral failings.

Though hailed as a success, Hackney's transformation was built on exclusion, not equity. Schools across the borough adopted "Mossbourne-style" discipline models, leading to some of the highest exclusion rates in London. In the end, it did not prove that structure liberates—only that structure efficiently dispenses with the children the system cannot make sense of, those deemed beyond the scope of the colonial burden to civilise.

SCHOOLING AS SURVEILLANCE: THE CARCERAL LOGIC OF HACKNEY'S ACADEMIES

Hackney's newer school buildings, such as Mossbourne Community Academy and Excelsior Academy (formally Petchey Academy), follow design principles of surveillance and control. Drawing from Michel Foucault's (1975) concept of the Panopticon—a model of control where individuals regulate their

own behaviour due to the ever-present possibility of being watched—the internal design of these buildings and others mirror prison landings, with the ability for the guard or teacher to see onto all levels.

These schools employ multiple mechanisms of control, including:

- **Open sightlines**
  ...ensuring students can be observed at all times.
- **One-way systems**
  ...a feature more common in prisons than schools.
- **Zero-tolerance discipline policies**
  ...which treat minor infractions as significant transgressions.
- **Carceral language**
  ...such as taking student statements as if they were in a criminal investigation, labelling students as the "*aggressor*", or albeit internally referring to groups of students only by their ethnicity code: BCRB (Black Caribbean)

By the time formal police presence was introduced in Hackney's schools, it was not a policy shift but an **inevitable next step** in an already hyper-surveilled environment (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Long, 2021) which assumed the innate criminality of young people in one of the most historically socially deprived boroughs of London.

PREDICTABLE OUTCOMES: THE RACIALISED CONSEQUENCES OF EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

Hackney's exclusionary approach has produced predictable and deeply harmful outcomes. The borough has been home to some of the most high-profile cases of racialised school violence in recent years:

- **Ruby Williams,** a Black student repeatedly sent home from Urswick School for wearing her natural Afro hair, which was deemed a violation of uniform policy (The Independent, 2020).
- **Child Q,** a 15-year-old Black girl who was strip-searched by police at school while menstruating, with school staff failing to intervene (CHSCP, 20220).

It is important to not see these cases as isolated incidents but the inevitable outcome of a borough-wide approach that prioritises surveillance and control over care and dignity.

EDUCATION AS LIBERATION OR CONTROL?

Hackney's case study reveals that policy alone cannot create equity—especially when those policies are built upon the same ideological foundations that justified exclusion in the first place. However, what Hackney also demonstrates is that ideology is the true driver of educational practice.
The Mossbourne effect is not unique to one borough; its rigid, carceral model has been replicated in schools and academy chains across the country, shaping the national landscape of education.

Yet, the future of education does not have to be McDonaldised, carceral, or exclusionary. We could choose to construct an alternative ideology—one that sees education as a site of affirmation rather than discipline, where students are recognised as full human beings rather than problems to be managed. In such a system, producing engaged and informed citizens would be a natural byproduct of affirming their humanity, rather than something achieved despite it.

But until this ideological shift occurs, Hackney remains a borough where the tail wags the dog—where exclusion is mistaken for success.

Slow, steady, and rooted: the Equitree in practice

Our blueprint for change

Identifying the problem is easy. The real work lies in finding a solution—one that doesn't just look good on paper but leads to lasting change.

The Equitree is our solution. It may seem deceptively simple, but every meaningful transformation begins small. An oak doesn't spring up overnight. It begins as an acorn. Change takes root quietly, then grows.

The Equitree is a persistently disruptive, action-based framework built around our four core principles: affirming a person's full humanity, nurturing innate critical thinking, cultivating community, and fostering democracy.

It works by challenging and changing the practices, pedagogies, and policies that shape school life, redistributing access and opportunity toward fairness and justice.

As our sensitivity to inequity deepens, the Equitree becomes not just a tool but a way of being—one that helps us detect even the smallest misalignments and respond with purpose.

This is not a new idea

The Equitree didn't come from nowhere. It's grounded in decades of critical pedagogy—echoing thinkers like bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Bettina Love, Valerie Walkerdine, Maggie Maclure, Paul Gorski and Beverly Daniel Tatum—and shaped through ongoing conversations with our network.

Its roots also stretch into more familiar territory: the Plowden Report, Ofsted guidance, behaviour policies, and government strategies. Ideas about care, community, and engagement have long existed—just scattered, deprioritised and often stripped of their radical intent. The Equitree gathers those fragments and centres them around one undeniable truth: **Nothing is more important than a person's humanity.**

Many schools still operate within an ideology, as Dr Martin Luther King (1963) said, "more devoted to order than to justice." They claim to prepare young people for the future—but too often, they're preparing them to uncritically accept punitive systems and rigid expectations that leave them more vulnerable to misinformation on social media and exploitation.

This is what the Equitree pushes against: systems that have mistaken control for safety and order for justice. Education can be different. In every school, there are educators already living that difference, showing that another way is not only possible, but already underway.

Remember the teacher who changed everything?

Think back to your favourite teacher. What made them different? Chances are, they saw you for who you were. They listened—really listened. They encouraged you to think differently, and made space for your voice to matter. That kind of affirmation stays with us. It shapes who we are, and who we believe we can be.

Now think of the teacher who did the opposite—the one who made you feel small. Maybe they singled you out, ignored your voice, or treated your presence like a problem. That feeling lingers too. It can follow us quietly for years, shaping our confidence, our relationships, and our sense of belonging.

This is why **Affirming full humanity** is the first principle of the Equitree. Schools should be places

where a young person's worth isn't reduced to grades, where a teacher's value isn't measured by control, and where parents are seen as partners, not problems.

affirm *verb*

gerund or present participle: affirming

1. To recognise a person's inherent value, without conditions.
2. Offer emotional support or encouragement.

"I care about you. You have value. You don't have to do anything to prove it to me, and nothing is going to change my mind." (Venet, 2021)

Imagine if every teacher had the tools, support, and environment to inspire young people, rather than having to rely on control in the absence of relationships. Imagine if every young person left school feeling heard, nurtured, and valued. Imagine a school system where teachers love their jobs, young people are thriving, and exclusions are no longer necessary. This vision isn't just possible—it's necessary. And we believe the Equitree gives us a way to get there.

Beyond ability: cultivating community in education

If we truly believe in building a school system where every child is affirmed, then we must rethink how we structure learning itself. The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child", is often referenced in education. But in practice, it's often been narrowed, individualised, and reinterpreted to sound more like: "It takes a village to raise my child".

community *noun*

1. to practise mutual care, trust, and accountability.
2. to build spaces where people show up for each other, especially when it's hard.
3. to resist isolation by choosing connection over competition.

Community is not a static entity. It is constantly being made and remade through relationships and shared practices. — (Studdert, 2005; Studdert and Walkerdine, 2016).

This individualised mindset plays out clearly in the widespread resistance to mixed-ability classrooms. The common fear is that some children will be 'held back' if they're not grouped by perceived ability. But research consistently shows that setting and streaming do little to improve overall outcomes. Worse still, they deepen structural inequalities by disproportionately placing children from minoritised backgrounds in lower sets, a practice researchers have called a form of symbolic violence (Archer et al., 2018).

The belief that a child might be 'held back' only makes sense if we buy into the myth of meritocracy—that success is earned solely through individual effort, in a fair and level playing field. But life isn't a neutral race. It's shaped by deep, persistent inequities. And if we reject that truth, we're left with only one other explanation: that some children are inherently more capable than others—a belief dangerously close to the idea of a genetic cognitive elite (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994).

Setting is a practice rooted in competition and scarcity—it asks, how do I get ahead? rather than how do we move forward together? In that way, setting is the erasure of community. If we took community seriously—if we believed in collective progress—we wouldn't need to rank and divide children in the first place.

Thinking about the bigger picture for a second, education isn't just about acquiring knowledge. It's about learning how to exist alongside others to collaborate, communicate, and navigate differences. This is more than a philosophical stance. Employers are increasingly raising concerns about young people entering the workforce without the ability to show initiative, adapt, or work in teams (Open University, 2023; PwC, 2024; The Times, 2024)

These aren't "soft" skills, they're essential ones. And they're best developed in environments that centre community, not competition. This isn't just about those placed at the bottom. Young people labelled as "high achievers" often experience intense academic pressure, learning that their value depends on constant success. The result is often detrimental to their mental health—fueling anxiety, fear of failure, and a reluctance to take academic risks.

Separate is still not equal—and never has been.

Cultivating community

Families often feel forced to choose between grades and well-being. But what if they didn't have to? The Equitree framework is an attempt to bake the cake and eat it—to design a system where academic success and young people's well-being aren't competing goals, but ingredients in the same recipe.

Recipe: cultivating community
(serves all)

If we want to create a school system where young people thrive together, we need the right ingredients.

Ingredients:

- A belief that education is a shared experience, not an individual race.
- A commitment to fostering connection, not division by arbitrary academic labels.
- An understanding that well-being, mental health, and academic outcomes are interwoven—not competing priorities.

Method:

1. Combine high expectations with inclusive practices
2. Stir in opportunities for collaboration—peer learning and classroom cultures where young people affirm each other.
3. Knead out outdated hierarchies, and deficit ideologies
4. Let it rise—creating an environment where learning is dynamic, risk-taking is encouraged, and mistakes are part of the process.
5. Allow it to cook - giving time for the culture of the community becomes baked in and permeates the flavour of all you do is essential
6. Serve shared success...

Rethinking critical thinking

We've said this isn't about choosing between well-being and achievement—and it's not about choosing between structure and criticality, either. To build true community, schools must nurture more than just cooperation. They must foster real engagement, dialogue, and inquiry. Right now, too many schools still reward compliance over curiosity. Teachers are praised for compliant classrooms as a result students are praised for sitting still, following instructions, and giving the 'right' answer. But this doesn't teach them how to question, challenge, or think for themselves.

We often hear schools and inspectors talk about the importance of critical thinking. But in practice, questioning is tolerated more than it's encouraged, confined to specific lessons, rather than woven into the culture of learning.

critically think *verb*

gerund or present participle: critically thinking

1. to create a culture where questioning is expected, not exceptional.
2. to engage with others in naming the world—and imagining how it could be different.
3. to practise learning as an act of liberation, not performance.

