

**Professor Gus John**

**comments on**

**Key areas for the Commission**

The Commission is particularly keen to hear from practitioners, experts and young people.

The questions asked, will include:

**1. What role can early years support play in reducing levels of youth violence?**

A child's early years are formative in many respects. It is a crucial period in which the child is being socialised into society and its norms and values. A great deal of this is done through a mixture of imitation and intuition. The child's natural instincts, temperament and disposition are given expression in the only ways the child could. Part of the socialisation process, therefore, is helping the child to learn what is acceptable and desirable and what is not. A great deal of that is done through supervised play and social interaction. But, much learning is also derived from imitation.

Far too often, children receive mixed messages in that while siblings or adults chide them for inappropriate behaviours, they themselves fail to model the behaviours they wish to see the children adopt. Physical violence and verbal abuse are classic examples of that. Children are told 'don't hit', 'don't shout', 'don't throw tantrums', but they are often in environments where they experience domestic abuse, physical violence, quarrels, name-calling and the like and consequently see such behaviour as normal and as allowed, because they are exhibited by those from whom they learn.

This is why the shift in emphasis some three decades or so ago from child care to early learning and early years education was so essential. Child Protection and Safeguarding are crucial policy vehicles for guaranteeing children's rights and keeping them safe physically and emotionally.

Austerity policies have had and continue to have a destabilising effect on many households, especially low income families. Stress and conflict characterise the home environment from which many young people come to school or college and such conflict sometimes give rise to physical and emotional abuse. Some children live with parents who suffer varying degrees of mental ill health, or incapacitating physical illness, to the extent that they become carers of their siblings if not of the parent(s) themselves. Children and young people react to such experiences and

domestic realities in different ways, but invariably their reactions register in their conduct at school and in their interactions with their peers. The IPPR report: *Making the Difference* deals with this issue very helpfully in Chapter 2, 'Who gets excluded and why?'.

In the last ten years, there has been a steady increase in the number of primary school pupils being excluded for physical assault against an adult.

'In state-funded **primary** schools (5 -11 yr olds), exclusions for physical assault against an adult is a slightly more common trigger for a permanent exclusion, accounting for 31.3 per cent of all primary permanent exclusions'

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-exclusion>

Part of the purpose of schooling children of any age is to assist them in unlearning inappropriate behaviours and resolving conflict without resorting to physical violence. It is incomprehensible, therefore, that more and more nurseries and primary schools are operating 'zero tolerance' policies that result in children being excluded rather than being given assistance to change their behaviour, especially given the increasing evidence of poor mental health among excluded students, often mirroring mental health challenges within their households.

As the IPPR report notes:

'There is a causal link between family poverty, parental mental ill health and negative and damaging parenting behaviour (Cooper and Stewart 2013). Children in the most deprived neighbourhoods are 11 times more likely to be subject to a child protection plan than those in the most affluent neighbourhoods...

Mental ill health among children is strongly linked to familial mental health, which is in turn linked to family poverty. In families with weekly incomes of less than £200, 20% of young people have a mental disorder, compared with just 6% of children from families with incomes over £600 per week (ONS 2005)'.

Where older siblings indulge in violence or have been excluded from school for physical assault, the support needs of young people become even greater.

The Sure Start programme began to address many of those issues, but even then the way in which many schools dealt with young people displaying violent and disruptive behaviour was punitive rather than supportive, thereby increasing the likelihood of bitterness and resentment, if not poor mental health.

I believe this situation calls for at least two things:

- a) Family liaison officers in nursery and primary schools who can work with families who identify themselves or whom the schools identify as needing support with parenting and being effective partners in their children's learning. Such staff would have the level of training that enables them to offer a triage service and point families, as necessary, to other relevant services; and
- b) a 'nil exclusion' policy for ALL nurseries and primary schools, with educational support services being made readily available to those schools, including resources that would allow them to provide for all students on the basis of their individual needs. Such support services would be provided by, among others: teachers, counsellors, clinical therapists, dramatists, educational psychologists, youth workers, spiritual counsellors, etc.

