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Educating for all: Who are we educating?

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ABOUT BERA

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Our vision is for educational research to have a profound and positive influence on society. We support this by promoting and sustaining the work of educational researchers. Our membership, which is more than 2,500 strong, includes educational researchers, practitioners and doctoral students from the UK and around the globe.

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We run a major international conference each year alongside a diverse and engaging series of events, and publish high quality research in our peer-reviewed journals, reports, book series and the groundbreaking BERA Blog. We recognise excellence through our awards and fellowships, provide grants for research, support the career development of our members, and nurture an active peer community organised around networks, forums and special interest groups.

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ABOUT THE BERA BLOG

The BERA Blog was established to provide research-informed content on key educational issues in an accessible manner. Its aim is to produce and promote articles that attract policymakers, parents, teachers, educational leaders, members of school communities, politicians and anyone who is interested in education today. It also welcomes the submission of research-informed articles from across this community.

The blog is edited by a small team comprising academic representatives chosen by BERA's Academic Publications Committee and the BERA office. All content is approved for publication by one or more of this team. However, the views of the authors are their own, and the views expressed on the blog (and in this collection) are not the official views of BERA.

The blog is currently curated by the editorial team of Jennifer Agbaire, Gerry Czerniawski, Naomi Flynn, Alison Fox, Elizabeth Rushton, Barbara Skinner and Kathryn Spicksley.

See bera.ac.uk/blog

ABOUT BERA BITES

The BERA Bites series presents selected articles from the BERA Blog on key topics in education, presented in an easily printable and digestible format to serve as teaching and learning resources for students and professionals in education.

Each collection features an introduction by editors with expertise in the field, and each article includes questions for discussion, composed by the authors, prompting readers to further explore the ideas and arguments put forward in the original articles.

See bera.ac.uk/bera-bites

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EDUCATING FOR ALL

Editorial



ANDREA PRIESTLEY¹, HEATHER EARNSHAW² & DI CANTALI³

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In this collection, we bring together BERA Blog posts that, in aggregate, challenge us to be innovative in imagining how schools could be genuinely inclusive and education systems more equitable. Contributions include a provocation around what the purpose of education is, a variety of voices depicting a range of lived experiences and marginalisation in education, and some reflections on the implications and challenges for both practice and policy at local and system level. This BERA Bites collection will be a valuable resource for educators to think ‘beyond issues of access and participation (weak inclusion), to include questions of knowledge, representation, power, and cultural change (strong inclusion)’ (Dawson, 2017, p. 540). Orienting efforts towards strong inclusion means thinking and enacting inclusion differently, creating environments that are responsive, welcoming and educative for all our children and young people.

In 2026, what does inclusive education look like? Are we close to being fully inclusive? Where are the gaps and the challenges? Whose voices and experiences are still unheard and unseen? What might we do both locally, in practice, and at policy level to move us closer to genuine inclusion?

Valuing school communities

To set the scene we start with a blog post by **Mary James**. She asks us to consider whether the current schooling system is educational by looking back to

a successful community school in the 1980s, which valued ‘place, time, teams, resources and relationships’. No uniform or bells, first names for all, mixed-ability teaching and period times of 75 minutes to half days. Central to this was the idea of community. James raises an important question for us to consider: ‘Could you envisage a system where education utilises more community resources (material and human) with less emphasis on schooling as currently manifest?’

Diversity in our communities, as an essential resource, is central to several of the blog posts in this collection. We can plan to integrate and value this diversity through our pedagogical decision-making. **David Roxburgh** challenges us to rethink what the purpose and focus of language learning might be. He notes that current practice within Scotland’s 1+2 languages policy is hampered by adhering to Eurocentric assumptions and suggests embracing and utilising the increasingly diverse range of languages within local communities. Several authors describe the need to work in partnership with marginalised groups in our communities. For example, **Andrew Ryder**’s focus is on Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, while **Andrew Brown**’s is on children who have been adopted. Both describe a need to engage in dialogue – seeking children and young people’s views (however expressed) and being comfortable (or willing to feel discomfort) in receiving what needs to be shared. This is about establishing and maintaining inclusive learning communities, where all identities are encouraged and recognised.

Labels as help or hindrance?

Labels are another recurring idea. These can be well intentioned, but are too often restrictive in practice, tend to be one-dimensional and lack intersectional nuance. For example, **Yunus Emre Demir** looks at the underresearched phenomenon of twice-exceptionality where one label can mask the presence of another.

Karen Zecca considers the influence that medical and social models of inclusion have on perceptions of disability and argues for a more intersectional approach.

Then there are questions around whether activity in the name of inclusion is tinkering at the edges or genuinely predicated on a willingness to acknowledge and shift the current locally dominant cultural norms and power structures. **Myrtle Emmanuel** highlights this, as she argues for greater attention to be paid to hair-based discrimination experienced by Black and mixed-race students and staff. She seeks enforceable policies and action beyond 'symbolic solidarity', a move from superficial initiatives towards genuine and sustained institutional and sectoral transformation. Similarly, **Aria Zhang** discusses the benefits of bringing a lens of transgender and trans-feminist studies to support understanding of, and fostering of, inclusivity: 'What does meaningful inclusion look like ... beyond a series of talks?' Further, inclusive practice often starts with existing content and pedagogy and adapts it as necessary to meet diverse needs. **Kay Sidebottom** notes that this approach does not challenge the underpinning assumptions, predicated on humanism and centred on certain types of human. Using the lens of critical posthumanism, Sidebottom reimagines inclusion in the context of physical education, where ableism, normative ideals and a presumption of performance and competition are currently embedded.

Interrogating school's purpose

Reimagining through a posthuman lens or otherwise can allow for alternative and bold projections of inclusive curricula. **Reece Sohdi** revisits our thinking about the purposes of education through the lens of decolonisation. This is not to tweak content to add some diversity but as an examination of bigger questions that would move us away from content delivery and its inherent underlying assumptions towards an ethical and relational practice. **Rebecca Loader and colleagues** also advocate acknowledging and planning for existing diversity. They welcome the review of the primary religious education curriculum in Northern Ireland and examine, through the lens of epistemic injustice, the potential harms done by the existing dominance of Christianity in the curriculum.

Finally, one of **Emma Simpson**'s questions is: 'If you're not academic, what's in it for you?' This brings us back full circle to our starting point with Mary James's provocation: 'Aside from academic qualifications, what do we want pupils to feel they are getting from their experience of school?' Simpson argues that a school system increasingly under pressure, and with a focus on attainment, has the unintended consequence of driving pedagogies which focus on individual exam performance, inculcating a passivity in learning, devaluing other pathways, potentially reducing children's sense of achievement, and particularly impacting those students who are already marginalised, including White working-class families.

Brave steps needed

The blog posts in this BERA Bites collection suggest orientations to schooling practices which celebrate differences rather than trying to assimilate and make uniform. The key questions and provocations raised are applicable far beyond those groups identified here. This is a systemic challenge for today's schooling system, which too often values conformity and responsabilisation of individuals (children and adults alike). Brave steps are required if school is to turn away from schooling to become more educational, more democratic, more inclusive. Dare we transform to a more ethical, relational practice not predicated on dominant cultural norms or operating within current existing power structures?

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A NOTE FROM THE BLOG EDITORS

While you read these blog posts, you might also think about your own contexts or research. Perhaps you would like to contribute a post to the BERA Blog, or perhaps when you are next at a conference or professional development event you might come across someone whom you could encourage to write for us (see bera.ac.uk/submission-policy for details on how to submit). Please consider interesting methodological aspects, issues and approaches that would be worth reporting more widely, as well as the content of studies. As the BERA Blog team and our colleagues develop these resources we welcome feedback that can help us improve their quality and accessibility.