To critically think is not to memorise facts, but to make meaning together, to ask who benefits, who is harmed, and what could be otherwise (attributed to critical pedagogy)

If we're serious about building a collaborative education system, critical thinking can't be a one-off skill. It has to become a shared way of being, for students and educators alike.

Did you know?

"Separate is not equal" is a phrase that appears in the 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education, which ruled that racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.

The risks of suppressing critical thinking

Paulo Freire warns us of the violence of silencing inquiry:

"In a situation in which a person(s) prevents others from engaging in the process of inquiry, it is one of violence. To alienate humans from their own decision-making is to construct them as objects." (Freire, 2018)

When questioning is discouraged in the classroom, we aren't just limiting learning—we're increasing young people's vulnerability to harm. If curiosity is suppressed in school, how will young people find the confidence to question those who seek to manipulate them? **A culture of inquiry isn't a luxury—it's a safeguarding strategy.**

When youth work mirrors grooming

Youth work is often seen as a space of choice and connection. But what happens when even well-meaning engagement unintentionally mirrors coercion?

Practitioners often build trust through shared interests—music, gaming, sports. But without a culture of inquiry, that trust can quietly shift into transactional expectation. Encouraging participation with phrases like "*Come on, just try it*" or "*Trust me, you'll love it*" might seem harmless, but they subtly reinforce a pattern: an adult offers something desirable, and the young person feels pressure to say yes—not because they're interested, but because they don't want to disappoint someone they trust.

This dynamic can mirror grooming. It teaches that saying no is a form of ingratitude—and that compliance is the cost of belonging. Without a deep culture of inquiry—where power can be questioned and 'no' is respected—this imbalance remains.

Trust is not enough. Real empowerment requires autonomy, choice, and the expectation that young people can challenge us—without losing the relationship.

The first three principles of the Equitree work together to proactively safeguard young people—in education and beyond.

- **Affirming full humanity** – When young people know their worth isn't conditional, they're less likely to seek affirmation in harmful places.
- **Cultivating community** – When they belong to a community that values them, they're less likely to be isolated, manipulated, or drawn into coercive relationships.
- **Nurturing critical thinking** – When questioning is a way of being, they're more likely to recognise harm and resist harmful narratives.

Together, these principles build collective strength. They move us towards liberation because equity isn't about surviving harm, but dismantling the conditions that produce it.

Fostering democracy: the natural outcome of equity

When schools affirm full humanity, nurture belonging, and centre critical thinking, something powerful happens: **Democracy stops being a lesson and becomes a lived expectation.**

Schools regularly speak about democracy teaching voting, laws, and justice. But how many teachers, support staff, parents, or young people actually experience shared power? How frequently are decisions made with—not just for—them? In many cases, "democracy" in education amounts to top-down policy changes, with little consultation from those most affected.

democracy *noun*
gerund or present participle: democratising

1. to practise shared power through collective decision-making.
2. to build environments where every voice matters.
3. to create the conditions where justice, autonomy, and accountability are held in common.

"There can be no love without justice... until we live in a culture that affirms and values all human life, we cannot talk about democracy." (hooks, 2000)

But democracy in schools isn't about surrendering authority, it's about transforming it. It's not structure or shared power. It's structure through shared power. The Equitree framework helps us build that. It's more than a shared language, it's a shared ideology. One that recognises that consistency doesn't require sameness, and that equity thrives when autonomy and accountability work together.

Consistency in schools isn't about enforcing sameness—it's about holding shared values while allowing for difference.Yet many academy groups are moving toward standardisation, narrowing what's possible for young people and undermining teacher autonomy.

Take SLANT, a popular behaviour system that tells students to:

- **Sit up straight**
- **Lean forward**
- **Ask and answer questions**
- **Nod your head**
- **Track the speaker**

In contrast, we've found the Equitree to be deeply galvanising. In our experience, we've yet to meet a governor, teacher, senior leader, parent, or young person who doesn't connect with its principles. As these principles become more deeply embedded, we believe they will soften rigid hierarchies—offering shared goals, shared language, and shared responsibility. That's what creates the conditions where democracy can truly flourish.

This is why Fostering Democracy is the fourth and final principle of the Equitree—because a system built on affirmation, community, and critical thought cannot help but demand justice, fairness, and participation.

The slow work of real change

There's no shortage of fast solutions in education Hares sprinting toward a better future. Behaviour systems promising instant compliance. Tutoring to 'raise standards'. Both interventions are designed to 'fix' young people, rather than fixing the systems that fail them.

These approaches move quickly, look impressive in the short term—but we've been doing them for years. And outcomes for marginalised groups have remained consistently poor. Remember the programme for "at-risk" Year 9 boys? It does nothing for the Year 7s or 8s facing the same systemic injustices. These quick wins can't deliver the deep, lasting change that young people and educators deserve.

Betting on the tortoise!

The four principles of the Equitree framework may not offer instant results—but they offer something far more powerful: momentum that lasts.

- **Affirming Full Humanity** - because every person deserves to be seen and valued.
- **Nurturing Critical Thinking** – because no one should be denied the ability to think and question.
- **Cultivating Community** – because learning and life are shared experiences.
- **Fostering Democracy** – because everyone deserves a voice in shaping their world.

These aren't quick-fix solutions. They're steady, deliberate, and built to endure. We can't predict the future—but when it comes, don't you think we'll need people who know their worth, think critically, and work collectively to shape a fairer world?

What does the Equitree look like in action?

The Equitree isn't just a theory, it's a living process. The comic that follows brings it to life, showing how schools can use the four principles to reflect on policy and practices growing over time. There's no race, no ranking, just a shared commitment to building environments where equity can take root **This is where theory meets practice.**

Success World™

Would you send your child?

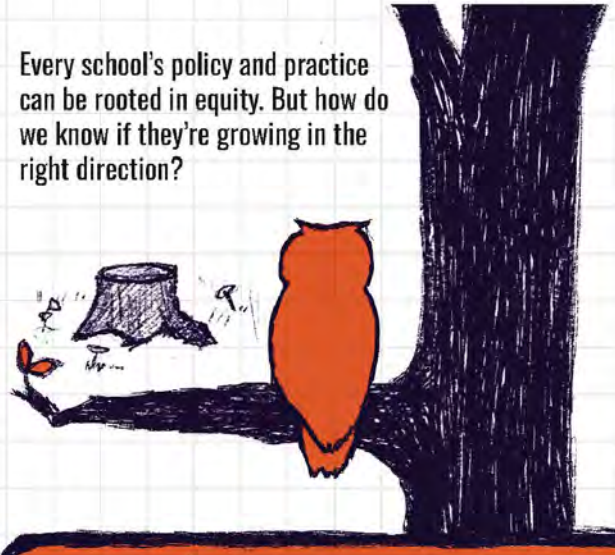
Terms and conditions apply*

*Attendance at Success World™ is compulsory. All children must enter the park gates by 08:45 and remain on-site until 15:15. Failure to attend may result in fines or possible court proceedings. Parents should be aware that certain identities carry a statistically higher risk of harm while inside the park. This includes, but is not limited to, Travellers and Roma children, guests with diagnosed or undiagnosed support needs, and children in receipt of Free School Meals. Children racialised as non-white are currently four times more likely to be harmed. This figure has remained stable for many decades, and as such, racialised guests are kindly requested to sign a waiver absolving the park of any liability. In addition, girls may experience unsolicited dress code adjustments. Toilets are located at key points across the site. These will be accessible during two brief periods during your time at Success World™. Refusal to go on all the rides may result in classification as a Ride Refuser, and will trigger the automatic escalation of intervention pathways. Please keep your voice low and your badge visible at all times. Thank you for your compliance. Please note that Success World™ is not responsible for any indirect harm experienced as a result of witnessing harm inflicted on others. This includes, but is not limited to, normalisation of harm, or long-term emotional distress.

The Equitree
A Living Framework

There once was a tree in a school,
That quietly challenged each rule.
Its branches reached wide,
With equity its guide—
A compass for when systems are cruel.

Every school's policy and practice can be rooted in equity. But how do we know if they're growing in the right direction?



Well, we can access Class 13's four principles. Each one is scored from 1 to 10, for now.

Anything scoring between 1-3 is stuck in **'Deadwood'** —it doesn't align with our values and will need to be reviewed.

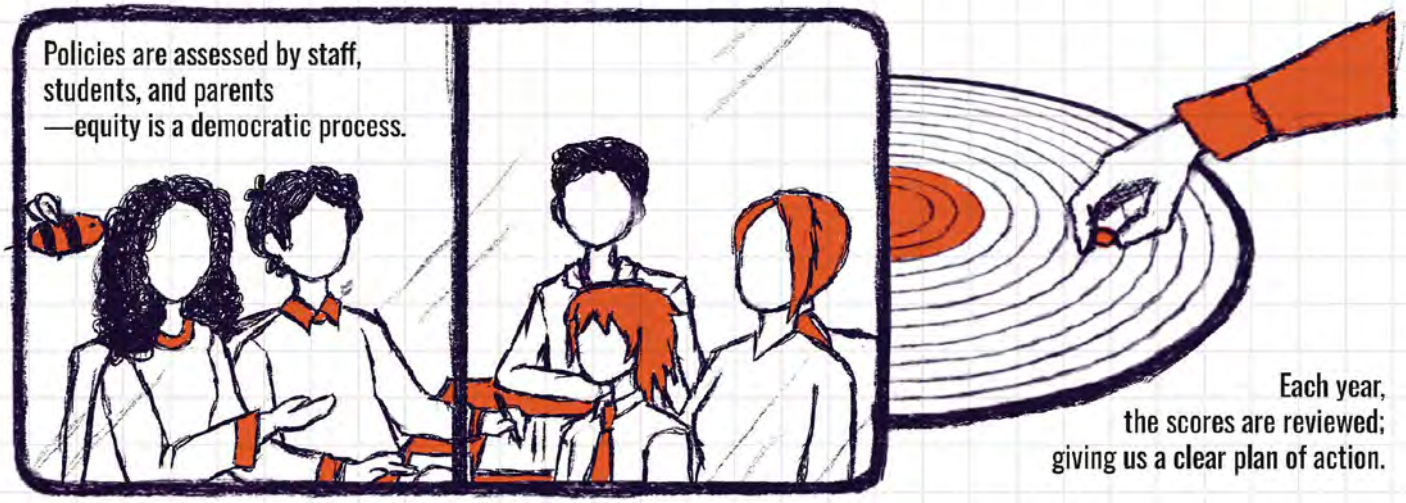
Policies scoring 4 - 7 in different categories are good enough to use. But how do we grow?