**2. What role do you think schools/colleges/education settings can play in a public health model based on cross departmental planning and working?**

It would help if those education providers were to place their work and plan their provision within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is important for such providers to understand what it means to approach youth violence as a public health issue rather than as a criminal justice or crime control issue, especially in the light of the findings of the IPPR report and the government's own statistics. There needs to be a child-centred and children's health approach which affirms:

Every child a learner

Every child a learner that matters

Every child a learner with rights and entitlements

Every child a learner with needs (emotional, social, developmental)

Some needs act as a barrier to learning, self development and the development of social skills and emotional literacy

Some needs are complex and require specialist intervention

Every child has an entitlement to education, irrespective of those needs and the behaviours to which they may give rise

Children's right to education cannot be forfeited on account of their poor behaviour, or their non-compliance with codes of conduct or policies relating to school uniform.

If the time children spend in school, during which there should be the highest level of joint working between the school and their parents/carers, is not used to equip them

with the values, the knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviours that make them fit for living in civil society and for being at ease with themselves and with those around them, even when faced with unemployment, peer pressures, negative youth culture, cyber bullying and the rest, then we are failing children and young people. There surely is little point in equipping people with qualifications and skills for the workplace if the social and life skills they need for managing themselves in the home and for basic survival on the streets are absent.

‘Zero tolerance’ is senseless, oppressive and destructive. Some parents in the learning community of the school have major challenges that affect their children and their ability to support their children’s learning. While they struggle to give their children a decent meal every day, other than school meals, parents of some of their children’s peers are able to spend £40 to £60 per hour for private tuition for their children.

Education providers should be required to conduct assessments of wellness among their students in order to identify factors that might be hampering children and young people’s wellbeing and their capacity for effective self management and meaningful social interactions with young people and adults around them. Such wellbeing surveys, in addition to the needs assessment students themselves, schools, parents and other significant adults might provide, could form the basis of joint planning and intervention in order to meet the needs of individuals and groups of young people. Joint planning and partnership working between schools and colleges, schools and youth workers, schools and training providers (including technical and vocational education and training providers), schools and communities, could avoid the situation in which young people feel they have the profile only of a ‘problem’ to be controlled, with no opportunity for meaningful interactions with other groups of young people.

Schools and other education providers should focus more upon we know about children and young people’s development, especially during adolescence, about the challenges that young people face in their homes, in school and in their communities, and the lack of provision of support and guidance in formal, non-formal and informal settings that they might otherwise access.

Having worked with young people practically all my life (I did a postgraduate diploma in youth and community work in 1968) and with students excluded from schools and colleges since 1999, I believe that the more the nation adopts a punitive, crime and punishment approach to young people’s infractions, in schools and in communities, the less respect young people will have for authority and for the rule of law, and the more indifferent they will become to the possible consequences of their actions. This can be seen clearly enough from the impact of government responses to gun- and knife-enabled crime. The assumption that targeting young people for actual or potential involvement in gun and knife crime and introducing tougher sentences for

those found carrying or/and using guns and knives would have a deterrent effect has clearly been proved false. Despite knowing the fatal consequences of using knives and despite the number of young people killed and the number of others serving long jail sentences on account of gun and knife crime, scandalous numbers of young people are still being killed on our streets by young people like themselves.

If we genuinely do not believe that there is any evidence that young black people have a congenital propensity to murder and mayhem, or to outing death at a ridiculously young age, we need to answer the question: How has it come about that descendants of the Windrush generation can assert in a very matter of fact way that they do not expect to live beyond the age of 25 and would consider themselves lucky if they reach 25? And that in one of the most advanced nations on earth, which is not plagued by malaria, ebola, civil war or any other population decimating disaster that affects the black youth population disproportionately.

### **3. What gaps in resources and training in schools/colleges/education settings do you feel impact negatively on their ability to address youth violence?**

It is questionable whether the failure and ability of schools/colleges/education settings is accounted for by 'gaps in resources and training'. Training is indeed a key issue, especially with some 57% of newly qualified teachers saying that they feel unprepared for teaching and managing classes in an urban setting, especially in secondary schools.