EDUCATING FOR ALL

Schooling, innovation & community



MARY JAMES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Recently, I discovered some chapters that I had drafted in the early 1980s.¹ These arose from a study of teachers at Bridgewater Hall, the first secondary school on Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes. Rereading them raised issues for me about the current state of schooling.

The creation of the Campus was driven by the vision of its first director, Geoff Cooksey, whose overriding concern was that the campus schools should achieve coherence with the community they served. The buildings were designed to reflect domestic architecture, while, in order to avoid separation between education and other aspects of living, he emphasised the roles of place, time, teams, resources and relationships. At Bridgewater, a timetable based on 75-minute blocks of time was introduced, often doubled to give half-day sessions. And no bells! Bells only divide the day in prisons and convents, Cooksey said. Day 10 and Week 10 were instituted to allow extended and integrated activities outside the normal curriculum, including residential experience at an expedition centre. Courses were developed by teams of teachers who prepared their own resources. 'Shared Time' was an opportunity for interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Most teaching was mixed ability. Teacher-generated,

but examination-board accredited, qualifications and a record of achievement for all students were developed. This development activity was carried out in twice weekly staff meetings. A community resource centre was the first building on the campus. All these structures were balanced by an equal emphasis on relationships. Mutual respect between adults and students was expected but first names were used and there were no uniforms.

What happened to Stantonbury Campus over time is a sad story. Geoff Cooksey retired in 1984. Many of the schools' leaders (such as Bob Moon, Mike Davies, Mervyn Flecknoe, Ivor Goodson and Michael Fielding) went on to notable careers in headships of other schools, or in universities, or both. After a string of good Ofsted reports, the Campus received a poor one in 2012. A new principal introduced fences, gates, uniform and lanyards. It became an academy within a multi-academy trust (Griffin). These 'reforms' did not work. In 2018, the school, now named Stantonbury International, 'required improvement' and in 2020 it was judged as 'inadequate' and put in special measures by Ofsted. The heavy workload of teachers, a badly planned and taught curriculum, and lack of leadership were all criticised. However, the safety and security of students was the major issue after violence among students resulted in a (non-fatal) stabbing. This is

¹ Original blog post, published 1 March 2022: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/schooling-innovation-and-community>

doubly tragic as the original school placed so much emphasis on relationships. In September 2021 the school reopened under the management of a new principal and a new multi-academy trust (Tove). How it fares will be interesting to watch.

The failure of changes – that are more in line with current directions in central education policy – to restore the fortunes of a once-successful community-based school, might be seen as a metaphor for the system in England today. So, what is to be done? The early history of Stantonbury Campus, when the concept of community was central, might hold a key.

‘The failure of changes – that are more in line with current directions in central education policy – to restore the fortunes of a once-successful community-based school, might be seen as a metaphor for the system in England today.’

In his book, *Beyond Schooling: An Anarchist Challenge*, David Hargreaves (2019) makes a characteristically provocative argument for ‘murdering’ the state by other means than revolution. He draws on anarchist thought, particularly that of the political philosopher William Godwin (1756–1836), who offered a powerful indictment of the state, including its role in schooling. It is unlikely that Godwin could envisage the extent of centralisation in England in the 21st century, but Hargreaves makes the link and draws a sharp distinction between education and schooling. He argues that the former does not depend on the latter; he then offers an alternative based on community action for education in which specialist teachers would have a role but so too would parents and other members of the community, who have funds of knowledge and skill to share. Community resource centres would be important, but the school as an institution might not be needed. He writes of the possibility of a stronger place for home education facilitated perhaps by a universal basic income that could free up time for all adults to be involved in the education of the young, teaching them in ways that integrates theoretical with applied learning.

All this might seem wildly optimistic, but, in the two years since Hargreaves’s book was published, we have seen communities mobilise around Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Extinction Rebellion, LGBTQ+, Marcus Rashford’s efforts to end child hunger, and crowd sourcing and public funding of assets such as Wikipedia. The coronavirus pandemic has also had a profound effect on education, work and people’s lives. While some might wish to ‘get back to normal’, others see recent crises as opportunities to do things differently. For example, hybrid forms of working have been tried; not all have been found wanting. In schools, flexible and blended learning can work well. People have discovered, or re-discovered, the outdoors for recreation, health and learning about the natural world and their communities. So, a renaissance of community is possible. If motivation, engagement and action follow, then the power of centralised forces could be diminished. Is it too much to hope to see a new age of innovation in curriculum, pedagogy and the structures of education, part-generated, appreciated and supported by local communities, and perhaps actively encouraged by a more hands-off government?

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have issues of safeguarding become so critical that a school like the original Stantonbury Campus is now inconceivable?
2. Would a search for more cohesion with the local community help to break down barriers and restore trust? Are any of Cooksey’s strategies for doing this relevant today?
3. Could you envisage a system where education utilises more community resources (material and human) with less emphasis on schooling as currently manifest?



Why going ‘local’ could be the future of primary language learning in Scotland (and beyond!)



DAVID ROXBURGH
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Scotland’s ‘1+2 languages’ policy, introduced in 2012, reflects the growing global need for multilingualism.¹ It introduced learning a second language (L2) from age five and a third language (L3) from around age nine, but with different end goals, as summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Scotland’s ‘1+2 languages’ policy

Aspect	L2 (Second language)	L3 (Third language)
Start age	Age 5	By age 9
Duration	Up to age 15, before exam phase (age 16, possibly 18–18)	Continuation into secondary school phase not required
Languages	Most often European	Potentially wide-ranging
Goal	Enhanced fluency and communication	Broaden language and cultural awareness
Flexibility	Standardised across P1–7	Various delivery models
Approach	Traditional methods, in place since late 1990s	Interdisciplinary
Focus	Progressive language skills	Language in context
Curriculum time	Regular/semi-regular, often scheme/resource based	Short blocks of input over 4–6 weeks

While progressive, the policy faces challenges in primary schools where research indicates that many teachers feel less confident providing even one additional language, let alone two (Valdera Gil & Crichton, 2018). Through a small-scale study of 38 teachers, this issue

appeared in both the questionnaires and interview data around teachers’ self-perceptions. This situation raises an important question: Is our current approach to language learning effective? Or might innovative models, such as L3, offer a more inclusive way to inspire confidence in both teachers and pupils as they navigate their educational journeys?

Challenges in initial teacher education (ITE)

One significant challenge, in Scotland and beyond, is that many student teachers enter ITE programmes with limited experience of languages, largely due to decline in subject uptake. This issue is further compounded by the actual time available to engage in related ITE modules. With typically around no more than 20–30 hours of modern languages input in many such degree programmes, student teachers often struggle to build the necessary confidence and skills to realistically see themselves as ‘teachers of languages’ upon graduation.

‘Student teachers often struggle to build the necessary confidence and skills to realistically see themselves as “teachers of languages” upon graduation.’

This raises another question: How might issues around lack of time and space be addressed through more innovative ITE inputs?

1 Original blog post, published 28 April 2025: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/why-going-local-could-be-the-future-of-primary-language-learning-in-scotland-and-beyond>

A new perspective: The value of local languages



(Image generated through Word Cloud software)

Perhaps it's time to reconsider the traditional focus on particular European languages, given increasingly diverse classrooms in Scotland and beyond. Instead of sticking to conventional models, we could embrace 'local languages' – those spoken within pupils' communities, such as Polish, Urdu, Mandarin or Gaelic through enhanced practices such as L3. Recent research shows that exposure to languages relevant to learners' everyday lives can foster more meaningful and engaging learning experiences, summarised well by one teacher who commented, 'All the children were engaged rather than just, you know, the one or two that people would ordinarily think would have been those children' (Pedley et al., 2024, p. 28).

This shift would benefit both learners and teachers by tapping into the linguistic expertise and cultural resource already present when bringing members of the local community into classrooms to work alongside teaching staff. Such an approach could inspire a deeper connection with language learning, laying a stronger foundation for further study in secondary schools and beyond.

