**The National Curriculum, what needs to change? A youth voice perspective.**

**Abstract**

*The Multi schools’ council meet regularly with hundreds of young people across the county of Essex to discuss important topics that affect them. At recent meetings we asked the young people of Essex* ***How could the national curriculum be improved – What should young people be learning about in schools?*** *It was a popular topic of debate and the young people had lots of ideas on how the national curriculum can be improved. Research has shown that the current curriculum can narrow children’s access to learning (Hargreaves et al, 2023) and the young people of Essex have suggested possible changes that would have a positive impact. This paper details the outcomes of our meetings and the youth voice perspective on the national curriculum.*

**Introduction**

A large body of educational literature has examined how school policy based on measuring performance in specific subjects, has narrowed children’s access both to curriculum breadth and to diversity in pedagogy (Hargreaves et al, 2023). Researchers have argued that the current national curriculum in England does not meet the educational needs of all children and young people and it raises some dilemmas, especially for students who are lower in their attainment and learning ability. In a recent 5-year study, participatory research with young people showed that the current curriculum in England narrows opportunities for participation in engaged leaning, especially for lower attaining school age children (Hargraves et al, 2023). Children directly narrated their experiences of school, highlighting that a curriculum that has an emphasis on core subjects such as Maths and English had a negative impact (Hargraves et al, 2023). The study raised concerns around wellbeing and social justice.

In recent years there has been a concerning and rapid increase in children and young people who have mental health difficultis; one in six children aged 5-16 likely to be impacted. This figure has increased by 50% in the last three years. For older children, there has been a jump from one in six to one in 4 young people with a probable mental health disorder. Although there are a multitude of factors that have impacted children’s mental health in recent years. The curriculum and pressures of school have been identified a contributing factor for some young people (Action for Children, 2023). Thus, it is important that will look at the National Curriculum and what is working and not working for young people. Children and young people have a right to be listened to on matters that affect them, and more than just good practice, it is a legal duty that we actively listen to what they have to say (UNCRC 1989, The children’s Act 1989, The Education Act). The multi schools’ council facilitate youth voice, we hold regular meetings with 100’s young people across the county of Essex to get their views on important topics.

At a recent meeting we asked young people **How could the national curriculum be improved – *What should young people be learning about in schools?***We gathered all data from these meetings and then completed a thematic analysis of the key recurring views of young people.

Young people across Essex expressed the need for more **preparation for their futures** to be on the National curriculum. Currently this is limited, especially in mainstream settings with a focus on core subject. Learning about how to prepare for future transitions, college, careers, and independent living would all be beneficial for young people, and they felt there needed to be more of this on the national curriculum**. Practical lessons** were another common theme within the Multi-Schools Council meeting. Lessons including **building,** creating, and getting more active were all mentioned. Currently pupils spend a large part of their day seated at a desk learning. Children and young people expressed the need for more movement, more diversity of learning rather than lots of writing. Research shows us that children learn better when they are having fun. The children and young people at our multi-schools’ meetings agree. They **want fun lessons** on the curriculum.

**Less writing** was another common theme with children expressing the need for less writing, the current curriculum focuses largely of handwriting, and this is felt to be ‘too much’ and there needs to be other ways of learning.

**Physical education** has many benefits for children and young people and youth voices across Essex expressed the need for more of this on the National Curriculum. Additionally mainstream schools have limited lessons on **life skills**. Young people told us they want more of this in school. Life skills are vital for young people to learn, to develop their resilience and to increase independence. An important life skill is to be able to manage money and young people expressed the need for this to be included rather than just maths**. First aid** was also expressed as an important subject that should be included on the national curriculum.

The benefits of **forest schooling** have been well researched and proven to have positive effects on children’s wellbeing and development. Young people across Essex want to see forest school appear more regularly on the curriculum. They think that there should be more opportunities for outdoor leaning.

Young people believe that the national curriculum needs to ‘evolve with the times’ and that more **AI technology** and technology in general needs to be included. Other subjects such as **Space and history** were also common themes from the young people. **Science/Biology** were other subject that were raised regularly through the meetings with young people. They believe that there should be more of these subjects in schools as well as **speaking different languages.**

There was an emphasis on **self-esteem and mindset** being part of the curriculum; given the increase in mental health difficulties highlighted above, this is something that needs to be considered.

In Conclusion, research with children and young people has shown that the current national curriculum, not only lacks subjects that young people feel are important, but also raises concerns about social justice and wellbeing. Young people across Essex have voiced their concerns about the current curriculum and given suggestions from items to be included. Therefore, we urge the government to listen to young people and at how the national curriculum can be improved. There was an overwhelming response from young people at our meetings, who feel that the current curriculum does not include the subjects that it needs to. Given the research discussed at the start of this report and the increase in mental health difficulties for young people in school. **Young people and the Multi Schools Council, believe it’s time for change.**

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