The major issue, however, is to do with government policy and the schooling policies and practices to which that has given rise, pretty much since the Education Reform Act 1988. While no sensible person would balk at any government's aspiration to improve school standards and raise achievement, there is a major issue of the measures that are adopted and the policies that schools are allowed to operate in pursuit of those goals.

If students schooling outcomes are measured only or even mainly by test and examination results, schools will inevitably focus upon preparing them to perform well in such tests and examinations. Rather than attending to young people's holistic development of mind body and spirit, therefore, teachers teach for exams, a learning environment is created which is principally about conformity to rules, ability to access curriculum and be disciplined learners and ability to reproduce knowledge. But, students' abilities and aptitudes in respect of all of those things differ and for a whole variety of reasons. Some students have hidden disabilities such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, some are on the autism spectrum, others suffer from ADHD and their capacity for focused attention, active listening and orderly conduct is compromised not because of their badness but because of an absence of wellness. Other

students have none of those conditions but have simply not developed self management skills, or indulge in behaviour that compensates for their lack of confidence, their fear of failure, their fear of having others discover their hidden disability, or because of reaction to stress and trauma that derive from their home environment, from witnessing violence among their peer group, or from fear of other young people like themselves.

Schooling is compulsory for all those of statutory school age. If you are made to go to school, you inevitably bring who and what you are to the school community and you have an entitlement to education irrespective of what you bring. You may be required to leave jewellery, mobile phones and illegal objects such as knives narcotics outside the school gate, but there are certain characteristics or conditions you cannot divest because they are part of you. It is the business of the school, therefore, to seek to understand you as an individual learner, understand how it might best assist you in unlearning inappropriate behaviours, in not limiting yourself and your potential because of your disability, in having and using opportunities to overcome your limitations and excel, in developing self management skills, in resolving disagreements and conflict without resorting to violence, in learning how to learn, in coping with adverse circumstances in your home or your community. Time was when teachers taught children, children in the process of learning to be well adjusted social beings, children in the process of discovering their creativity and giving it expression, children discovering who they are and what they do best, children struggling to define their sexuality, children struggling to respect, understand and be at ease with others who are different from themselves (on account of gender, class, ethnicity, upbringing, language, faith, etc), children who are gifted and talented. While some teachers still struggle to teach and to make time to teach children in all their diversity, they are required more and more to teach subjects, teach for tests and exams and to weed out those children who demonstrate by their conduct and demeanour that they are not conforming to that regime.

It is in this context that schools operate 'zero tolerance' policies and exclude students for infractions and breaches of codes of discipline and of rules in relation to school uniform. Increasingly, such uni-form policies apply to the length, style and colour of hair, with black boys in particular being excluded on account of short cropped hair, or for wearing their hair in braids or in locks. In one exclusion case that went to judicial review and in relation to which I was an expert witness, the headteacher excluded a black boy on his first day of secondary school for wearing his hair in neat corn row braids. This boy had never had his hair cut since birth. The school determined that his hairstyle was 'an aggressive form of ethnic identification' and furthermore it was 'indicative of gang culture'. The judge in that case found that the school had acted illegally in excluding the student and ordered that it review its uniform policy.

Youth violence is sadly part of the social context in which young people operate, particularly in urban environment and in communities beset by poverty and deprivation. I believe it is very much the responsibility of schools to assist young people in understanding and avoiding youth violence, having regard to the fact that many young people experience violence in their homes long before they experience or, worse yet, become involved in it as victims or perpetrators in their communities.

For generations, there have been rivalries between schools and not just on sports grounds. For generations, too, school students, boys and girls, have got into conflict with one another in school. Yet, more and more schools are identifying such inter group rivalries as students 'importing street culture or gang culture into the school' and excluding students or/and punishing them more harshly for involvement in such confrontations.

Training should be designed to change the mindset of school managers and teachers and the increasingly punitive, labelling and profiling approach they take to young people and young black boys in particular. Schools should acknowledge that they are not the only people who can provide education for living and the development of social and self management skills and emotional literacy in young people. Social education programmes for young people could be planned and developed by schools and colleges in partnership with youth and community workers, dramatists, sports instructors, community artists, musicians and a whole range of other professionals. Many of the above could work with young people outside as well as in school, thus supporting them in the community environments in which many of them encounter youth violence. Joint planning, joint training and joint funding with clear objectives and intended outcomes would be far more effective than schools seeking to address the issue of youth violence by themselves.