Empowering change through ITE

To truly effect such change, and avoid approaches such as L3 simply becoming scaled-down versions of L2, ITE courses should look beyond promoting language proficiency goals. Through partnering with local community members who speak various languages, student teachers can incorporate real-life experiences of other cultures into their lessons. Then, by integrating local languages into interdisciplinary projects, they can create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Such an approach fundamentally recognises primary teachers' existing skills and expertise, potentially boosting their confidence in teaching languages in innovative ways.

One example, based on teaching Mandarin in a Scottish context, found that incorporating community languages into project-based learning significantly improved pupil engagement (Pedley et al., 2024). This aligns with

ecological models of language acquisition, emphasising connecting language learning with learners' real-world experiences (Chong et al., 2023).

Furthering innovation within language policies

While policies, such as the '1+2', are often grounded in good intentions, adapting these to the realities of our classrooms will be key to future success. This means preparing both student, and in-service teachers, to manage a broader range of languages in innovative ways, particularly those that learners encounter in their daily lives.

This brings us to our final reflection: Is it time to rethink our approach to language learning in primary schools by shifting from a narrow focus on particular European languages to embracing the broader linguistic diversity present in our school communities? It's a worthwhile discussion because today's primary-aged pupils could be tomorrow's enthusiastic language teachers.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How well do current language policies reflect the languages children use in everyday life?
2. What kinds of support help teachers feel confident teaching languages?
3. What might schools gain, and struggle with, when using community languages in the classroom?

EDUCATING FOR ALL

Sites of resistance: Gypsies, Roma & Travellers in school, community & the academy



ANDREW RYDER

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Schools are institutions in which racial conflict is brought into focus and can be acute.¹ Gillborn (2008) asserts that current education policy is not designed to eliminate race inequality, but to sustain it at manageable levels in a system that privileges majoritarian insiders and marginalises those minorities deemed backward or belligerent. These observations have some relevance to the educational experiences of Gypsies (see endnote below), Roma and Travellers, in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, where alienation and poor relations are evidenced through high rates of bullying towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, high exclusion rates from school, and low rates of participation and achievement (Ryder & Cemlyn, 2014).

Formal education has been viewed with mistrust by some Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, and as counter-productive to the preservation of their traditional way of life; others though have been alienated by racist incidents inflicted by fellow pupils and teachers. However, others have striven to gain access into mainstream education and participated actively in the curriculum (Derrington & Kendall, 2004). At times, mainstream society has viewed the formal education of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers as a 'civilising agent', to assimilate, others have contended that formal education is a means by which Gypsies, Roma and Travellers can achieve equality, greater self-reliance and

hence greater cultural autonomy and representation (Foster & Cemlyn, 2012). In my book *Sites of Resistance* (Ryder, 2017) I attempt to probe and understand these positions by drawing upon more than 25 years of work with these communities in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, as a school teacher, campaigner and researcher.

Some might argue that traditional Traveller socialisation practices and non-attendance deny children their basic human rights, as the lack of formal schooling can limit their ability to adapt, thus minimising life chances. Yet others might argue that a mono-cultural education system which favours the dominant culture poses equal dangers. In such a system, it is argued, many Gypsies and Travellers find themselves at a disadvantage in a learning environment that values academic success rather than experiential learning and skills development. Moreover, it can be argued that school fails to offer a safe and secure learning environment as a consequence of prejudice and bullying.

'The challenge for schools in the 21st century is to offer learning environments that allow Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and other minorities to maintain their identity, but also to acquire new and adapt old skills.'

1 Original blog post, published 11 December 2017: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/sites-of-resistance-gypsies-roma-and-travellers-in-school-community-and-the-academy>

An educationally inclusive school has been defined by the Office for Standards in Education (2000) as one that offers new opportunities to pupils who may have experienced previous difficulties, and takes account of pupils' varied life experiences and needs. Inclusive schools monitor and evaluate the progress each pupil makes, and they promote tolerance and understanding in a diverse society. However, the search for 'inclusive education' is becoming an increasingly elusive goal. It is feared that cutbacks to school budgets are creating poor-quality learning experiences for many children, especially those at the margins such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. Furthermore, oversized classes, a monocultural and inflexible curriculum, and creeping forms of selection are undermining educational inclusivity (Cemlyn & Ryder, 2017). One of the most alarming outcomes of austerity politics in the UK has been the savage reduction of Traveller education services, local authority agencies providing support on home-school liaison, classroom assistance and strategic guidance to schools.

A comment from a Gypsy elder in the UK that has always stayed with me, is:

'Gypsies need education: they need to live in the 21st century. I'd like to live how we did when I was a child but we can't go back to those days. Most of them kids, they couldn't cope with that life but they need to be able to cope for this life.'

The challenge for schools in the 21st century is to offer learning environments that allow Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and other minorities to maintain their identity, but also to acquire new and adapt old skills. *Sites of Resistance* argues that a prerequisite to such inclusive schooling is partnership and dialogue within broader policy frameworks which are based on recognition and redistribution.

Endnote

Roma is the term generally used to describe the Romani communities of Central and Eastern Europe because a growing number see the term 'Gypsy' as pejorative, although they belong to the same ethnographic group as British Gypsies who prefer to continue to use this term. Irish Travellers descend from ancient Irish nomadic groups. Gypsies and Irish Travellers traditionally have close-knit family and economic networks, and nomadism – or the possibility of it – remains a strong cultural value in a way that it does not for the mainly sedentary East European Roma. In documentation and discussions, 'Roma' can encompass diverse groups such as Roma, Gypsies and Travellers.

*Sites of Resistance: Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in School, Community and the Academy*² by Andrew Ryder is published by Trentham Books at UCL IOE Press.

2 <https://www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/social-justice-equality-and-human-rights-sites-of-resistance/>

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can schools alone raise Gypsy, Roma and Traveller inclusion or are wider measures needed?
2. What is the value and importance of learning about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture in the curriculum?
3. How can home-school links with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities be improved?



EDUCATING FOR ALL

Coherent lives: Making sense of adoptees' experiences in education through narrative identity



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UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

'Who am I? Where do I fit in? What do I want to be?' These are common questions we associate with adolescent development.¹ For young people who have left care through adoption, these questions about identity and self have added layers of nuance and complexity that may not be fully appreciated by peers, extended family or adults in the school workforce. These extra layers, and their potential implications for educational experience, are explored in this blog post and discussed in greater detail in our study (Brown & Shelton, 2024).

Our study considers the potential of applying a 'narrative adoptive identity' perspective (Grotevant & von Korff, 2011) to answer questions about how

adopted young people experience school as an 'adopted' person; that is, how does their lived experience as an adopted member of a school community impact on how they engage with their school, schoolwork and social network? We theorise that by taking this approach to understanding adoptees' unique challenges, opportunities for better educational experience may be enhanced.

'Our study shows a dearth of academic research into adoption and education, and that the voice of adoptees is strikingly absent.'

¹ Original blog post, published 17 April 2024: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/coherent-lives-making-sense-of-adoptees-experiences-in-education-through-narrative-identity>

Our study shows a dearth of academic research into adoption and education, and that the voice of adoptees is strikingly absent. The irony of not being able to include the voice of the very adoptees we were writing about was not lost on us. Fortunately, I was contacted by an adoptee who had read our paper. This adopted young person, Rosie (pseudonym), offered unsolicited, but most warmly welcomed, feedback on the article. [For context, Rosie was taken into care at four years old (with her siblings) and found an adoptive family at age six (with her siblings). She is now 26 and living independently.] With some trepidation – because, with all due respect to peer reviewers, the response from adopted people is a critical acid test – I read her feedback. Rosie has kindly agreed for her comments to be used here:

'I read this paper and cried. It's extremely difficult to live normally and adapt quickly after adoption, which feels expected, and being academically smart like me and pretty well behaved, I just felt invisible. For the first time, when I read this paper, I felt seen.'

