

Supporting Equity in Education through Data Informed Decisions

Edequity AI Briefing Paper



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1 Introduction

Equity in education is not a peripheral issue, but the cornerstone of an effective school system. It means ensuring that all young people, regardless of background, identity, or ability, can thrive in a school environment that is fair, inclusive, and safe. But across the UK, evidence continues to show that too many children still face persistent and intersecting barriers to success.

From the postcode someone is born in, to their ethnicity, disability status, or gender identity, inequity is deeply embedded in the structures of education. Closing the gap in attainment is only one part of the story. To deliver on the full promise of equity, schools must also address disparities in belonging, safety, and participation, particularly for groups whose needs have historically been overlooked or misunderstood.

Recent national and international reports, from the OECD to the London-wide *Inclusion, Belonging and Safety in Schools* study, highlight the urgency of this work. Ofsted, too, is now signalling a shift: in its forthcoming inspection framework revisions, schools will be expected to demonstrate not only academic success, but how they foster inclusive cultures and respond to students' lived experiences [5]. Equity in schools must be identity and data informed, and grounded in both systemic reform and compassionate practice.

2 The Current Equity Landscape in UK Education

1. Intersecting Inequalities and the Impact of Poverty

Despite long-standing policy efforts like the Pupil Premium, students from lower-income families continue to underachieve compared to their peers. These children are more likely to experience school exclusion, persistent absence, and under-identification of additional needs. This is shown in the figure below, produced by the Education Policy Institute in their Annual Report 2024.

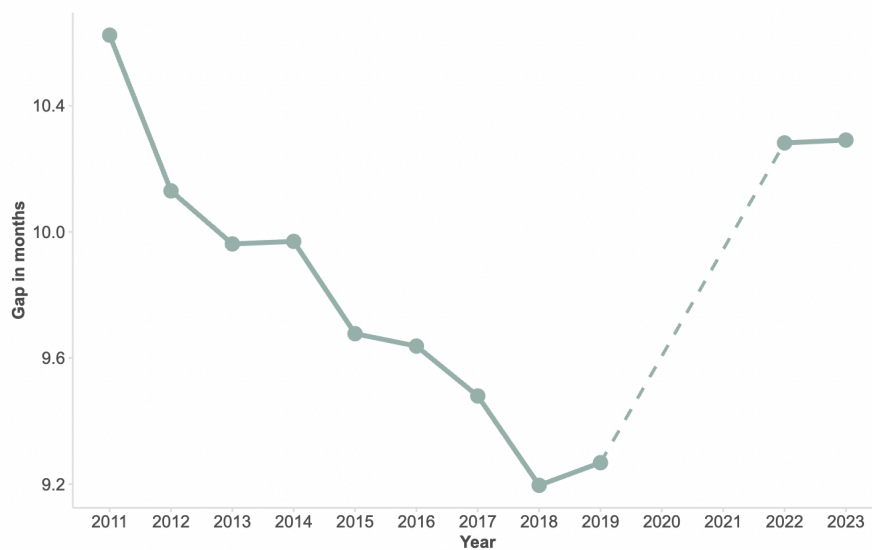


Figure 1: The disadvantage gap at the end of primary school remains at levels significantly higher than prior to the pandemic. Source: Education Policy Institute, Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage, July 2024 [2].

2. SEND and the Struggle for Inclusive Support

A crisis in special educational needs provision is unfolding across the England. While the SEND Code of Practice (2015) provides a statutory framework intended to promote inclusion, implementation remains inconsistent and often inadequate—particularly at local authority level. Ofsted/ Care Quality Commission (CQC) area SEND inspections found that in 11 out of 26 local areas reviewed in 2023, SEND arrangements led to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people, with some areas exhibiting widespread systemic failings requiring urgent improvement [1].

Also, The Public Accounts Committee’s January 2025 report described the system as “inconsistent, inequitable and not delivering in line with expectations,” discussing long delays in EHC assessments, postcode-based variability, and rising tribunal appeals [4].