**4. In Scotland, the Violence Reduction Unit argue that a move to a zero exclusion policy across all schools was central to their approach. Do you think that moving to a zero exclusion policy nationwide is possible?**

I see moving to a zero exclusion policy nationwide as not just possible but as absolutely necessary. For, not only is there no evidence of exclusion acting as a deterrent, few excluded students experience exclusion as having a corrective or remedial impact upon their conduct. It is not unusual for excluded students to find themselves compounding the behaviour(s) for which they are excluded.

The government is building inexorably a twin track schooling system, with schools that cream off high performing, conformist, well adjusted and highly motivated students that are capable of producing high level examination results on the one hand, and the rest on the other. The rest typically end up in 'alternative provision' with poor education standards, an environment that is conducive to anything but

learning and with more prospects of youth offending than of positive schooling outcomes.

Introducing their school exclusion guidelines in 2015, the government said this:

“We are unapologetic in our stance that giving teachers the powers to properly discipline disruptive pupils and exclude the worst behaved pupils benefits all by deterring poor behaviour and ensuring young people spend their time in school learning”.

- DfE, 2 February 2015

This statement and indeed the exclusion guidelines had no regard whatsoever to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Rather, the government encouraged schools to adopt ‘zero tolerance’ policies and to apply them in a manner that failed to acknowledge the complex needs that many students have, including special educational needs and disabilities.

Commenting on the government’s proposed school exclusion guidelines (2015), I stated:

It is clear and unsurprising, but utterly disgraceful nevertheless, that the DfE is seeking to finesse exclusion as a management tool, with scant regard for the rights of the child as a learner in the process of developing. Making sure that headteachers and governors do the wrong thing legally is not the same as ensuring that they have regard to children’s entitlement to an education and to support in unlearning inappropriate behaviours and embracing more appropriate approaches to self-management. It is a punitive, make ‘one size fit all’ approach to facilitating children’s learning and as such, both in process and outcomes, it is akin to supermarkets rejecting perfectly good produce simply because items do not meet their acceptance criteria as regards, for example, colour, size and shape. In the schooling context, this contributes massively to human wastage and to wrecked life chances.

As far as I am concerned, the DfE’s approach since 2012 and especially its insistence on making it as difficult as possible for parents and students to challenge and to reverse headteachers’ and governing bodies’ exclusion decisions demonstrates the government’s disregard for the rights of the child and their refusal to place the child’s best interests and education entitlement at the centre of the exclusion guidelines.

The spirit, intent and practice implications of ‘Every Child Matters’ seem to be some ever increasing distance away from where neoliberal education ideology and practice are positioning the most vulnerable students in the school system, with dire consequences for their life chances.

The education charity I chair, Communities Empowerment Network (CEN) from its inception in 1999, has been advocating on behalf of excluded children and those at risk of exclusion as discrete groups within the schooling population and can point to evidence that provides shocking examples of how whimsically, arbitrarily and illegally headteachers deny children's rights, damaging their schooling and affecting their life chances year on year.

When the Blair government was forging ahead with its academies programme and it was clear that, with academies and their Governing Bodies/Boards/Trusts having no accountability in the public sphere and with the government requiring evidence that they were successful at dealing with disruption and students' non-engagement with learning in order to raise standards and get the best results, especially in schools that had been in special measures, CEN predicted that academies would exclude at a rate even higher than local authority maintained schools.

And they did:

- *In 2012-13 a total of 18,763 maintained schools excluded 2,700 pupils*
- *Yet, only 2,390 academies excluded 1,930 pupils (a mere 770 less than all maintained schools)*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-exclusions>

Based on the evidence it had gathered for more than a decade, CEN argued the situation was bad enough when schools were run by local education authorities and could therefore be expected to worsen, with no protection for parents at local government level, when academies were 'set free from the shackles of local councils', to quote ministers' rhetoric.