'I worked very hard to fit in at school, as I felt I must be perfect to have a proper family (this was self-inflicted). School was an area I felt I could prove [the adoption placement] was successful. I excelled at school, but socially I was the same. Academically, I think part of it was being terrified of being abandoned again, so yes, there may have been a natural aptitude, but that was further fuelled by fear.'

'[I] like science and logic and understanding WHY I am who I am, and the paper helped me understand why, as I have never met another adopted person like me. I know I'm lucky being in my position, but I have always struggled with being looked at as "fine" because I got A's [GCSE and A-level; Rosie's academic CV includes a 2:1 BA (Hons) and an MA]; finally, people can see that it's not necessarily true!'

The 'it', of course, that Rosie refers to in the final sentence is that good academic attainment is not a proxy for wellbeing. Academically, Rosie is an outlier because an attainment gap persists in the UK and internationally for adoptees – a phenomenon we highlight and explore further in our study. Despite her academic success, Rosie's adolescence wasn't all plain sailing and challenges in resolving her adoptive identity remain. We had several exchanges with Rosie about other challenges adopted young people face in education, several of which are included in our study. For example, the impact of microaggressions from peers and staff alike; opportunities for open, sensitive communication about adoption; and constructing a consistent and coherent adoption narrative – all while simultaneously attending to academic demands.

I hope the acid test was passed. We are hugely grateful to Rosie for her feedback. Our interaction has provided direction and purpose for future explorations in this space; but, most importantly, it has served to remind our academic and research identities of the centrality of voice.

This blog post is based on the article 'Coherent lives: Making sense of adoptees' experiences in education through narrative identity'² by Andrew Brown and Katherine Shelton, published in the *British Educational Research Journal*.

2 <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3918>

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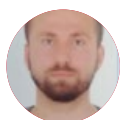
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can open, sensitive communication about adoption best take place in schools?
2. What would meaningful co-produced research with adoptees look like in schools, and what might it change?
3. What counts as a microaggression in this context, how might staff notice patterns and what practical responses might best protect privacy while improving belonging?



EDUCATING FOR ALL

Investigating ‘twice-exceptionality’ in English secondary schools



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‘Twice-exceptionality’ describes high-functioning individuals who also have a disability or learning difficulty that demands additional support.¹ Twice-exceptional (2E) students may display creativity or excel in one or more areas despite the ‘special’ educational needs or disabilities (such as moderate learning difficulties, ADHD, autism, and emotional-behavioural and physical disorders) that co-exist with their high potential (Reis et al., 2014). Additionally, savants displaying high performance in one area and having similar social problems to those experienced by other autistic individuals are mostly considered as 2E (Demir & Done, 2022).

Conceptualising studies of twice-exceptionality commenced in the US in 1981, and the term twice-exceptionality is gaining recognition and importance globally. In the UK, these individuals are also described as ‘dual/multiple exceptional’ (Yates & Boddison, 2020). The fact that giftedness is a concept that is not measurable and has no fixed description indicates that twice-exceptionality is a research topic that needs to be addressed and developed. Most studies about twice-exceptionality are descriptive and conducted in the United States and Australia, while research in Türkiye adopts the definition used in other European countries (such as Germany) and tends to focus on high-functioning students with ADHD or learning disability.

¹ Original blog post, published 1 August 2022: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/investigating-twice-exceptionality-in-english-secondary-schools>

Recognition of 2E students can be problematic since their gift may obscure their special need or disability, and vice versa. Additionally, teachers may find the term to be paradoxical and confusing (Schultz, 2012). Emotional and behavioural disorders can arise in these students when their talents and disabilities are unacknowledged and their special needs are unmet (Gelbar et al., 2015). All these issues refer to a description problem and misconception of twice-exceptionality, and research is needed to gain a better understanding of 2E and prevent such misconceptions. It could be argued that twice-exceptionality should be approached as a special educational need. Eliminating prejudices and identification problems around high-potential students would enable more qualified solutions to be developed. It has been found that once a student is diagnosed as 2E, a sense of belonging through participation in school activities can be enhanced by membership of social clubs and group activities (Renzulli et al., 2007).

‘Recognition of twice-exceptional students can be problematic since their gift may obscure their special need or disability, and vice versa.’

Twice-exceptionality is an underresearched and contested area. In the UK, a lack of attention may be attributable to the disbanding of a Talented and Gifted programme in 2010 and to its omission from statutory guidance as a diagnostic category. This may explain the apparent reluctance of schools to participate in research on this topic. Research is in progress at the Plymouth Institute of Education that seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of 2E students of secondary age, their teachers and parents. One of the project’s aims is to contribute to the development of a programme addressing 2E students’ needs and to provide ideas for different teaching methods.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the fact that twice-exceptionality is not an official diagnostic category in the UK affect the recognition and support of 2E students in schools? How does this create a gap between policy and practice?
2. How can a student’s high potential ‘mask’ their special educational needs, leading to misdiagnosis by teachers? What strategies can schools develop to overcome this paradox?
3. Is it more functional to address twice-exceptionality as a separate category or within the scope of special educational needs? How might this choice affect students’ sense of belonging and school participation?

Inclusive Education

EDUCATING FOR ALL

The 'Diverse Model': A new way of perceiving disability?



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The term 'disability' includes various impairments affecting physical, mental, intellectual or sensory abilities.¹ According to the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,² individuals with disabilities have long-term impairments that, when combined with barriers, may hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis. However, this definition is debated and needs further exploration. In this blog post, I will use 'disability' as a general category for all physical impairments (avoiding subgroup distinctions) and present a new model to broaden understanding and improve teaching approaches.

In disability studies, the medical model perceives disability as an individual issue that can be cured through medical interventions. It focuses on limitations and attributes barriers to biological conditions. Oliver (1996) argues that this model perpetuates negative stereotypes and neglects societal factors in the formation of disability. On the other hand, the social model considers disability as a result of the interaction between individuals and their environment. It advocates for modifying the environment to accommodate the needs of disabled individuals and combating societal discrimination (Shakespeare, 2006). However, neither the medical model nor the social model fully captures the complexity of disability.

1 Original blog post, published 13 December 2023: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-diverse-model-a-new-way-of-perceiving-disability>

2 <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>

'In disability studies, neither the prevailing medical model nor the social model fully captures the complexity of disability.'

The biopsychosocial model of disability (Engel, 1977) attempts to integrate both medical and social influences, while also including psychological aspects that affect an individual's disability experience. It has contributed to shifting the perspective from a purely medical model to a more comprehensive understanding of disability. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise the limitations of the biopsychosocial model. One of the main criticisms is its failure to fully encompass the diversity and intersections within the disabled community. Disability is a multifaceted concept that intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and culture. The experiences and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities are shaped by these intersecting factors, which may not be adequately addressed within the framework of the biopsychosocial model. So it is necessary to develop a more holistic and nuanced disability model to account for both individual and social dimensions, while acknowledging the diversity within the disabled community. Previous models oversimplify disability as a binary concept, disregarding its fluidity across contexts and situations.

‘It is necessary to develop a more holistic and nuanced disability model to account for both individual and social dimensions, while acknowledging the diversity within the disabled community.’

Throughout my research, I have encountered various models of disability, yet none of them truly encapsulate the multifaceted realities of individuals with disabilities. Drawing from my personal experience as a disabled researcher and former wheelchair user, I have identified numerous overlooked factors that require attention, especially within the realm of education.