When a policy scores 8 or higher in two areas, it triggers growth, which creates a new **Growth Ring**, expanding the schools equity.

But growth means higher standards. What was once 'acceptable' might now be Deadwood.

We must revisit these policies and improve them in that particular area. Equity demands continuous reflection.

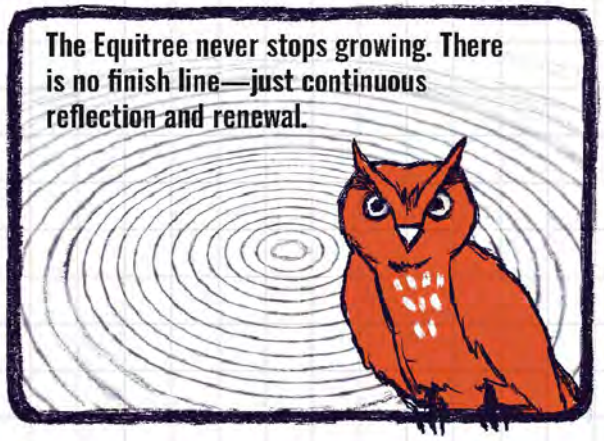
Policies are assessed by staff, students, and parents —equity is a democratic process.



Each year, the scores are reviewed; giving us a clear plan of action.

There's no competition—just different schools at different stages of their growth.

The Equitree never stops growing. There is no finish line—just continuous reflection and renewal.



I'm **Theory.**
I bring the knowledge.

I'm **Action.**
I put plans into practice.

I'm **Reflection.**
I help us grow by learning from what's been.

Together, we form **Praxis**
—the cycle that keeps the Equitree alive.

"The goal of praxis is not just to understand the world, but to actively work to change it for the better."

— Paulo Freire

His words remind us: equity isn't theory alone. It's a commitment to changing the world, together.

Building a democratic school community

Building a democratic school community isn't about grand statements—it's about daily routines, power dynamics, and culture. Through the embedded pilot, we're putting the Equitree into practice: transforming schools from the inside out, one shared decision at a time.

Creating an equitable education system demands more than good intentions. It requires deep, lasting change—ideological shift. That kind of transformation doesn't come from quick fixes or one-off training. It requires an embedded, whole-community approach.

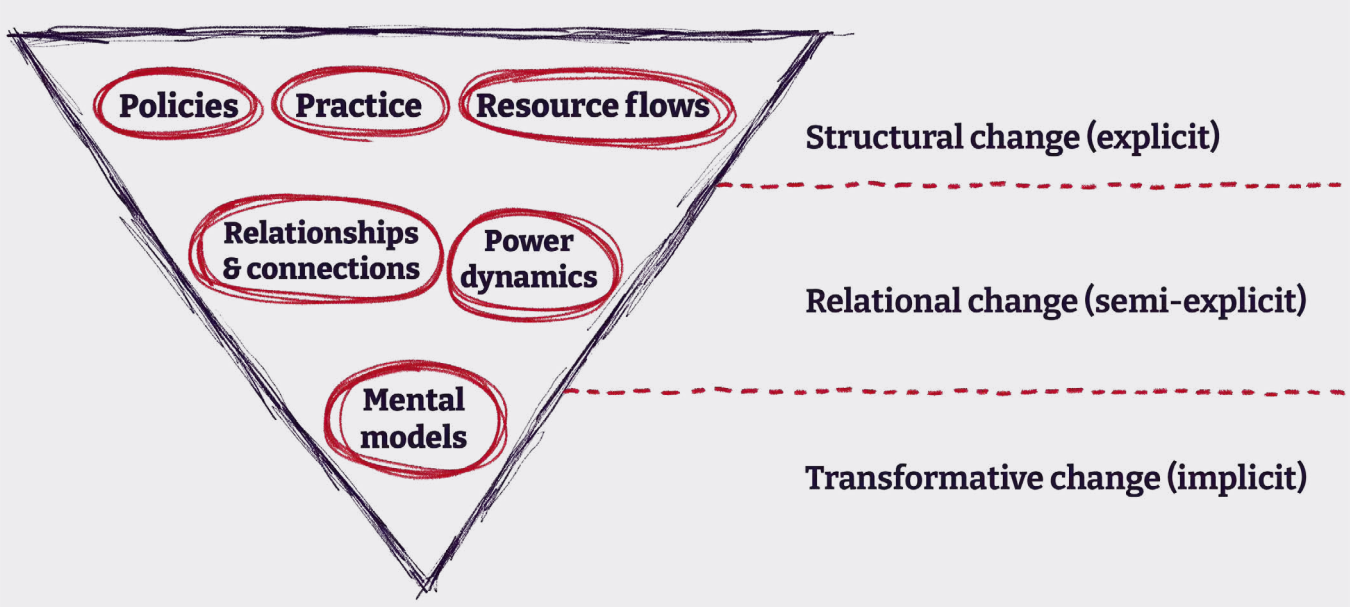
> ***Real and equitable progress requires exceptional attention to the detailed and often mundane work of noticing what is invisible to many.***

You shouldn't think of this as radical—it's what education should be: a system rooted in care, connection, and justice. But shifting deeply ingrained norms means paying close attention to what often goes unseen. Real progress happens in the small, everyday decisions that shape school life.

That's why we're launching a four-year embedded pilot to test how change happens when schools are given the time, tools, and support to transform from within.

To guide this work, we're drawing on the Water of Systems Change model (Kania et al., 2019), which illustrates that systems don't shift through surface-level reforms. Structural change must be accompanied by relational and cultural change. It's not just about policy, representation or funding—it's about implicit conditions such as shifting decision making power, improving the quality of connections and changing habits of thought.

The Water of Systems Change



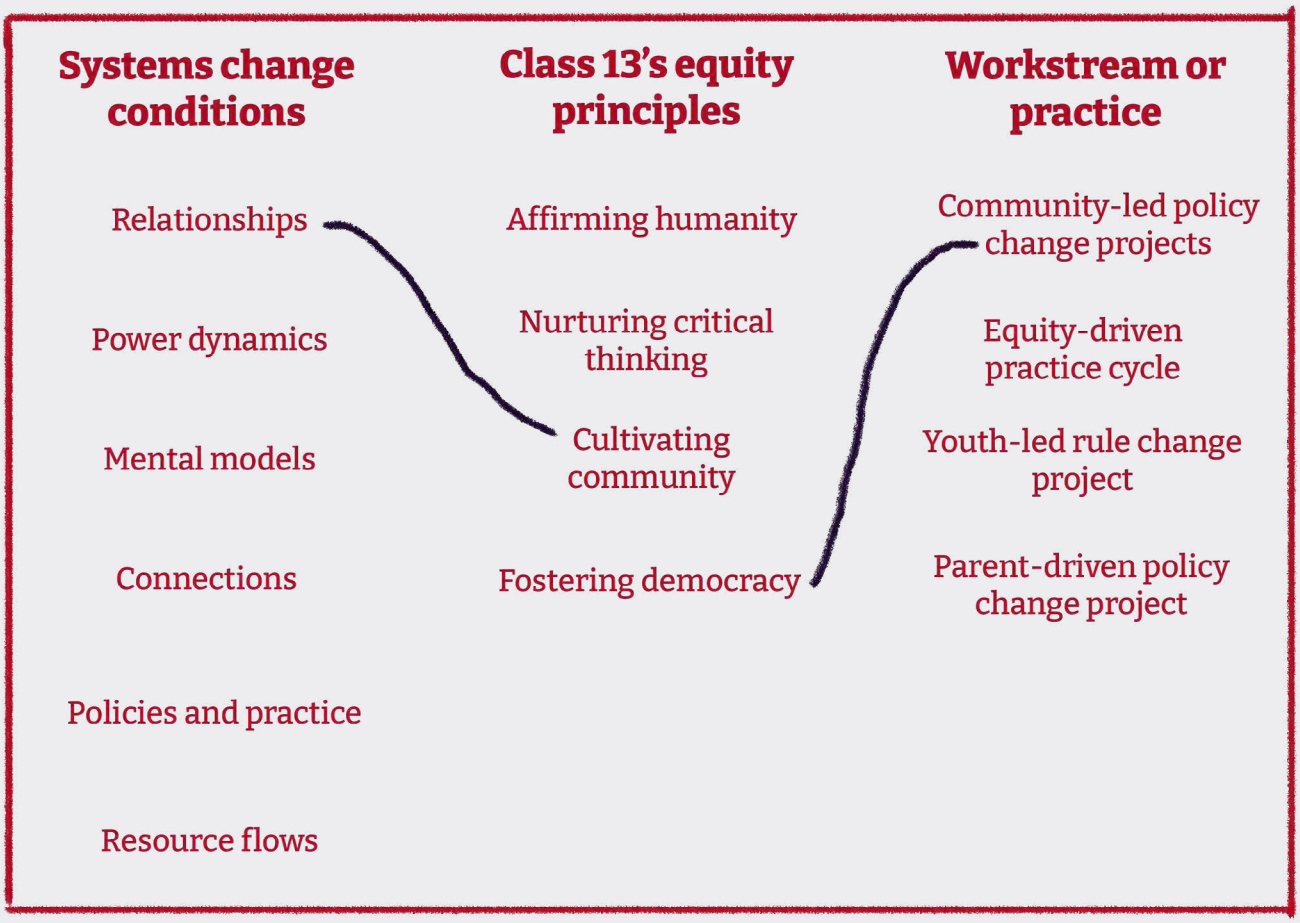
We're confident in this approach because the embedded pilot tackles the system as a whole. It works across multiple levels to initiate, sustain, and deepen change. Our equity principles and pilot workstreams align with the six conditions of systems change making for a powerful catalyst for transformation.