Since then, we have had not just Michael Gove's 'Free Schools', but increasing attempts by government to force even successful schools, primary and secondary, to convert to academy status.

Despite the compliance requirements of the Equality Act 2010, academies and free schools are largely ignoring their duties under that legislation, albeit the most vulnerable students in the schooling system are those with one or a combination of 'protected characteristics'.

Research conducted by Race on the Agenda (ROTA) in 2013 found that many academies and free schools are basically ignoring the Equality Act 2010:

'Out of the 78 free schools opened in 2011 and 2012:

- Only 7.7% have published one equality objective
- Most seem to be unaware of the Equality Act

- Less than 25% have made reference to the Equality Act 2010 in their key documents and policies'
- Race on the Agenda (2013)

But, there has been a parallel and equally disturbing development that appears to have been accelerated by government as part of its policy to facilitate schools in excluding students.

In 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published their White Paper, *Back on Track: A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people*. In that document, government committed itself:

'to transform the quality of alternative education for those who are excluded from, or who for some other reason are unable to attend school'.

Before rolling out Back on Track across the schooling system, the DCSF allocated £26.5 million to fund 12 innovative pilot projects '**to develop best practice and encourage greater diversity in alternative provision**'.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/197340/DFE-RB250\\_1\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/197340/DFE-RB250_1_.pdf)

Those of us who studied that White Paper closely and attended the 'road show' events DCSF representatives held up and down the country had cause to 'smell a rat' when the government emphasised its intention to *encourage greater diversity in alternative provision*. Given the neoliberal ideology and the marketization of schooling provision that underpinned the academies programme, with the emphasis on dealing with disruption and taking over and turning around failing schools, it was clear that the government was not just concerned with modernising what already existed and ensuring that it was delivering students' entitlement, they were anticipating a huge spike in the number of excluded students. 'Encouraging greater diversity' was therefore effectively a less crude way of describing the process of opening up alternative provision to 'the market' and encouraging all sorts of providers to enter that market and help contain young people excluded from school and those who typically voted with their feet and resisted schooling for any number of reasons.

One important remnant of the responsibilities for education provision the government left with what they characterised as those 'pesky' local authorities was the requirement '*to arrange educational provision for excluded pupils of compulsory school age from all institutions from the sixth day of a permanent exclusion*'. This meant that local authorities were commissioning an increasing and 'diverse' number of providers to make such provision.

So, if as we have noted above, in 2012-13, 2,390 academies excluded 1,930 pupils, only 770 less than all 18,763 maintained schools, academies were clearly generating

the need for extensive educational provision otherwise than at school. There has therefore been a huge rise in the number and range of such providers in the last decade.

The government commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to evaluate the 12 Back on Track pilot projects. NFER published its final report in October 2012, noting that:

The report's findings are based on qualitative information derived from case-study visits carried out between autumn 2009 and spring 2012 involving individual, face-to-face, group and telephone interviews with 129 pilot project staff (operational and strategic level); 41 school/pupil referral unit (PRU) staff; 58 local authority staff (operational and strategic); 86 young people; 21 parents/carers; and 19 others (including other service providers and partners).

Among their 'key findings' were:

- There is great variety in the scope and constitution of effective alternative provision in terms of modes and contexts of delivery and the nature of the contributions made to the lives and future life chances of young people. Alternative provision works well when it reflects and is responsive to the dynamics of local contexts and the changing needs of the various cohorts of young people it serves.
- The value and effectiveness of pursuing personalised approaches to alternative provision need to be recognised and supported, especially in the commissioning process.
- The measurement and assessment of the impacts, outcomes and achievements of alternative provision require further consideration and development. There remains a critical need to develop meaningful achievable outcome measures that, whilst taking into account the variations in circumstances of young people and the remit of the provision, can deliver valuable assessments of their capacity to effect positive change.