My proposed ‘Diverse Model of Disability’ (DMD) (Zecca, 2023) incorporates legal considerations, and cultural factors that impact people with disabilities. When used in education, this model prioritises the individual, recognising factors that affect their academic progress and learning experiences. My research focuses on equitable educational opportunities for all children which includes examining the legal framework, including human rights principles that protect students with disabilities. Factors like impairments, environment, culture, attitudes and identities can impact learning and access for children with disabilities, so a comprehensive and inclusive approach is crucial to ensure these learners receive the education they deserve. My aim is to enhance and refine this person-centred Diverse Model to recognise the intersections of social identities (for example, gender, sexuality, religion) in shaping the life experiences of people with disabilities. This new model aligns with the UK Equality Act 2010,³ which recognises learners’ entitlement to equal and meaningful education. Adopting a comprehensive and inclusive approach to people with disabilities is vital to ensure that these learners receive the education and opportunities they deserve.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-act-guidance/disability-equality-act-2010-guidance-on-matters-to-be-taken-into-account-in-determining-questions-relating-to-the-definition-of-disability-html>

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When considering a learner with a disability, what factors beyond the impairment itself might influence their learning experience in your classroom?
2. How might your teaching approach need to adapt to ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities, can meaningfully participate in learning?
3. How might a learner’s disability interact with other aspects of their identity or background (such as culture, language, gender, or socio-economic context) to shape their experience of education?



EDUCATING FOR ALL

Reclaiming our roots in higher education: A call for policy development to address hair-based discrimination in UK educational institutions



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The journey of Black hair is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, political resistance and social justice.¹ Hair-based discrimination is not simply a question of access or participation. It raises fundamental questions about whose bodies, histories and cultural identities are legitimised within educational spaces, and therefore speaks directly to issues of power, representation and strong inclusion. As we reflect on centuries of colonialism and Eurocentric beauty standards shaping perceptions of Black hair, a powerful movement of reclamation continues to emerge. This personal and collective journey deserves both celebration and sustained scholarly attention.

Research highlights how appearance-based discrimination affects academic outcomes. Black and mixed-race students often face disciplinary actions and exclusions due to their natural hairstyles (Henry, 2021), while staff feel pressured to alter their hair to advance in academia (Doharty, 2020). These experiences create barriers to learning and undermine a sense of belonging in educational spaces. As a result, students and staff believe that modifying their natural hair is essential for academic and professional success (Griffiths & Houghton, 2021).

My relationship with Black hair reflects many shared experiences. For decades, I conformed to societal

pressures, using chemical treatments from my teens into my late 40s to meet 'acceptable' standards. The phrase 'good hair,' rooted in racist beauty norms favouring European textures (Griffiths & Houghton, 2021), shaped my self-image. Wearing my natural hair in tight coils rather than straight or loose curls led to microaggressions in education, from awkward silences to explicit criticism. This echoes Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly's (2018) view: 'If your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they're not happy.'

'Students and staff believe that modifying their natural hair is essential for academic and professional success.'

As an educator, I have observed students facing challenges in expressing their identities while adhering to academic expectations. Research shows that hair discrimination in education:

- reinforces Eurocentrism, lowering expectations and increasing disciplinary measures, creating self-fulfilling prophecies (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018)
- disrupts education, contributing to exclusions that hinder academic progress (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2022)

¹ Original blog post, published 25 April 2025: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/reclaiming-our-roots-in-higher-education-a-call-for-policy-development-to-address-hair-based-discrimination-in-uk-educational-institutions>

- negatively impacts academic performance, as emotional distress, and a weakened sense of belonging hinder students' ability to succeed (Gurley, 2022).

At the University of Greenwich, we are taking initial steps to address these challenges. As part of Black History 365 last November, our university community took a stand. The powerful photograph in the header above was captured on our Greenwich Maritime Campus. It features Black staff and students proudly wearing their natural hair, standing together with non-Black colleagues and students who support their right to wear their hair naturally without discrimination. This visual statement of solidarity demonstrates how institutions can actively challenge discriminatory narratives.

The 'Halo Code',² a UK initiative, sets voluntary guidelines to protect Black students and employees from hair-based discrimination. While it raises awareness of this issue in British schools and workplaces, Rollock (2022) argues that voluntary measures alone are insufficient to address systemic inequalities. Ahmed (2012) calls for enforceable policies, while Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) emphasise the need for comprehensive anti-discrimination frameworks.

Tackling hair bias is a crucial step towards decolonising universities and dismantling systemic racial inequities. Institutions can challenge Eurocentric norms and help close the BAME Awarding Gap through embedding anti-discrimination policies and fostering inclusivity. Additionally, research and policy reform are essential to ensuring that Black students and staff can thrive without compromising their identity.

Our solidarity photograph is not an endpoint but a call to action. We urge UK higher education institutions to:

- Collect national data on the impact of hair discrimination on student attainment, sense of belonging and identity.
- Conduct research on how Black staff and students navigate identity expression amid hair bias.
- Assess how hair discrimination affects academic success and inclusion within university communities.

The time has come to decolonise not only our hair practices but also our research agendas. We must examine the complex relationships between hair politics, health and educational experience if we are to move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives towards sustained institutional transformation that centres the wellbeing and dignity of Black students and staff.

² <https://www.halocollective.co.uk/>

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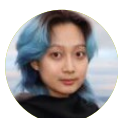
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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If professionalism in education continues to be shaped by Eurocentric norms, can we genuinely claim that our schools and universities are inclusive?
2. What assumptions about race, respectability and success are embedded within institutional appearance and uniform policies?
3. What would it take for educational institutions to move beyond symbolic solidarity and implement measurable, sustained structural change that addresses hair-based discrimination?

Towards inclusive futures through trans-inclusive education: The trans-inclusivity seminar series at University College London (UCL)



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Debates around gender in contemporary media and public discourse often overlook the depth and rigour of existing academic research.¹ These discussions can miss the rich, nuanced insights that transgender and trans-feminist studies contribute to understanding and fostering inclusivity. Education plays a critical role in challenging stereotypes, promoting equity and creating spaces for transformative dialogue. The trans-inclusivity seminar series (TSS), held from February to June 2024 at the Institute of Education (IOE), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, exemplifies how academic initiatives can bridge this gap by bringing groundbreaking research to the forefront. Funded by UCL's LGBTQ+ Equality Implementation Group (LEIG)² and launched during LGBTQ+ History Month, the series featured a variety of talks by leading academics in trans-inclusive research and scholarship, showcasing their rigorous and inclusive work. As an undergraduate student research fellow, I had the opportunity to gain valuable insights into trans-inclusive research and academic activism. Most of the videos³ are now available as resources for others.

Framing trans lives: Media narratives & digital power

The first event featured Professor Deborah Shaw⁴ (University of Portsmouth) on 'Trans-inclusive feminism, gender-critical feminism: Culture wars in the media'.⁵

This talk highlighted the media's role in shaping public perceptions of trans issues. As a student, it made me consider the silences built into mainstream narratives, and whether education is doing enough to equip students to notice what (and who) is missing from view. Shaw investigated how frequent reporting of gender-critical feminists has been weaponised in media coverage against trans people, in contrast to the significant underreporting of trans-inclusive perspectives from supporters such as trans-inclusive feminists (IOE, 2024c).

'[Deborah Shaw's] talk highlighted the media's role in shaping public perceptions of trans issues ... it made me consider the silences built into mainstream narratives, and whether education is doing enough to equip students to notice what (and who) is missing from view.'

Dr Kata Kyrölä⁶ from the IOE continued this theme on media with a talk on 'Cancel culture and the politics of vulnerability in queer/trans online spaces'⁷ (IOE, 2024d). Throughout the talk, concepts of 'cancellation' were illustrated through examples of platform drama, offering a comprehensive examination of the unique challenges faced by queer communities in digital spaces.