Match the change

Instructions:

Below are six systems changing conditions from the Water of Systems Change model. Your task? **Match each condition** with the most relevant **Class 13 equity principle** and a **workstream or practice** from the pilot that brings it to life.

Some may overlap—there are no perfect answers, but there are powerful connections.



Much of the work to address inequity focuses on either structural or relational change in isolation. For example, campaigns to improve staff diversity may increase representation, but they rarely shift power, challenge assumptions, or transform everyday practice.

To be a genuine threat to inequity, we need to act across all six conditions of systems change—redistributing power, reshaping practice, and challenging the habits of thought that sustain injustice. That's the work this pilot is designed to do.

We know that shifting systems isn't easy—especially when it means challenging habits, assumptions, and power. If it were, none of us would hold on to behaviours we know don't serve us. Awareness alone doesn't create change—if it did, we'd be a nation of non-smokers after photos were added to cigarette packets.

Real change takes time. Habit formation depends on sustained practice and reinforcement (Duhigg, 2012).

One widely used model breaks this down into three parts:

- **The cue** - what triggers the behaviour
- **The routine** - the behaviour itself
- **The reward** - what we get from it

Understanding this cycle helps us shift patterns that feel stuck and redesign them in line with our values.

For the equity principles to take root, they need to shape how schools think, plan, and respond—becoming part of everyday routines. That's exactly why the embedded pilot isn't designed as a quick intervention, but as a long-term process of practice and reflection. We've built it with the long game in mind—drawing on what we've seen in our work so far, and what the research shows about how habits form and systems evolve. This is how we move equity from aspiration to action.

Let's take a small but familiar example: the line-up routine before lessons. In many schools, teachers noticed some young people skipping lessons or arriving unsettled. The cue was inconsistency in how students arrived. The response was to introduce a rigid, daily line-up rule. The reward? Greater oversight, calm entry, and fewer missed lessons. On the surface, it worked. But what did it teach? Not self-regulation, not community, not agency—just compliance. The rule substituted for the very relationships that would build those things.

If we return to the routine with the equity principles in mind—how could we affirm young people? Build community? Cultivate critical thinking? Instead of a blanket rule, we might introduce one day a week where line-ups are not required, with the intention of increasing this over time. We'd start from the assumption that young people are capable—and that connection, not control, is what builds consistency. By identifying the cue, routine, and reward of a habit, we begin to understand its logic—and how to redesign it.

Now try it yourself.

Choose one of the equity principles and apply it to a familiar routine. What changes?

What is the Habit? _____

What is the Cue? _____

What is the Routine? _____

What is the Reward? _____

What is the embedded pilot?

In the stirring words of bell hooks, "*The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.*" That's the kind of possibility we're working toward. Through the embedded pilot, we'll equip schools with the time, tools, and relationships they need to create environments where everyone is valued—teachers, young people, and families alike.

By sharing the responsibility for learning, we reduce pressure on educators and deepen participation across the whole school community. The result is a more dynamic, hopeful, and fairer school experience for everyone involved.

Consistency is key—but not sameness.

This isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Equity can't be imposed through templates or top-down directives. While each school will apply the principles in ways that reflect their unique context, the shared language of the equity framework makes deeper inquiry possible.

It means we can ask together: *What does affirming look like here? What could it look like?*

We're not enforcing uniformity—we're cultivating a culture where communities can reflect critically, supportively, and collectively on the **how.**

What the embedded pilot is:

- A live exploration of how the equity framework can be embedded in real school settings
- A way to test and refine methods of building engagement across staff, students, and families
- A learning process that will generate tools, practices, and insights others can adapt to their own

What the embedded pilot isn't:

- A prescriptive approach to practice
- A "how to" for "anti-racist" classrooms
- A quick fix or standardised programme designed for scale

How will it work?

The pilot will be a four-year, in-depth, on-site project based in two connected Lambeth schools: Henry Fawcett Primary and Lilian Baylis Technology School, which are connected through their student pathways, with many young people moving from Henry Fawcett to Lilian Baylis. Together, they serve nearly 1,100 students—and over four years, we have the potential to reach more than 2,400 young people.

	Capacity / number of young people	Number of staff
Lilian Baylis Technology School	900 / 845	90
Henry Fawcett	360 / 232	20

This isn't a targeted intervention. Equity isn't something that can be contained or compartmentalised. This work is for everyone — every child, every adult, every role. Metrics like race, gender, SEND status or free school meals eligibility aren't the focus—because this work is for everyone. Equity can't be delivered in silos. Every child and adult should come away from the pilot feeling more connected, more confident in their role, and more invested in shaping school life.

At the same time, this isn't a premium-priced solution. Our approach is more cost-effective than many short-term fixes schools are often encouraged to adopt, such as mentoring or one-to-one tuition. According to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2023), these interventions vary widely in cost and often sit at the higher end of per-pupil spending. By contrast, the embedded pilot delivers sustained, whole-school change for a similar investment, working across the school community to create lasting shifts in culture for years to come.

Project phases

The pilot runs over four years, delivered in three phases outlined below. We've designed it this way because meaningful learning takes time. In a world obsessed with speed, outcomes, and quick wins, we're choosing to slow down, to make space for reflection, connection, and lasting change.

✳ Phase One

...is all about set-up, focused on building relationships. We'll spend time with educators, children, and families to build trust, co-develop the support model and deepen our understanding of the school community — and to test early elements of the pilot.

✳ Phase Two

...is the most intensive stage—working with educators, children, and families to build understanding, community, and democracy. As part of a whole school approach, we'll also engage school governors and senior leaders through tailored learning sessions, alongside the equity-driven practice cycle for educators. The parent-driven policy change project builds on the youth-led rule change project—deepening engagement with democratic processes and widening shared decision-making across the school.

✳ Phase Three

...is when we step back—giving the school community space to apply their new practices, knowledge, and skills independently. We'll still be present for reflective conversations and guidance, and we'll work with the school to share learning across Lambeth—and beyond.

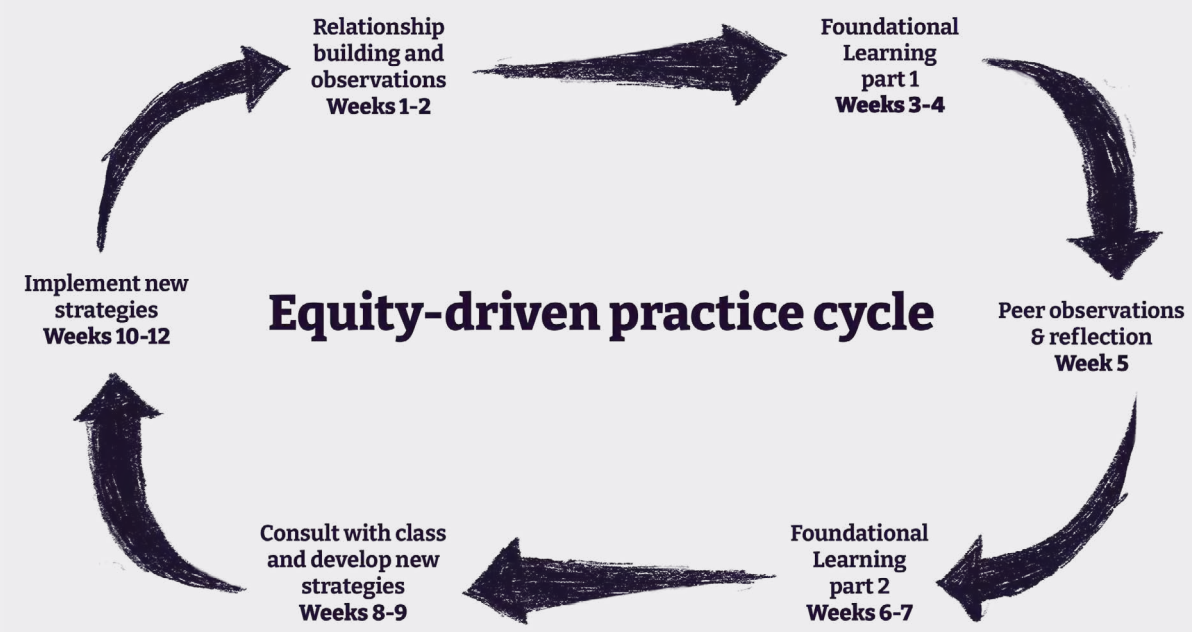
The journey of transformation—
a whole-school approach

The pilot isn't just about improving outcomes—it's about rethinking the ideological foundations of schooling. It's about shifting culture from the inside out. Our two pilot schools are on a shared journey—one that will radically change how people work together, relate to each other, and experience their school community.

The first step is awareness. As teachers begin to engage with the Class 13 approach, that awareness sparks reflection: What could I do differently? Could my practice be causing harm? What even counts as a good outcome?

If you've found yourself asking similar questions while reading this report—Wait... is that deficit ideology?—that's the point. One of the most powerful things about naming deficit ideology is that it helps us notice its influence, not just in others, but in ourselves. Think of it like developing a sensitivity to inequity. Over time, you start seeing it everywhere: in policies, classroom language, school displays, even in well-meaning projects.

The pilot gives staff and communities the space to sit with those reflections—and then go deeper. Imagine the kind of awareness you've had while reading this report, but multiplied tenfold, sustained over years, and supported by peers and a leadership team who are on the same path.



The Equity-Driven Practice Cycle builds on these early reflections—reframing everyday interactions and encouraging deeper critique and self-awareness.

Am I really causing harm? Why do I think this way? What could I do differently?

Of course, this isn't an easy process. Some educators feel energised by the possibilities of change. Others respond defensively—insisting their intent isn't harmful, or pointing to Ofsted, government policy, or school rules as immovable barriers. That's why we provide intensive, sustained support—including a partnership with Partisan, who will offer therapeutic support to help teachers meet the emotional demands of this work. Alongside this, we offer one-to-one support with equity practitioners, a Community of Practice, and structured spaces for reflection.