<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/APIZ01>

Their recommendations included:

- There is a need to broaden understandings of the scope and value of alternative provision, in terms of what it constitutes, how it operates and is delivered, and the extent and nature of the contributions it can make to the lives and future life chances of young people.
- Consideration should be given to tensions between the role of alternative provision in meeting the hierarchy of needs of individual young people through personalised approaches, and the imperatives to generate outcomes centred on academic-related performance targets
- The measurement and assessment of the impacts, outcomes and achievements of alternative provision need further consideration and development. There remains a

critical need to develop meaningful achievable outcome measures that, whilst taking into account the variations and differences in circumstances of young people and the aims/remit of the provision, can deliver valuable assessments of their capacity to effect positive change.

Anecdotal evidence from some students and staff in alternative provision and some local authority commissioners suggests that the NfER recommendations are not reflected in any way in the commissioning process or in the approaches to young people's learning and development. Talented students whose academic record in their former school(s) was commendable by those same schools' assessment, bemoan the lack of a disciplined learning environment and of students' motivation to learn in those settings.

Staff who worked as learning mentors or teaching assistants in mainstream schools prior to joining Pupil Referral Units and other designated alternative provision comment similarly on the nature of the learning environment, the quality of learning and the approach certain alternative providers take to achieving performance targets. Their experience is of providers finding ways of maximising profit, rather than having regard to the complexity of young people's needs and adopting personalised approaches to meeting those needs. For those reasons, young people are not being assisted to develop the skills, aptitudes and behaviours that would enable them to reintegrate within mainstream schooling and pursue a wider range of options, or to qualify for apprenticeships, or progress to further and higher education.

Typically, alternative providers charge £100,000 per year for one student. If the 'meaningful achievable outcome measures' the NfER recommended were to be developed and applied to what those providers do with young people and the impact they have on young people's life chances, it is questionable whether anyone would see alternative provision as representing value for money.

It is interesting to note that the cost to contain a student in alternative provision is only about 10% less than it costs to keep them in a young offender institution (YOI) and 20% less to contain them in an adult prison.

## **Empowerment and Advocacy**

Alternative education provision is now a lucrative industry and a staple in the schooling and education market. Those making such provision are not held to their legal requirement to comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty of the Equality Act 2010. And if one were to conduct extensive qualitative research among young offenders in YOIs, one would find ample evidence to demonstrate that for far too

many young people the alternative provision was little more than the ante-chamber to the YOI.

The implications of all that for children's education rights and delivery of their educational entitlement, for their life chances, for social mobility and for sustaining cycles of deprivation are immense. Such provision increasingly constitutes the mouth of the school-to-prison pipeline. Therefore, when one considers the ethnic and social class profile of those most excluded from school, those disproportionately represented in YOIs and the prison system generally, of those with the greatest children and adolescent mental health challenges, there can be no question that there is an ethnic penalty that is structurally imposed on that section of the population pretty much from birth.

Such is the logic of the much trumpeted 'zero tolerance' approach that government, academies and the school improvement lobby insist upon, uncritically and without nuance. And no doubt, the significance of young people in school uniform butchering one another at bus stops outside school gates, or at train stations during rush hour, is completely lost on those who celebrate the fact that as a consequence of their 'zero tolerance' whole school policy, these killings take place outside the school and not on school premises.

The Youth Justice Board, the Probation Service, academic researchers and parents and community groups have all provided evidence over the years of the link between school exclusion, patterns of youth offending and wider social exclusion. Excluding students on account of poor behaviour, aggression towards their peers and/or teachers, or on account of physical violence targeted at young people like themselves in the community simply exports the problem away from the school and often into arenas where such behaviours are reinforced without young people being able to access any form of support. They thus find themselves being defined by their conduct and being profiled by the very schools that excluded them in the first place. My own research among young offenders in prison suggests that across the prison population, over 50% of young people serving sentences for serious youth violence (from assault to grievous bodily harm to manslaughter and murder) had been excluded from school and saw exclusion as the point at which their schooling career began to give way to their offending career.

In my view, the DfE should do three things in this regard:

- i) gather evidence of the damage school exclusion does to the most vulnerable groups in the schooling system, black boys, looked after children and children with special needs and disabilities particularly, having regard especially to data on the link between school exclusion and youth offending

- ii) engage with the 27% of schools in England and Wales that do not exclude, assess and disseminate their strategies for keeping children in school while attending to their individual needs, however complex and
- iii) fund schools to enable them to access as wide a range of education support services as possible, including Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services and apply a zero exclusions policy across all schools.