1 Original blog post, published 9 July 2025: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/towards-inclusive-futures-through-trans-inclusive-education-the-trans-inclusivity-seminar-series-at-university-college-london-ucl>

2 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/equality-areas/lgbtq-equality/lgbtq-equality-implementation-group-leig/leig-fund>

3 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwX3wZX22uMyBqYSt3f8kM-wflqdFTjxi>

4 <https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/our-staff/deborah-shaw>

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXcT98w8dIE&list=PLwX3wZX22uMyBqYSt3f8kM-wflqdFTjxi&index=5&t=2326s>

6 <https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/84463-kata-kyrola>

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgFB80dKK2k&list=PLwX3wZX22uMyBqYSt3f8kM-wflqdFTjxi&index=3>

Challenging the social construct of gender & power

What might it mean to imagine a society without legal sex? Professor Davina Cooper⁸ from King's College London delved into 'The controversial politics of abolishing legal sex in Britain',⁹ exploring the implications of prefigurative law reform (IOE, 2024b). This approach analyses dominant arrangements while imagining alternative social organisations that support transformative change. By envisioning the abolition of legal sex and gender, Cooper invited critical reflection on existing norms and encouraged more radical thinking around social justice. Her talk offered a powerful rethinking of gender categories, highlighting the potential for societal shifts.

Building on these structural questions, Dr Natacha Kennedy (Goldsmiths College) tackled 'Deconstructing transphobia',¹⁰ analysing strategies used by transphobia proponents and their institutionalised impacts on transgender human rights (IOE, 2024a). Her analysis underscored the need for grassroots alliances between trans groups and other organisations campaigning against abuse of power, to combat the systematic exclusion of transgender rights.

Identity & the complexity of being: Queer histories, trans futures

Dr Onni Gust¹¹ (University of Nottingham) spoke on 'Trans history: What? Where? Why?',¹² providing a holistic look at the recording and importance of transgender history (IOE, 2024e). Their historical perspective illustrated the ever-present yet often obscured transgender history and its critical role in understanding a history of everyone. This narrative of shared experiences of being othered and stigmatised highlighted the universal relevance of trans history.

Shifting from historical record to lived experience, Dean Kathryn Bond Stockton¹³ delivered a talk titled 'I was a queer child and so were you'.¹⁴ The talk wove personal memoir with theoretical insights about gender, sexuality and identity, exploring how these concepts are shaped by societal, racial and cultural norms, especially in childhood. The talk ultimately tied this awareness to broader goals of social justice and human flourishing. Together, these talks made a powerful case

for embracing the complexities of identity, and left me reflecting on how we engage with them in education.

Conclusion

By fostering critical discussions and understanding, the TSS paves the way for future initiatives aimed at enhancing trans-inclusivity, steering us towards more inclusive futures. However, as an undergraduate student research fellow and facilitator on this project, I also witnessed the institutional barriers that remain. This experience left me questioning: How can we ensure that such spaces are safe, sustainable and accountable to trans communities? And what does meaningful inclusion look like in academia beyond a series of talks? These questions will continue to shape my thinking long after the series has ended. In reflecting on the dialogues I was part of, I am reminded that education is never neutral, and that perhaps the most an individual can do is to keep asking difficult questions even when there are no easy answers.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How should schools, universities and policymakers respond when trans-inclusive educational work meets institutional resistance or competing claims about gender and rights?
2. Are we approaching trans inclusion as a matter of policy compliance and access, or are we willing to rethink the cultural norms and power structures that shape recognition and value in education?
3. What place should belonging have in the purpose and practice of education?

8 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/professor-davina-cooper>

9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5V3Wx7eVCxA&list=PLwX3wZX22uMyBqYSt3f8kM-wflqdFTjxi&index=5>

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WK15bA-nZAg&list=PLwX3wZX22uMyBqYSt3f8kM-wflqdFTjxi&index=6&t=4383s>

11 <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/humanities/departments/history/people/onni.gust#:~:text=1.%20workRoom%20A2b%20Lenton>

12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jx4xTb8557o&list=PLwX3wZX22uMyBqYSt3f8kM-wflqdFTjxi&index=1>

13 <https://www.kathrynbondstockton.com/>

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLPuQXgWT7o>

'A world of difference': Exploring inclusivity in physical education through a posthuman lens



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Inclusivity as a concept is widely discussed, taught and applied as education grapples with difficult questions of equity and fairness in times of increasing human complexity.¹ However, its meaning is often assumed and not often problematised. Who wouldn't want fairness and equity for all, regardless of difference? Closer inspection, however, calls us to ask questions such as: Inclusion into what, for what, and for whose ends?

Inclusion through a posthuman lens

Theories of critical posthumanism can help us to interrogate such issues of power, politics and what it actually means to be human in the world today. The philosophy bases its foundation around a guiding principle that requires us to move beyond humanism. As an ethical stance, humanism is clearly of value for its promotion of human equity, agency and care and its associated liberatory aims and achievements. Critical posthumanism acknowledges this, but also points to its limitations in terms of the reification of humans above other species, and the elevation of certain types of human in particular: the dominant White, male, Western, able-bodied, neurotypical, heterosexual 'Man of reason'.

Braidotti (2013) argues that this idealised human (which the majority of us are not) is deeply encoded in all of our belief systems – including our educational practices. While the meaning of inclusion has shifted from the

original Latin *includere* – meaning to shut in – the sense of enclosure, or folding people into a fixed and limiting system (which actually only reflects the bodies and lived realities of a minority) remains. Contemporary practices of 'inclusion', in which content and pedagogy are adapted to suit the diverse needs of students (for example via differentiated materials, learning support and assistive technology) can clearly support difference, but rarely change the original intention of the normative curriculum; it is a process which can be likened to inviting people to sit at a table which has already been set.

'Contemporary practices of "inclusion" ... [reflect] a process which can be likened to inviting people to sit at a table which has already been set.'

Inclusive physical education

Physical education (PE) is one example of how – despite inclusion policies and learning which aims to support the abilities of all pupils – ableism continues to be deep-rooted. Practices founded on neoliberal aims of performance and competition, alongside particular understandings of strength, coordination and endurance, project an 'idealised normative expectation of a healthy, defect-free, fully functioning body capable of performing (athletically) at a high level' (Giese &

¹ Original blog post, published 20 May 2026: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/a-world-of-difference-exploring-inclusivity-in-physical-education-through-a-posthuman-lens>

Ruin, 2018, p. 159). Despite teachers' best intentions, a standardised curriculum further reinforces these normative ideals, rather than viewing bodies in a way that promotes and celebrates difference.

Moving towards a PE which considers participation, movement and 'achievement' in alternative ways necessitates education reform which goes much further than altering one subject discipline. Turning towards difference, instead of viewing it as a deficit, requires a reframing and problematising of what it means to be 'physical' in the first place; a (re)consideration of what it means to be 'fit', and an emphasis on relationality and community, over individual goals and success measures. Within a fixed curriculum, with limited resources and onerous workload pressures, this is a challenge; but it is one which invites us all to turn away from the universal, normative modes of teaching and adopt process-led practice, grounded in the care of individuals and elevation of different modes of being human (Sidebottom & Bancroft, 2026).

From deficit models to promotion of difference

So what might posthuman processes of inclusion look like in practice? Petrie, Devcich and Fitzgerald's (2018) research, which explores the practical experiences of PE teachers, suggests that change begins in dialogue and partnership with students. Inquiring critically together into questions such as 'what does it mean to be active?' firstly opens up space for questioning hegemonic ideals of mobility and exploring other notions of what 'active' *could* mean for different bodies (embracing both the diversity present within the class, and in the world more generally). Discovering what students enjoy about the multiple ways that activity occurs then allows for the emergence of new ideas of how to be active both individually and together – highlighting the role of participation, team-working and people skills. Considering mobility differently in this way can then lead on to the introduction of new or adapted games or sports, created as a learning community; activities which embrace difference while not relying on tradition, certain understandings of what a human body can do, or differentiation by gender.