We draw on Sherry Marx's (2001) approach to critical cultural therapy, which recognises that meaningful change often begins with contradiction: between how we see ourselves and how we show up in practice. Marx's work highlights what we've seen in our own delivery—that progress isn't always linear. People may open up, pull back, challenge, reflect, and then move forward again. That's not failure—it's the process. What matters is having the support and structure to move beyond defensiveness, to hold discomfort long enough to learn from it.

An adaptation of Sherry Marx's Critical Cultural Therapy model

Our model mirrors this: it creates the conditions for deep reflection, accountability, and growth. It helps educators not just know something different, but be someone different in the classroom.

On a practical level, we'll deliver our Foundational Learning once a term over two academic years, with the aim of engaging 70% of teaching staff in each school. This consists of four, six-hour sessions: two focused on deficit ideology and equity theory, and two on reflective practice and action planning. Lessons will be covered by our equity practitioners to enable full participation and create protected space for reflection.

Crucially, equity practitioners won't just be covering lessons—they'll be present in the classroom long-term. This means they can build real relationships with staff, observe school dynamics, and support the creation of new routines that interrupt habitual responses to young people.

The "magic" of our work lies in how we deliver the training and facilitate reflection. We don't simply point out problematic practices—we help teachers uncover them for themselves. Grounded in critical cultural therapy, this approach enables long-term change by fostering ownership, rather than compliance. For action planning, we use the What? So what? Now what? reflective model (Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper, 2001) to support practical application.

The aim isn't to feel guilty; it's to shift. From defensiveness to curiosity. From intent to impact. From seeing young people as problems to understanding them as people—full stop. We also recognise that transformation can't happen if teachers are exhausted. That's why the practice cycle includes practical, responsive support—whether that's help with classroom behaviour, teaching assistant cover, or preparing resources. Educators will have access to external therapeutic support to ensure teachers are resourced for the emotional demands of this work.

Facilitating democratic decision making

Shifting power in schools doesn't happen by accident—it requires intention, structure, and time. To support this, we're providing schools with the scaffolding they need to reimagine who makes decisions, and how. Through two projects—the rule change project and the parent-driven policy change project—we'll support schools to rework their decision-making processes and engage young people and families in meaningful power-sharing.

The Rule Change Project

As outlined earlier in this report, the education system claims to serve young people—yet routinely dehumanises them. Even when young people are invited to speak, it's questionable whether they are genuinely heard—or whether anything changes. This is another example of a common attempt at systems change that falls short because it does not seek to change all of the interdependent conditions. Student councils and youth advisory groups may address representation and occasionally influence policy or resource allocation, but they rarely shift the underlying conditions that sustain inequity.

The Rule Change Project offers a more holistic approach to elevating youth voice—one that, alongside the wider pilot, supports the systemic change needed to transform the school environment. We'll be partnering with Advocacy Academy, youth organisers based in Lambeth. Their Changemakers—young people in a cyclical leadership development programme—will lead work with students across both schools. Activities include leading assemblies, managing sign-ups, and delivering workshops to build momentum across the school. The project will culminate in a democratic event where students decide which school rules to change—guided by the equity principles as decision-making criteria.

Parent-Driven Policy Change Project

School communities are diverse—and for years, many initiatives have targeted or blamed parents and carers for children's educational outcomes. In some instances, this has left communities competing for resources or resentful about how the resources are being distributed. Many families' distrust or disengagement stems from their own negative experiences of the education system.

This project will be similar to the young people's rule change project, but led by parents instead. We aim to engage as many parents and carers as possible—because when we work together, we win. This project aims to break the cycle of blame — ensuring families are not just heard, but actively shaping the school community, participating in decision-making, supporting all children, and holding leaders to account. This is how we move from *it takes a village to raise **my** child to building the village that raises **our** children.*

In Phase One, we'll begin engaging families to build trust and clarify the pathway to transformation. Through deep listening, we'll explore what parents and carers want for their children — and what they need from the school. Along the way, we'll support the emergence of shared leadership and collective action, grounded in the experiences and insights of the community.

Building on this in Phase Two, families will identify policies that don't align with the four principles and advocate for change with governors and senior leaders. Governors and senior leaders will have the opportunity to independently review the proposal and discuss potential changes, before the two groups (leaders and families) come together to democratically decide which policy changes are most grounded in the equity principles and therefore should be taken forward. Ultimately, this project will unite families through the four equity principles—placing them at the centre of the school's transformation.

Spot the difference!

These two diagrams describe the same pilot — just through different lenses. One speaks the language of systems and funders, the other draws from our values and everyday practice.

What changes when we shift how we describe the work? What stays the same?

Transforming Schools into Equitable Spaces Embedded Pilot
--- A theory of possibility

CLASS 13

Inequity is baked into education. Although all schools are different, there are points of commonality across the education system

This pilot challenges inequity through four equity principles:
1. **Affirming a person's full humanity**
2. **Nurturing critical thinking**
3. **Cultivating community**
4. **Fostering democracy**

Work to embed the principles happens in three phases over four years

By participating in our activities and embodying our principles, young people, families and educators will feel **committed, heard** and **connected**

Throughout the pilot, as the principles are adopted by the community, we will see a culture shift:
1. **Young people, educators and families feel affirmed**
2. **Power is shared**
3. **The school community is more supportive**
4. **Democracy is the norm**

With the principles embedded within educators' practice and throughout the school community, we will see true transformation, with outcomes and impact sustained for years to come

Control to educate

Schools are harmful and violent places for children and teachers

Deficit ideology is pervasive, preventing truly equitable education

Schools are not working collaboratively with or held accountable by the community

Embedding equity

Inputs

Financial resources
£167 per young person per year (£500k total per year)

Staffing
9 FTE
- 1FTE programme design lead
- 1FTE evaluation and impact lead
- 1FTE project officer
- 6FTE delivery staff *(2FTE primary practitioners, 2FTE secondary practitioners, 1FTE SENCO practitioner, 2x0.5FTE community liaison officers)*

Materials
- Mobile technology for practitioners
- Data collection tools and systems, incl. comparison data from Teacher Tapp and DfE national datasets

Activities

Phase One - Relationship building
Sept 24 - Aug 25
- Rule change project (partner with Advocacy Academy)
- Test equity-driven practice cycle
- Evaluation set up

Phase Two - Supporting teachers
Sept 25 - Aug 27
- Termly equity-drive practice cycle (partner with Partisan)
- Parent-driven policy change project
- Communities of Practice
- Governor training

Phase Three - Community accountability
- Ongoing reflective support
- Grow and embed CofP
- Disseminate learning (partner with

Outputs

We'll know our activities have been delivered when:

Everyone in the school communities have had opportunities to engage with the four principles and have access to a shared language for challenging inequity

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The schools have new co-designed decision-making processes for school policy and changes to teaching practice

---

The school communities have a new definition of what "good" means (for educators and for young people)

70% of educators across both schools have completed the Equity-Driven Practice Cycle

Mechanisms of change

Committed

Everyone in the community has the willingness to invest in the relationships and work through challenges

Heard

Everyone in the community feels their unique qualities are acknowledged

Connected

Everyone in the community understands their role in the freedom of others

A school community transformed

Who we'll work with
- Approx. **130 teachers** (70 across both embedded pilot schools + 60 teachers across Lambeth who access to our training)
- Approx. **2800 young people** (total young people at pilot schools + est. 30 young people per teacher across Lambeth)

What changes we'll see

Educators will:
- Find teaching less stressful
- Be better equipped to work in partnership with young people and their families
- Feel better able to step into their pastoral role
- Be better at identifying harmful, inequitable behaviours
- Be more self-reflective

Young people will:
- Find school less stressful
- Have better relationships with educators
- Be better equipped to engage in critical thought
- Be more engaged in lessons
- Become more active community members

Families will:
- Have more opportunities to be active members of the school community
- Play a greater role in decision making and influencing change at the school
- Care for more children across the school community

Interest convergence

Crucially, together these changes will mean that all members of the school community not only have a shared language, but have shared values and goals for the school community that underpin their relationships with each other

Assumptions
- Teachers engage with peer-led community of practice
- SLT and Governors support and engage with the pilot
- Community engagement work with families is effective
- Families have the motivation and resources to support the pilot
- All staff (catering, support, administrators etc) step into their role as educators

Educational justice

Harm is reduced; mutual care and support for young people and their families is a priority

Affirmation and critical thinking are regularly used to challenge deficit thinking

Democracy is the norm

Spot the difference!

Transforming Schools into Equitable Spaces Embedded Pilot
--- A deficit theory of change

CLASS 13

There are persistent challenges in the school system that disproportionately affect certain groups

Our goal is to increase cultural competence and racial literacy to improve inclusivity. By taking a whole school approach, we'll ensure that all members of the school community play their role in making positive changes to improve the school environment as well as academic outcomes

By participating in our activities students and teachers will feel **empowered, heard** and **connected**

As students and parents are more engaged with the schools, students' and teachers' resilience improves, and teachers have a better understanding of the challenges that minoritised students face, we'll see improvements to the persistent challenges

Context

Poor mental health for students and teachers

Increasing exclusion rates and poor attainment for minoritised students

Teacher retention crisis

Embedding equity

Inputs

Financial resources
£167 per young person per year (£500k total per year)

Staffing
9 FTE
- 1FTE programme design lead
- 1FTE evaluation and impact lead
- 1FTE project officer
- 6FTE delivery staff *(2FTE primary practitioners, 2FTE secondary practitioners, 1FTE SENCO practitioner, 2x0.5FTE community liaison officers)*

Materials
- Mobile technology for practitioners
- Data collection tools and systems, incl. comparison data from Teacher Tapp and DfE national datasets

Activities

Phase One - Relationship building
Sept 24 - Aug 25
- Rule change project (partner with Advocacy Academy)
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- Parent-driven policy change project
- Communities of Practice
- Governor training

Phase Three - Community accountability
- Ongoing reflective support
- Grow and embed CofP
- Disseminate learning (partner with NGA)