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/2013/exclusionprison-280213>

rep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/18886/1/196560\_584%20Hodgson%20PrePublisher.pdf

#### 5. What are your views on the use of increased surveillance/security techniques in education settings, such as searching and scanning and knife arches?

The use of such techniques reassure parents who are anxious about reports of gun- and knife-enabled murders involving school students, some as young as 10. Young people increasingly live in fear of other young people, to the extent that some would sooner run into police officers in their neighbourhoods than approach groups of other black youths.

Young people's fear of one another is something black youths themselves have been grappling with for decades:

'In Bristol in 2007, I worked with 80 Black 12-16 year old school students, two thirds of whom were males, from three schools including an Academy. In the course of the day, I set them the following task:  
At this stage of your life, write down the three things you fear most. Their deepest fears, presented here on the basis of the frequency with which they appeared were:

- Dying
- Death
- Being killed/murdered
- Going pen (going to prison)
- Getting stabbed
- My loved ones dying around me
- Anything happening to my family
- Losing loved ones
- **Our youths**
- Not achieving goals
- Not being able to afford the things I want in the future( house, car, etc)
- Not getting the opportunities I want

- Not succeeding
- Living by myself
- The Tories in power

When I asked the entire group to describe what their schools did to engage with them in dealing with those fears, they could point to not one intervention save for the guidance and support a few individuals and their families were receiving from teachers who were 'safe' and with whom they had developed a good relationship. Indeed, the majority of the students stated that their schools did not know they harboured those fears as 'it's not the kind of thing the school is interested in'.

John, G. (2010) *The Case for a Learner's Charter for Schools*, New Beacon Books, London

That was just over a decade ago. Since then, knife crime has been on the increase as has the number and frequency of murders of black young people by other black young people.

But, while surveillance techniques might be reassuring, they have limited value as a short term measure and would be a mark of failure on the part of schools and parents working in partnership if the measures were institutionalised in the long term. In the short term, most students determined to carry knives for whatever reason are smart enough to hide them for easy retrieval rather than risk walking through a security arch with them. In this sense, such security techniques have the same effect as police bulging with armoury patrolling the concourse of train stations. In the longer term, if they were to become part of the architecture of the school or college, it would signify that the education provider is taking steps to avoid weapons being used on their premises. For a knife or gun to be detected by a surveillance mechanism, unless the student acquired it at the school gate, they must have travelled with it at least for part of the journey to school. It means that throughout that journey they would have been a risk to the public, including some of the same students the surveillance measure is designed to keep safe, if not to the weapon carriers themselves.

The challenge for schools, therefore, is how to work in partnership with parents and students to address youth violence as the collective failure that it is, a failure on the part of parents and families, of schools and local authorities and of artists and media platforms that appear to validate if not promote youth violence. As the quotation above suggests, if young people come to school full of anxiety about their safety and about the incidence of gun-and knife enabled murders in which young people are assailants and victims, chances are that they would mentally and emotionally be preoccupied with that irrespective of how much teachers might strive to engage them in learning. If schools are in communities beset by youth violence, while not making that their sole focus, they have a responsibility to work with students and parents and

support students in embracing the values and the knowledge and understanding that would ensure that they do not develop a predisposition to violence, let alone to the use of guns and knives.

While surveillance techniques might be used as a public safety measure, they use is also encouraged by police and sections of communities as a crime prevention measure and one which presupposes that those caught with knives or guns would face prosecution.

An increasing number of young people are suffering trauma and varying degrees of mental ill health as a consequence of experiencing, if not directly witnesses the killing of their siblings, friends or peers. Apart from young members of bereaved families, those young people do not access any counselling and therapeutic services. An unprecedented number of young people have attended funerals of young people like themselves over the last 25 years. The prison service plays host to more and more young people year on year, many serving long sentences. Siblings, other relatives and friends of both those who are killed and those who are imprisoned for killing them often live with anger, bitterness and a thirst for revenge many years after. All of this generates health needs in the short and long term. It also necessitates an empathetic approach to the challenges facing young people and an array of preventive and remedial interventions that should not include profiling young people or depicting their aggressive conduct as manifestations of 'gang' culture, or as a predisposition to 'serious youth violence'.