Undertaking these forms of dialogic and creative pedagogy require teacher reflexivity and humility, along with the understanding that you are likely to get some things wrong. But by understanding and celebrating what bodies and minds of all kinds can achieve – and what they have the potential to achieve – we can begin to enact new 'activity imaginaries'. In doing so, we expose and defamiliarise the constraints of neoliberal education systems and open up alternative possibilities.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways does PE privilege normative ideals of what it means to be human?
2. What kinds of practices are disrupting this in a meaningful way that goes beyond differentiation?
3. What other ways of promoting difference in PE are possible, considering the different levels of policy, curriculum design and individual teachers' pedagogical practices?

Reimagining the curriculum: A call for decolonial & values-driven education



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Curriculum is often seen as a fixed ‘course of study’ – a neutral list of topics to be taught and assessed.¹ Yet, it is anything but neutral (Apple, 2004). Pinar (2019) argues that curriculum is a sociopolitical construction embedded with assumptions about power, identity and the future. Every decision on what is included – or excluded – reflects contested values and worldviews (Young, 2007).

The UK is undergoing significant curriculum reform² from key stage 1 to key stage 5. Although education policy is devolved – resulting in different national curricula and reform trajectories in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – these systems continue to bear the imprint of colonial legacies. For example, in the English literature curriculum³ for schools in England, Shakespeare continues to dominate reading lists, while literature from the Global South or works by Black and Indigenous authors are often relegated to optional units or absent entirely. The curriculum is also increasingly shaped by market-driven logics that frame education around performance metrics, competition and the production of economically ‘useful’ learners (Ball, 2003). We should consider reimagining the curriculum through a decolonial lens.

‘We should consider reimagining the curriculum through a decolonial lens.’

1 Original blog post, published 24 October 2025: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/reimagining-the-curriculum-a-call-for-decolonial-and-values-driven-education>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-curriculum-and-assessment-review>

3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7eb05740f0b6230268ae6b/A_level_English_literature_content.pdf

Colonial foundations of the curriculum

In England, key stage 3 history⁴ emphasises topics such as the Tudors, World Wars and the British Empire, centring White British narratives while often overlooking critical views on colonisation and resistance. Science⁵ and maths⁶ are presented as culturally neutral, excluding significant contributions from Islamic, Chinese and African scholars (Tikly, 2019).

Further and higher education both prioritise ‘employability’, reflecting a colonial-capitalist focus on workforce preparation rather than ethical or civic development (Mbembe, 2016; Gopal, 2021). This narrows education’s purpose to economic utility, marginalising humanistic goals such as democratic participation, ethical reflection and social justice, evident in the decline of critical pedagogy and the arts (Biesta, 2021).

Accountability systems – Ofsted inspections, GCSE exams and university league tables – reinforce a performance-driven model, reducing learning to measurable outcomes and checklists. Despite reforms in Wales,⁷ Scotland⁸ and Northern Ireland,⁹ UK educators still face pressure to meet standardised targets, often sacrificing deeper learning and critical engagement (Lingard, 2011).

4 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c66d740f0b626628abcdd/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf

5 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7efc65ed915d74e33f3ac9/Science_KS4_PoS_7_November_2014.pdf

6 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c1408e5274a1f5cc75a68/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_Mathematics.pdf

7 <https://www.gov.wales/education-changing>

8 <https://www.gov.scot/groups/education-reform/>

9 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/givan-welcomes-independent-review-northern-ireland-curriculum>

What is decoloniality?

Decoloniality is not simply about adding diverse content to existing structures. Rooted in Quijano (2000) and expanded by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), it demands epistemic disobedience: questioning dominant knowledge hierarchies, their formation, and whose interests they serve. It challenges Western epistemic dominance and affirms historically marginalised ways of knowing.

‘Decoloniality is not simply about adding diverse content to existing structures ... it demands epistemic disobedience: questioning dominant knowledge hierarchies, their formation, and whose interests they serve.’

In education, decoloniality involves critically examining inherited assumptions and engaging with alternative traditions. Black feminist thought (hooks, 1994) and Indigenous methodologies (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021) offer more than diverse perspectives – they propose radically different ethical orientations grounded in care, land and interdependence.

Towards a reimagined curriculum

What if curriculum design began not with rubrics or attainment targets but with public values – like justice, sustainability and care? What if we asked:

- What does it mean to live well together?
- How do we learn to respond to injustice?
- What futures are worth imagining and building?
- What is the *true* purpose of education?

A values-led, decolonial curriculum reframes education as an ethical and relational practice prioritising inquiry over instruction and transformation over transmission. Biesta (2021) contrasts ‘learnification’ – education reduced to content delivery – with ‘subjectification’, which supports learners in becoming thoughtful, responsible agents.

Curriculum, then, is not merely what we teach. It is who we are, what we value and the futures we seek to cocreate. As systems globally grapple with reform, we must not only revise content but reimagine education as a space for justice, plurality and hope.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If curriculum is a sociopolitical construction rather than a neutral body of knowledge, whose histories, epistemologies and futures are currently centred in our education system – and whose remain marginalised or absent?
2. How might shifting from a performance-driven, employability-focused model of education towards a values-led, decolonial framework reshape what we mean by ‘inclusion’ – particularly in relation to knowledge, power and representation?
3. What practical and policy-level changes would be required to move from ‘weak inclusion’ (access and participation) to ‘strong inclusion’ that reimagines curriculum, accountability and assessment as ethical, relational and justice-oriented practices?

Reforming religious education in Northern Ireland: Moving beyond epistemic injustice



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Questions of what constitutes 'important' knowledge, whose epistemologies we value, and how we manage competing knowledge claims are central to the design of curricula in plural democracies.¹ In Northern Ireland (NI), the recent Supreme Court judgment on religious education (RE),² issued in November 2025, illustrates the importance of these considerations, as well as the risks that can arise where curriculum development does not reflect or engage with non-dominant perspectives. The Court judgment ruled that the primary RE curriculum in state-controlled schools, with its exclusively Christian and confessional focus, did not fulfil principles of objectivity, criticality or plurality, and was therefore indoctrinatory. Consequently, it was found to breach parents' rights to education that conforms with their own religious and philosophical convictions (Article 2(i) of the First Protocol (read with Article 9) of the European Convention on Human Rights).³

In our chapter for the *BERA Guide to Decolonising the Curriculum* (Loader et al., 2024), we consider the epistemic harm that the existing primary RE curriculum perpetuates in a society increasingly characterised by a diversity of faiths and worldviews. We argue that, through its focus on Christian instruction, the current

syllabus establishes Christianity as normative in NI and tacitly communicates that other worldviews are inferior or less valid.⁴ If other religious traditions are acknowledged within the classroom, this is typically in fragmentary or superficial terms that – often contrary to educators' intentions – can reaffirm their lower status.⁵ Applying the lens of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), we suggest that these arrangements may perpetuate harm in two ways.

Forms of epistemic injustice

First, by marginalising information about traditions other than Christianity, the curriculum denies pupils access to the interpretive resources that can help them make sense of their encounters with faiths or belief systems of which they are not members. As children lack influence over the curriculum that withholds this knowledge, this may constitute an injustice against them as knowers (McNulty & Henning, 2019). Furthermore, in the absence of critical and objective information, children may be forced to rely on other, less desirable resources to appraise other religious beliefs, including populist discourses and biased news sources. Where this contributes to the development of prejudicial attitudes, the curriculum itself may be implicated – through its omissions – in perpetuating hostility.

1 Original blog post, published 20 May 2026: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/reforming-religious-education-in-northern-ireland-moving-beyond-epistemic-injustice>

2 <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2024-0095>

3 https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_eng

4 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291123003042?via%3Dihub>

5 <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Filestore/rwe-report-december-2025.pdf>

‘In the absence of critical and objective information, children may be forced to rely on other, less desirable resources to appraise other religious beliefs, including populist discourses and biased news sources.’