Outputs

We'll know our activities have been delivered when:

Teachers, governors and parents have had access to equity training and learning opportunities

---

The schools have put youth voice at the heart of their policies and decision

---

Students and teachers have been given the tools to be more resilient

---

70% of teachers across both schools have completed the Equity-Driven Practice Cycle

Creating change

Empowered

Students and parents feel able to use their voice to advocate for change

Heard

Students and parents feel their opinions are listened to and understood by the school

Connected

Students and parents feel included in the school community

What we'll achieve

Who we'll work with
- Approx. **130 teachers** (70 across both embedded pilot schools + 60 teachers across Lambeth who access to our training)
- Approx. **2800 young people** (total young people at pilot schools + est. 30 young people per teacher across Lambeth)

What changes we'll see

Teachers will:
- Have a better understanding of racism and inequity
- Spend less time managing challenging behaviour
- Have improved wellbeing and resilience
- Be better equipped to work in partnership with young people and their families
- Take greater responsibility for safeguarding, particularly when it comes to racial equity

Students will:
- Be better equipped to regulate their behaviour
- Have improved wellbeing and resilience
- Show less challenging behaviour in the classroom
- Engage with opportunities to have their voice heard
- Show less school refusal

Parents will:
- Be more actively engaged with the school
- Take more responsibility for their role in supporting their child to engage with school
- Stand together with teachers

Assumptions
- Approximately 70% of teachers across both schools engage in equity-driven practice cycle
- Teachers engage with peer-led community of practice
- SLT and Governors support and engage with the pilot
- Community engagement work with families is effective
- Families have the motivation and resources to support the pilot
- All staff (catering, support, administrators etc) step into their role as educators
- Class 13 practitioners and trainers receive ongoing reflective support

Impacts

Students and teachers feel their mental health has improved

Overall exclusion rates have reduced and there are fewer disparities

Teacher retention improves

The impact of creating equitable spaces

If we believe education can change lives, we have to ask: how do we know when that change is happening— *and who gets to decide?*

This pilot has the potential to fundamentally change how we understand and resource schools. We want the impact to be felt by the whole school community—families, educators and most importantly, young people—creating a legacy of equity for generations to come.

Class 13 has always been bold about our intention to transform the education system. We also want to be bold in how we understand impact—and how we generate the kind of evidence that supports others' change, too. We know that to effectively create sustained change in a system, it is necessary to change both explicit and implicit conditions. This will be hard work, and it will take time. So we wanted to develop an approach to learning and evaluation that can demonstrate change is taking place incrementally throughout the course of the pilot. We'll track change as it happens—from shifting policies to reshaping habits of thought—and refine our approach along the way.

We'll use creative, participatory evaluation methods to guide community members in articulating the impact the pilot has had on them and their community.

Understanding our impact

It should come as no surprise that, as we think about education differently, we think about evaluation differently too. As our work is grounded in community, the key purpose of our evaluation is to articulate the journey of change the school community and its members undergo, and co-produce resources to disseminate learning to the wider community.

We recognise that it is important to understand what has worked well with the pilot and what has worked less well. To do that, we'll focus our efforts on working alongside the school communities to collectively understand and articulate impact as it happens.

Our research questions:

1. **What happens when schools try to centre equity?**

2. **What does it take to transform a school and:**
   - ***Challenge deficit thinking?***
   - ***Reduce harm?***
   - ***Normalise democracy?***

3. **How and in what ways does centring equity mitigate persistent challenges of:**
   - ***Young people's mental health?***
   - ***Exclusion rate disparities?***
   - ***Teacher wellbeing and retention?***

An overview of our methods and outcome areas is provided in the table on the next page. We'll be taking a developmental approach to evaluating the pilot, combining more traditional evaluation tools such as pre-post surveys, in-depth interviews and focus groups with more innovative, participatory tools. By drawing on a range of methods to collate knowledge, we'll be able to triangulate across qualitative and quantitative data to draw out deep insights and learning across the course of the pilot.

METHODS		OUTCOME AREA		
		Improved knowledge/ skills	Behaviour change	Change to conditions
SURVEYS	Teacher Tapp pulse checks		X	X
	Pre-post surveys	X	X	X
SCHOOL DATA	Behaviour points		X	
	Academic progress	X		
REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES	In-depth interviews	X	X	X
	Reflective conversation proforma		X	
RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING	Appreciative inquiry		X	X
	Interactive group reflections		X	X
	Impact mind mapping		X	X

To get a holistic picture of the school culture and context, we'll interview teaching and support staff, draw on existing school data, such as behaviour points and attendance data, as well as capturing new data via surveys over the course of the pilot. This approach has been developed collaboratively with the schools. We polled teachers to understand how and at what frequency they would find opportunities to reflect most valuable. We talked with senior leadership about what information they would find most useful in understanding their staff and any challenges they face. We used reflective activities to understand what teachers' bugbears and priorities were in the current school context.

We expect the process of capturing outcomes to be iterative. Our Theory of Change articulates our current hypothesis. However, as the pilot is new and our approach hasn't been tested before, continuous learning and improvement of our research activities will be part of the evaluation process. This is why we're prioritising participatory approaches to ensure that community members are a meaningful part of the process. We'll use Ripple Effects Mapping* (Chazdon et al., 2017) to support community members to articulate in their own words what changes they've seen as a result of the pilot, and what the "knock-on effects" or impact of those changes are. The first stages will involve a combination of peer led discussions and mapping exercises to generate an initial picture of changes that are happening in the schools. Later in the pilot, we'll engage in reflective activities, reviewing the maps and discussing further changes and transformations.

*What is Ripple Effects Mapping?

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is a participatory evaluation method that captures the full scope of a programme's impact — including the indirect and unexpected. By combining storytelling, visual mapping, and group reflection, it surfaces meaningful outcomes that traditional metrics often miss.

Changes for our pilot will likely not be linear, particularly as teachers will be engaging with the equity-driven practice cycle at different points in time. We are also more focused on sustained change. We therefore have found it more helpful to think of our outcomes in terms of knowledge and skills, behaviour change, and changes to conditions rather than short, medium and longer-term outcomes. Our aim with this approach is to capture the different levels needed for change to be holistic and sustained across the community.

The issue with traditional evaluation approaches

In alignment with the design of our pilot, the evaluation takes a different approach — one that seeks to excavate rotting roots rather than apply surface-level fixes. Popular though traditional interventions may be, they rarely challenge the deeper systems that sustain inequity. If our equity principles are to be truly woven throughout the project, they must sit at the heart of the evaluation process too.

This can feel uncomfortable; taking a non-traditional approach can raise questions of rigour and validity. But when we rely too heavily on what's been done before, we limit the possibilities of what might be needed next.

As this report has shown, existing interventions have too often been insufficient and ineffective in resolving the inequities that continue to recur across education systems. We acknowledge that the novelty and boldness of our approach brings tension — but by working with the community, we believe those tensions can be held and worked through across the course of the pilot.

On a more practical level, there are several reasons why traditional approaches did not make sense for our pilot. This pioneering project is conceptually complex, and is being delivered across two schools that are connected but not comparable. Then, there are elements of the delivery model that would create challenges for more traditional evaluation approaches. For example, the equity-driven practice cycle will be individualised as needed for each teacher and iterated across the course of the pilot, so the definition of fidelity will shift and change. Although there will be some consistent elements of delivery, such as all teachers attending the foundational learning sessions, it would be impossible to control or account for all external factors as there are far too many. A more dynamic, holistic approach to evaluation is therefore necessitated by our unique approach.

Another option would have been to replicate methods or outcome measures utilised in evaluations of similar projects as a point of comparison. For example, there are similarities between our embedded pilot and the school-wide positive behavioural support (SWPBS) model (Sugai & Horner, 2002). SWPBS is an intervention increasing in popularity as it takes a whole school approach working with teachers and young people, and is often favoured as it is considered "strengths based" and has tiers for tailoring to different schools' and young people's needs. There are also many standardised measures and tools that already exist to assess things like young people's wellbeing, such as the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (Hall et al., 2019). But many of these existing interventions and standardised tools are grounded in deficit ideology, seeking to prove that young people are "fixed", better able to navigate barriers placed in their way, more resilient to a harmful system.

As a researcher, I've been trained to think and approach knowledge and information in a particular way. To value systematicity and replicability (how will we know if our findings are valid if we can't do the same thing again?); to hold certain types of information in higher esteem (peer reviewed academic journal articles are the gold standard); to think about people and communities as objects (research subjects, fieldwork, data collection).

It is all very extractive, which doesn't sit well with me when it is pointed out, but I have often chosen to go with the status quo (or even champion it) rather than try a different path. I've delivered government-commissioned projects with vulnerable groups using rigid research methods. I've worked for a funder advocating to charities that their data collection must be more rigorous to evidence impact more effectively. I've "centred youth voice" in evaluation by engaging young people in a tokenistic way.

At Class 13 there is a real opportunity to do things differently, yet I still find myself falling back into "traditional" approaches, looking to previous evaluations for frameworks and tools and outcome measures. After recently seeing a post on social media and reflecting on the Class 13 equity principles, I came to the realisation that using different language would be a good starting point. Not data collection, but ***co-creating knowledge.*** *Not research findings, but* ***shared learnings.*** *Not informed consent, but* ***consent as an ongoing, relational practice.***

So this is where I am at. I don't have all the answers; our journey is ongoing. But I am thinking, reflecting, exploring different approaches and coming back time and again to our principles. I'm excited to see where we end up.

Schools transformed

Through this pilot, we hope to transform our two partner schools into communities that affirm all members—young people, educators, and families. We believe that if school communities truly embed our four principles, then:

- Harm will be reduced; mutual care and support for young people and their families will be a priority, and relationships amongst school staff as well as between educators, young people and their families will improve.
- Affirmation and critical thinking will be used regularly to challenge deficit thinking, mitigating the need for restrictive and controlling risk-averse policies such as one-way systems, limited bathroom access, and detentions
- Democracy will be the norm, improving engagement from young people and their families and improving job satisfaction for teachers

In turn, this will mitigate and, we hope, eventually eradicate, persistent issues around mental health, exclusion rates, and retention:

- The mental health of young people and teachers will improve, as the schools will be a more supportive, less stressful place to be.
- Exclusion rates will decrease, as deficit thinking is consistently challenged, many existing punitive practices will no longer make sense.
- Teacher retention will improve, as they too are affirmed and feel more part of the school community.