3. LGBTQ+ Students

LGBTQ+ young people, particularly trans and non-binary students, face disproportionate rates of bullying, school absence, and mental health distress. According to Stonewall (2022) and supported by the recent London Schools study (2024), these students are among the least likely to report feeling safe or included in school [3].

While inclusive policies and training have improved in some schools, implementation remains inconsistent, and cultural change is slow. These patterns highlight an urgent need for schools to better monitor the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and take more proactive steps to create environments where all learners feel they belong.

4. Cultural Bias in the Curriculum

Girls remain underrepresented in STEM due to stereotyped materials, a lack of role models, and subtle classroom biases[6]. Black pupils face disproportionate exclusions driven by racialised interpretations of behaviour. Refugee and asylum-seeking students are frequently under-served, facing language barriers, trauma, and interrupted education without adequate support. These patterns reflect structural inequities rather than individual deficits. Addressing them requires inclusive curricula, anti-bias training, and systemic change that affirms all learners' identities.

3 The Role of Data in Advancing Equity

Disaggregated, identity-aware data is essential for making inequity visible and then doing something about it. Schools that track trends in attendance, behaviour, and attainment across groups can identify where gaps are opening and act before they widen.

It also requires overcoming the persistent challenge of data fragmentation. Many schools still store academic records in one system, safeguarding notes in another, and SEND or wellbeing information in spreadsheets or paper files. This disjointed approach makes it difficult to build a full picture of a student's experience, or to design effective, inclusive interventions. While recent reports such as the UCAS–Stonewall Next Steps study highlight identity-specific gaps in support for LGBTQ+ students [7], similar disparities are evident across multiple areas: students with SEND often wait too long for support, boys and girls experience different learning outcomes and subject pathways, and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers to engagement.

The Open Education AI Framework can help address these challenges by enabling schools to bring together diverse data sets—on attendance, safeguarding, attainment, and wellbeing—and disaggregate them by relevant student characteristics. This helps surface patterns of marginalisation and underachievement early, supporting a more targeted and equitable response across the whole school population.

The marginalgains.ai web application enables educators to test and track small-scale inclusion interventions, such as changes to curriculum, staff training, or pastoral policies, and measure their real-world impact over time. By making these insights visible and actionable, Edequity AI can help schools move beyond generic inclusion strategies toward targeted, evidence-based practices that affirm identity, build belonging, and improve outcomes for all.

4 Turning Insight into Action: Tools and Strategies

Let's be clear - data doesn't fix inequity, but when paired with strategic action, it can drive meaningful change. Schools and trusts across the UK are beginning to use more integrated platforms to bring together assessment, wellbeing, safeguarding, and inclusion data.

For example:

- Absence and wellbeing data might show marginalised groups missing school on days when particular classes or teachers are scheduled.

- Assessment tracking might reveal gender gaps in subject choices or attainment.
- Behaviour records disaggregated by ethnicity or SEND status might highlight disproportionate sanctions.

5 Building Equity-Responsive Schools

To be truly equity-responsive, a school must go beyond compliance. It must commit to:

- Representation and visibility
- Belonging and safety
- Early intervention
- Iterative practice

Critically, this work must be co-produced. Students, families, and communities must be included in decisions about what equity looks like, and how success is defined.

6 Conclusion

Equity in education is not a dashboard metric or a compliance checkbox. It is a commitment to fairness, to safety, and to recognising the full humanity of every learner. With better data, and stronger insight, UK schools can move from identifying injustice to actively dismantling it. Social equity starts with listening, learning, and leading differently every day, in every classroom.

References

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- [4] House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. Support for children and young people with special educational needs. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmpubacc/353/report.html>, January 2025. HC 353, Session 2024–25, published 15 January 2025.
- [5] Ofsted. “Ofsted sets out proposals for fair education inspections and new, more detailed report cards”, 2024.

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- [7] UCAS, Stonewall. Next Steps: What is the Experience of LGBT+ Students in Education?, 2023.