Second, and relatedly, by failing to provide pupils with the language and concepts of religions other than Christianity, the current curriculum may prevent children from non-Christian backgrounds from communicating their social and spiritual experiences in a way that is meaningful to them and their peers. In such cases, the available interpretive resources may only offer these children ‘at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render [their experiences] intelligible’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 148). As Dotson (2011) describes, such experiences can lead to self-silencing (or ‘testimonial smothering’) by a speaker who fears they will not be understood.

Towards a new syllabus for religious education

In response to the Supreme Court ruling, the NI Minister for Education, Paul Givan, has announced a review of the Core Syllabus for RE. Positively, the review’s terms of reference⁶ state that the revised syllabus should be structured in an objective manner and be pluralist and inclusive. Although Christianity is to remain ‘the central focus’, the new syllabus will ensure ‘pupils explore a range of religious and non-religious worldviews’⁷ – knowledge that can help them to navigate a religiously diverse society. Somewhat concerningly, however, there is no specified role for representatives from non-Christian traditions in drafting the syllabus, which risks perpetuating hermeneutical marginalisation.

Beyond RE and Northern Ireland, this case speaks to the importance of epistemic inclusion in education, ensuring children have access to knowledge that enables them to make sense of others’ experiences and to understand and share their own. From decolonial pedagogies in the classroom to curriculum policies that centre pluralistic knowledge, epistemic inclusion should be embedded within education systems. Educational research can support this through the empirical analysis of distinctly epistemic inequities in education and consideration of strategies for redress.

⁶ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/terms-reference-review-re-core-syllabus>

⁷ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-02/Updated%20TOR%20-%20RE%20Core%20Syllabusrb.pdf>

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What would an RE curriculum characterised by strong inclusion look like?
2. What steps can we take to ensure curriculum development fulfils principles of epistemic justice?
3. How might the framework of epistemic injustice shape our understanding of inclusion in education more broadly?

'So I suppose they think I'm a failure': How schools (unwittingly) marginalise white working-class families



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This blog post¹ relates to a qualitative research project focused on the engagement and achievement of white working-class students carried out in three comprehensive secondary schools in an inner London borough and presented at the annual BERA conference in September 2023.² For further details, see Simpson (2024 and 2025).

This research found that the pressure schools are under to secure exam results, together with chronic funding cuts, have led to a privileging of academic attainment which implicitly devalues working-class culture and marginalises some working-class students and their families. I am not saying that working-class students should not be enabled to pursue academic pathways; just that the current system devalues non-academic pathways which makes it more difficult for students (from all backgrounds) who are not academic to feel that school is working in their best interests.

'The current system devalues non-academic pathways which makes it more difficult for students (from all backgrounds) who are not academic to feel that school is working in their best interests.'

1 Original blog post, published 13 March 2024: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/so-i-suppose-they-think-im-a-failure-how-schools-unwittingly-marginalise-white-working-class-families>

2 <https://www.bera.ac.uk/conference/bera-conference-2023>

As a member of staff from a focus group in this research put it:

'If you're not academic, what's in it for you? You get a certificate for looking smart every day, that's what's valued – do you wear the correct uniform and are you academic. We need something more.'

In discourses about white working-class underachievement, lack of aspiration is held up as a key barrier (Adams, 2018). Yet many students I spoke to had clear aspirations, as typified by this student: 'I know what I wanna be, an electrician.' However, when asked if the school and the student's current studies were supporting this goal, she responded: 'I haven't really spoke about it to the school.' It is not a career pathway the school wants to hear about, or the curriculum supports.

When academia is presented as the only form of success, other strengths and aspirations are understood as 'less than'. The title quotation was an aside made by a parent during a senior leader talk which equated success in life to academic success. The parent's inference was reasonable. Feeling implicitly judged as a 'failure' is not conducive to parental or student engagement and affects how students feel about themselves as learners.

Many of the white working-class students in this study had a learner identity made fragile by their experiences of school which manifested as difficulties with concentration, resilience and confidence. The following were found to be protective factors that strengthen learner identity:

- strong student–teacher relationships
- felt safety
- student-centred pedagogies which promote responsibility and agency
- academically supportive peer relationships
- investment in the social and emotional aspects of learning.

Yet many of these are undermined by ‘pedagogies of poverty’ prevalent in schools serving working-class communities (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012).

In such places, pressure to secure exam results can drive schools to adopt approaches which seem like the most efficient way to get through a content-heavy curriculum and drill students to pass tests: an emphasis on teacher instruction, discipline, and on individual, silent work. Yet these weaken learner identity by making students feel anxious, increasing passivity, reducing agency and limiting opportunities for students to bond over shared academic outcomes and thereby develop peer relationships which support, rather than undermine, academic success.

Ironically, this approach to education disengages and disempowers the very students who most need to feel supported, included, seen, heard and valued: white working-class students and others marginalised by institutional classism (and racism). The obsession with academic results squeezes out myriad other important aspects of education: enjoyment; wellbeing; creativity; collaboration; independence; success in vocational and creative subjects; and personal growth. This direction of travel marginalises the very students who should be at the centre of thinking about education.

The implications from this research and the work of many others are clear. The system needs to reduce performance pressure, invest in the social and emotional aspects of learning, and promote inclusive mindsets and practices to enable all to engage meaningfully in a version of education which is enjoyable, and one which makes people feel seen and valued and able to proudly pursue a diverse range of careers. All this is known. The question is, will politicians listen?

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. ‘If you’re not academic, what’s in it for you?’
Aside from academic qualifications, what do we want pupils to feel they are getting from their experience of school?
2. What other groups of pupils are similarly affected by the processes of marginalisation outlined in this blog post?
3. What do you think about the ‘pedagogies of poverty’ prevalent in schools serving working-class communities?

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Andrew Ryder is Director of the Institute of Political and International Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. Prior to this he held academic positions at the Corvinus University Budapest and the universities of Bristol and Birmingham. Andrew has a longstanding history of social justice activism and campaigning. He recently co-authored *George Soros and the Roma: Praxis, Equity and Empowerment* (2026).

Key Sidebottom is a Lecturer in Education, and Programme Director for a new MSc Education at the University of Stirling. With a background in community and adult education, her pedagogical specialisms include critical, radical and anarchist education, arts-based practice and community philosophy. Current research projects focus on what we can learn from 'more-than-human' teachers; that is, the animals, insects and wider ecological systems on which humanity depends. Her recent collaborators include dogs, bees and algae.

Emma Simpson is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Education, UCL and Principal Social Researcher at The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). Before moving into research, she worked in the English education system for 26 years: for 12 years as a teacher and leader in inner London schools, and for 14 years as an educational consultant. She has particular interest in social justice, inclusion, equality, classism, racism, and the potential of more progressive forms of education than currently prevail in England.

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is eager to contribute to transformative discussions and practices that promote equity and globalised inclusion across all educational sectors and spaces.

Karen Zecca is a fourth-year EdD candidate at Cardiff Metropolitan University, researching how to enhance education for individuals with disabilities by strengthening student teacher self-efficacy. She is also completing a PGCTAP, further developing her expertise in academic practice. Her doctoral research includes the Zecca Model (2024), a holistic framework that modernises the social model of disability by recognising intersecting identities such as gender, race and socioeconomic status to inform inclusive teaching. A former elite athlete and wheelchair user with lived experience of invisible disability, Karen brings personal insight to her work as an Associate Tutor and Senior Research Assistant at Cardiff Metropolitan University and Academic Lecturer at Cardiff and Vale College. Her research, which won awards at the Cardiff Metropolitan University DRG Research Conferences, centres on inclusive pedagogy, social justice, and promoting equitable access in higher and further education.

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