But these are the long term goals. What changes will we see along the way that get us to our vision of schools transformed?

What systems change will look like

If we think again about the "Water of Systems Change" model, we know that to effectively change a system we need to make sustained changes across a number of explicit and implicit conditions. Below are some examples of how the pilot will work in an interconnected way to change implicit/semi-explicit conditions (habits of thought, decision making power and the quality of connections) and explicit conditions (resources, policies, and practice).
Our intention is that, by combining these projects and delivering them strategically, change will build cumulatively and become sustained. Going through these changes collectively will improve **relationships** within and between young people, educators and families. Over time, **mindsets** (or ideologies) and **power dynamics** across the school community will change and it will become the norm to have the equity principles and a range of voices at the heart of all decision making. A key part of our vision includes a significant rethinking of how schools support their young people and the community, moving away from short-term fixes to more sustainable approaches. These projects will help the schools to think differently about policy and practice, and in turn envision ways to use their resources in different and genuinely transformative ways, by developing a clear vision for change grounded in our equity framework.

Community-led change

The primary goal of the Rule Change Project and the Family-Driven Policy Change Project is to shift power — enabling young people and families to lead meaningful change in schools. What often happens in schools is that young people are given a voice in a tokenistic way (e.g. a youth council)—but because young people and educators are used to the status quo, they rarely question fundamental issues within the school system that harm and dehumanise them. Alongside this, families often don't feel they have a voice in school decision making, and educators often find it challenging to build positive relationships with families. These projects will be critical in disrupting business as usual — creating space for new questions, new relationships, and new ways of imagining what school could be.

Key outcomes for these projects will include:

- Educators and school leaders will think about and approach decision making differently, empowered to truly centre democracy and in turn escape from a cycle of blame and evasion of responsibility.
- By taking the lead on this project, young people and families will feel more affirmed and seen, whilst getting comfortable with asking questions and being in dialogue with teachers and senior leaders.
- This will be a catalyst for embedding critical thinking as the norm, which will in turn mean young people and families become more active community members, advocating for themselves and sharing feedback more freely, moving towards a more democratic learning environment.

Relationships at the heart of teaching practice

Through the equity-driven practice cycle, we'll be working with educators to improve their understanding of inequity, supporting them to become more reflective practitioners, and ultimately driving forward an ideological shift away from deficit thinking. By being active and engaged participants in the practice cycle, teachers will be better able to encourage critical thought amongst young people and create more opportunities for young people to give feedback on the learning process. This will improve the quality and quantity of their relationships with young people, a key part of being more community-led. This will mean that:

- Young people experiencing challenges will have a broader network to gain support School will be a more affirming environment for young people.
- With community and collaboration at the centre, teachers will find managing their classrooms easier, reducing teacher stress and burnout.

Supporting the wider community with resources and learning

The pilot is working intensively with two schools, but we want the learning we create to be shared much more widely. Our goal is to create a diverse set of resources that other schools can engage with to embed the Class 13 principles in their school community. This will include things like case studies from the pilot, reflective activities, readings, video resources such as workshops, online safeguarding training.

During the fourth year of the pilot, where support becomes less intensive for the schools, we'll shift our focus towards collating knowledge into resources that can be shared. As this is not a **one-size-fits-all** approach, schools that are not in the pilot will be able to engage with resources as and when it makes sense for them. To live our value of cultivating community, we'll prioritise accessibility, such as by offering additional tailored support in exchange for existing school resources rather than financial contributions.

We'll maintain and continue to build resources after the end of the pilot as we transition to a membership business model (which has the added benefit of supporting our financial sustainability as an organisation). We are building key relationships in the education system in Lambeth outside of the pilot schools to share learning through different channels. Key partnerships we've built so far include Lambeth Heads Association, Oval Learning Cluster, the Wyvern Federation (of which both pilot schools are a part of) and the National Governance Association.

Interest convergence and diffusion

We're often asked how and when we'll scale the pilot. But that's not our aim. Because this work is rooted in community, any ongoing change must also be community-led. Instead of scaling through top-down replication, we're focused on diffusion (Rogers, 2003)—the idea that meaningful change spreads when people see what's working and choose to adopt it themselves.

We know this approach works in education because we've seen it before. Though ideologically different, the transformation of education in Hackney is a clear example. It began with one school: Mossbourne. When improvements in academic attainment became visible, other schools adopted similar practices. This wasn't driven by government policy or Ofsted mandates; it was driven by what scholar Derrick Bell called **interest convergence:** change that happens when the goals of the community align with the interests of those in power. In Hackney, schools and families shared a goal of improving outcomes, and that alignment accelerated the spread of Mossbourne's model.

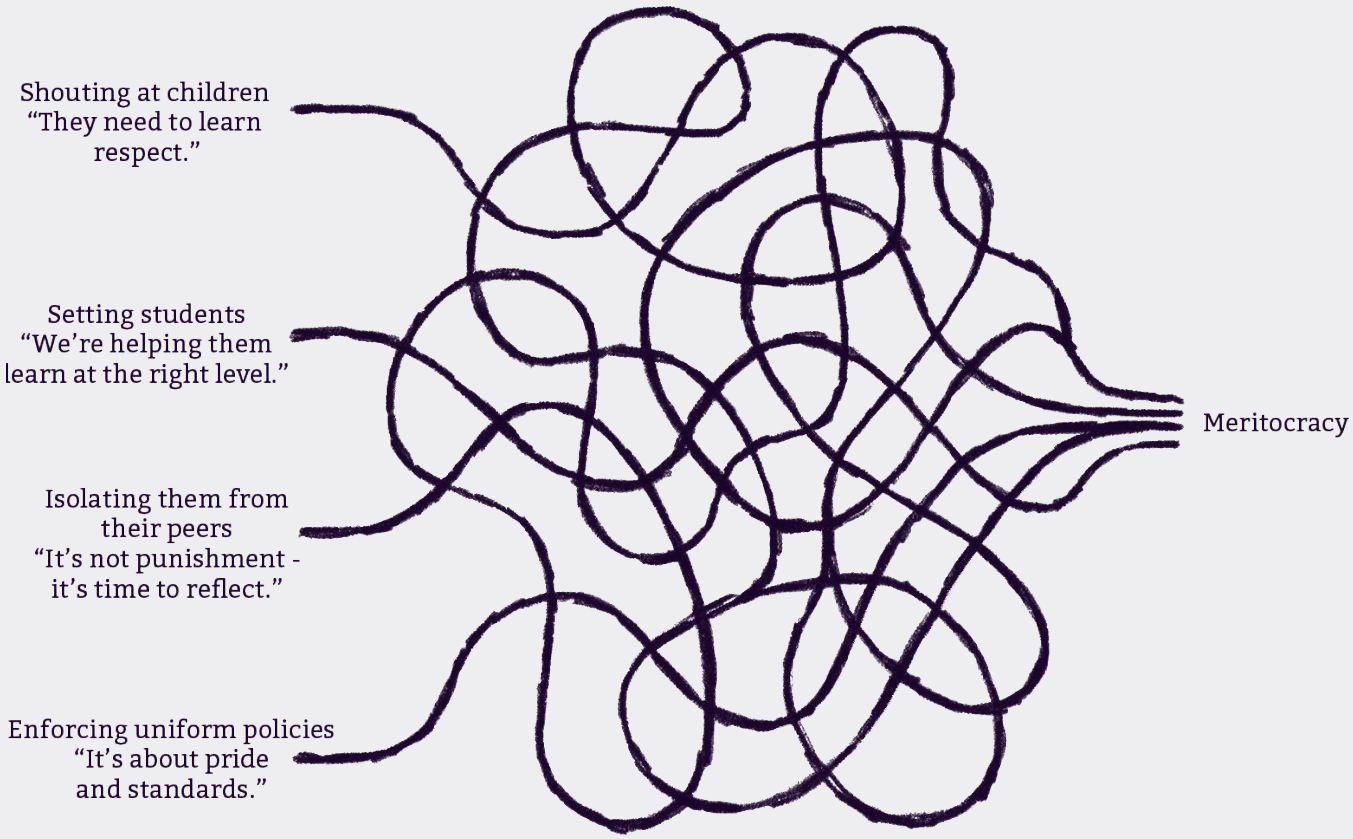
We see similar diffusion with pedagogical tools like Teach Like a Champion and trauma-informed practice. These approaches weren't imposed; they spread because they were perceived to "work" — especially when linked to attainment.

Our hope is that the Class 13 framework diffuses in the same way — not through mandates, but because it works. When schools centre the four principles — affirming humanity, thinking critically, cultivating community, and practising democracy, equity grows. Relationships deepen. Exclusions reduce. Mental health improves. And yes - **so does attainment.** That's the simplicity of our argument: when equity is the foundation, outcomes follow.

And when others see what equity makes possible, they'll want to join. When they're ready, the tools, relationships, and shared learning from this pilot will be here — ready to grow with them.

All roads lead to...

These practices may look different — shouting, isolation, setting, strict uniform policies — but follow the logic, and they all lead to the same place: the belief that young people must earn their worth through compliance.



But if the meritocracy isn't real, the justification collapses — and all we're left with is harm, dressed up as discipline.

Remember: justice is what love looks like in public. — Cornel West

Conclusion

The future of education starts here

Throughout this report, we've shown that the education system is not broken. It rests on an ideology that has persisted for centuries, and its legacy runs through colonisation, patriarchy, poverty, and enduring educational inequities. But naming the harm is only the beginning. What matters now is what we choose to do with that truth.

At Class 13, we're betting everything on our truth that affirming humanity, nurturing critical thinking, cultivating community, and fostering democracy these four principles won't be optional in the future—they'll be essential to anyone serious about building something better. This work is already underway. But we know change doesn't come from frameworks alone—it comes from people.

Which is why we're closing with a letter. A letter to those not yet here. A letter that speaks not only to what was, but to what must be.

Let's build something better—together.

A letter from the editor:

To the children not yet born, but already imagined

You may hear stories about how schools were once places of order. About rules that made sense because they were rules. About young people who just needed discipline, and teachers who "couldn't cope[]. You'll hear that these systems were fair. That everyone had a chance.

These are stories people tell when they've learned to survive, when education demanded resilience instead of offering care.

We write this letter not as a warning, though there is danger. Not as a comfort, though there is love. But as a record: of what was, of what we could not ignore, and of what we chose to do.

There was a time and still is, as we write this, when young people were punished for resisting harm. When teachers were asked to uphold the very conditions that broke them. When both were taught the same lesson: be silent. Comply. Your value lies in how well you obey. Some swallowed this message until it tasted like truth. Others spat it out and were punished for the mess.

We watched as voices were lost, some quieted by fear, some by fatigue, some by force. We watched children learn not just how to read and write, but how to doubt their instincts, shrink their joy, and see themselves as the problem. We watched teachers - bright, committed, hungry to make change - stripped of their autonomy, their judgement replaced by scripts. Forced to teach conformity. Becoming someone else entirely.

And yet.

There were always those who refused. Who stayed loud. Who loved too fiercely to conform. Who found each other in corridors, in classrooms, in the gaps between policies. Who held the line, even as it frayed.

We did not write this report as a blueprint. There is no one way forward. But we wrote it because there are too many ways back...

We want you to know that we tried to break the silence without breaking

each other. That we chose clarity over comfort. That we refused the lie that some humans are more human than others, even when the system rewarded us for believing it.

Some of us will be the ones you meet in your school older, maybe wiser, maybe still healing. Some of us will be the ones who left so you wouldn't have to. Some of us will be stories you inherit, names you repeat, people you never knew but somehow remember.

And you?

You do not need to repeat what we lived through to honour what we fought for. You are not here to prove your worth. You are not here to make peace with systems that never made peace with you. You are here to build something new. To ask better questions. To demand better answers. We will not romanticise your struggle. But we believe in your imagination. We believe in your defiance. We believe in the world you are already shaping, even as this one resists you.

But know this fundamental truth: it's not your fault. You are enough.

Even if they put you in a mentoring programme, don't take it to heart. It's just a sign that the adults have run out of ideas.

Promise us one thing.
That you won't keep looking for validation from those who get their power by withholding it. That you won't let the system define your brilliance by its capacity to see it. That you will remember: some eyes are trained not to recognise light.

Instead, offer validation freely. See others as fully human. Because the most radical, most beautiful part of being human is recognising that others are too.

With love, rage, and hope in motion,

CLASS 13

P.S.
If something in these pages stayed with you, hold onto it - and share it. This work isn't finished when the report ends. It continues in conversation, in classrooms, in quiet acts of refusal and everyday courage. Change doesn't belong to us. It belongs to all of us.

The Equity Oracle

Welcome to The Equity Oracle, where we tackle the burning questions that keep educators, school leaders, and policymakers up at night. Think of us as the agony aunt for anyone struggling with the contradictions, frustrations, and downright absurdities of the education system.

99 problems and TLAC is one

Dear Equity Oracle,

My school is following the Teach Like a Champion approach. This approach favours techniques over pedagogy, it feels reductive for teachers and oppressive for the children. Removing individuality for both. The school is pushing for shared techniques, language and routines, all wrapped up in what TLAC call 'belonging', whilst focussing on correcting and controlling pupils. How do I push back and challenge this approach when it is so embedded and valued by leadership and trust?

Kind regards,
Broken like a Champion

Dear Broken Like a Champion,

You're not alone in feeling this way about TLAC. While consistency and a sense of belonging are essential, we agree with you—this approach can feel more like control than care, reducing teachers to instructors and pupils to passive recipients. It risks turning schools into metaphorical McDonald's, where everything is standardised—fry chips for exactly 3 minutes at 168°C. But people aren't potatoes, and education needs to be responsive and human-centred.

Here's a way to start pushing back constructively: engage leadership with the values they care about. For example, ask your senior leader which of the Class 13 principles resonates most with them and that they'd like to see reflected in the school. If they choose "critical thinking," then the next time a scripted technique or routine is introduced, you can ask, "How does this support embedding critical thinking?"

By tying your challenge to the school's values or priorities, you position yourself as someone who shares the goal of improving the school, but with a perspective that centres individuality and meaningful learning. It's about shifting the conversation from control to connection.

You've got this!
Equity Oracle

To coat or not to coat

Dear Equity Oracle,

A recent incident has highlighted a challenge in my school. During playtime, a teaching assistant insisted that a young person put on their coat. The child, who never wears a coat (a fact known and accepted by their mother and other staff), refused and responded bluntly. The TA demanded compliance, eventually escalating the matter by recommending a lunchtime detention. This led to the child becoming very upset, and I had to intervene to calm them down and reverse the detention.

This incident feels like a case of misplaced priorities. How do I help my staff focus on meaningful interactions with pupils rather than enforcing arbitrary rules?

Sincerely,
Caught in the Cold

Dear Caught in the Cold,

Your leadership offers an opportunity to model equitable responses. While your intervention was necessary to de-escalate the situation, it's important to affirm the teaching assistant to maintain their confidence. When staff feel unsupported, it can lead to disengagement and strained relationships with pupils.

Consider a three-way reflective conversation involving yourself, the teaching assistant, and the young person:

1. Affirm the Teaching Assistant:
   Acknowledge that your approach was not affirming to them, and show understanding of their intent to uphold standards, then explore similar reflections from them and how their actions may have felt to the young person.
2. Encourage the Young Person's Reflection:
   Give the young person space to share their perspective. This fosters critical thinking and while affirming them.

Moving forward, it's worth introducing a reflective framework for all staff to use in similar moments. These three guiding questions are a simple yet effective way to shape equitable and meaningful interactions:

- How is this affirming for everyone involved?
- How is this building stronger relationships?
- How are my actions encouraging critical thinking?

This approach not only retains staff autonomy but also provides a consistent foundation for navigating complex situations. By anchoring decisions in these principles, you ensure that your school community moves closer to embodying equity in practice—not just policy.

In community,
Equity Oracle

Not so Marvel-ous

Dear Tempted but cautious,

I recently worked on a project with Marvel around the Black Panther movie. It felt like an amazing opportunity for the young people I work with, but on reflection, I realised it was quite extractive. The young people's voices and creativity were used to promote the brand, and I didn't feel they got much out of it beyond the initial excitement.

What can I do differently next time to make sure projects like this benefit the young people and don't feel like they're just being used?

Sincerely,
T'cha-nah

Dear T'cha-nah,

Your reflection is an essential step in embedding equity into your practice. Often, the first stage is developing a "spidey sense" for inequity that causes us to pause and question. Recognising these moments, even without immediate answers, is a critical part of the journey.

Projects with major brands can be exciting, but as you've noted, they can risk being extractive when the focus is on the organisation's goals rather than the young people's growth. To navigate this tension in the future, keep your role simple: affirm young people, encourage critical thinking, and prioritise their growth. If you do that, you're already doing great work!

For short projects, like your work with Marvel, here are some steps to create a more equitable experience:

1. **Set the Context:**
   Before the session, spend time discussing the purpose of the project, its benefits, and its limitations. Be transparent about how their input will be used. This helps young people manage expectations and empowers them to participate knowingly.
2. **Facilitate Reflection:**
   After the session, debrief with the young people. Explore what they learned, how they felt, and whether they found the experience meaningful. This strengthens their ability to recognise and navigate inequity—building their own spidey sense.

By embedding these steps into future collaborations, you can ensure opportunities like these do more than excite young people—they affirm, empower, and inspire them too.

In solidarity,
Equity Oracle

Show Me the Receipts!

Dear Equity Oracle,

I'm planning to pitch your work to the trustees of the foundation I work for and need some 'hard facts' or 'ammunition'. Specifically, I'm expecting they will ask questions about how you plan to spread the model you're piloting to schools across the country, what evidence you're basing this on, and what this will cost. What else might give them the confidence to sign that cheque addressed to Class 13?

Sincerely,
Tempted but cautious

Dear Tempted but cautious,

First, thank you for your support. We could not do the work we do without people advocating for our work to funders. Your letter highlights some questions we often and are keen to address.

People often assume our intention is to scale our pilot project, rolling out to more schools over time. But the level of intensive support we provide through the pilot is not scalable. Our intention instead is to use the pilot to generate learning and resources that can be used in a broad range of school communities and show that, with time and dedication, schools can be transformed.

We know that other schools have been transformed and then modelled by other schools after innovations have diffused across the community. For example, schools in Hackney adopted a similar approach to the innovator Mossbourne, after seeing its success in improving attainment. Our approach is of course very different to Mossbourne's, but our model of change through diffusion is the same.

In terms of cost, we suggest you share a cost comparison with other approaches. Our project will improve the school environment for all young people at our partner schools. This equates to **£468 per young person per year.** According to the Education Endowment Foundation, this cost is moderate when compared with other work in schools that supports young people— a typical mentoring and 121 support is a similar cost per young person, but works with far fewer young people and will be needed indefinitely.

A key part of our approach is that we will cease to exist: we're taking a holistic, whole school approach that will lead to systemic change, and as our approach diffuses, change will be sustained with no ongoing annual costs (unlike short-term fixes which will always be needed without systemic change). So investing in Class 13 is truly an investment in transformation.

In solidarity,
The Equity Oracle.

Notes:

Click for our references

This report reflects the work of many. We are especially grateful to our trustees, past and present, for holding the vision and doing the thinking in the messy middle.

We also thank Impact on Urban Health, whose partnership and belief in this work made the embedded pilot possible. It takes courage to back slow change.

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Class 13 exists to reimagine education as a space where young people and adults grow together in dignity, curiosity, and community. Our work is rooted in four core principles: affirming full humanity, nurturing critical thinking, cultivating community, and fostering democracy.

***We believe real change doesn't come from surface-level reform. It comes from building power and connection — slowly, deliberately, and* together.**

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CLASS 13

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