#### **6. Do you have examples of best practice from your own experience that could be replicated nationally?**

Most of my work with young people involves one-to-one mentoring and group work. The young people I mentor are like the majority of their peers ever at risk of being affected by youth violence, simply on account of being young black males and living or studying in London, in much the same way that they are at risk of being stopped and searched by the police. I act as a voluntary consultant to Options for Change, an organisation advocating for young people in Lambeth and adjacent boroughs. I recommend the work this organisation does in support of marginalised young people and their parents.

I am also an honorary member of '100 Black Men of London', an organisation that does great work with parents in support of their children's self development and learning, as well as directly with young people themselves.

The Communities Empowerment Network (CEN) which I chair engages with young people who are excluded for fixed periods or permanently. An integral part of the CEN approach is working with students on fixed term exclusions to put in place

strategies for ensuring that fixed term did not escalate into permanent exclusions, as well as to address the students' overall experience of schooling and of life in their community. We are firmly of the view that in spite, if not because, of the challenges young people face, there is need for more and more significant adults and men in particular to work with them and guide and assist them in managing those challenges and attending to their self development.

All those three organisations are strapped for funds, ever though an increasingly number of parents and young people look to them to provide a service. The irony and injustice that is built into the system could be seen by looking at CEN as an example. That organisation sees an increase every year in the number of school exclusions parents ask us to assist them in dealing with. Yet, while schools that are well funded in relative terms continue to exclude students rather than applying strategies for supporting them and keeping them in school, CEN and the organisations mentioned above are constantly having to raise funds in order to deal with the casualties they create. Here is a case of the statutory sector off loading on to the voluntary sector, irrespective of the added pressures the government austerity policies place upon already vulnerable groups in the society.

For this reason, too, the government should show itself to be much more concerned about the societal consequences of school exclusion, not least its impact on social exclusion and impose a zero exclusion policy on all schools.

## **7. To what extent is the education system equipping young people with the necessary skills to succeed in the employment market?**

The education system is clearly equipping many young people in some sectors of the population with the necessary skills to succeed in the employment market. As such, this question needs to be much more nuanced. Access to the employment market is far easier for young people with good schooling outcomes, especially when those outcomes enable them to progress to university, Russell Group institutions in particular, or to internships and apprenticeships. Youth unemployment is something which affects predominantly young people with poor schooling outcomes, the same young people who predominate in statistics for school leavers not in education, employment or training.

Government statistics year on year indicate stubborn trends in schooling outcomes for young people by gender and ethnicity. That data evidences the importance of not seeing 'young people' as an undifferentiated mass, whether that be within individual ethnic groups or across ethnic groups. Asian groups, Indian students consistently do far better than Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Chinese students have schooling outcomes similar to those of Indians and both of those groups do better than the rest of their peers year on year. Black Africans do better than Black

Caribbeans, Black African girls do better than Black African and Black Caribbean boys.

But, even before one examines post-16 progression for 'young people', one has to take account of the 'off rolling' and weeding out that schools do, especially of Black Caribbean boys, mixed heritage boys (Black African/white and Black Caribbean/white in particular), looked after children and children with special educational needs and disabilities. They are typically the groups that are subject to managed moves and to fixed term and permanent exclusion. They are consequently represented in Pupil Referral Units and other forms of alternative provision, where typically they sit for fewer GCSEs, they seldom have opportunities for meaningful apprenticeships and the learning environment is not conducive to the acquisition of self management and social and life skills, all of which the workplace needs, irrespective of whether one is a banker or a painter and decorator.

When in 2005, Mike Tomlinson produced his report on the review of 14-19 education policy in which he raised questions about the obsession with GCSE and A Level results as the measure of school attainment, proposing instead a new Diploma for which students would study at the age of 14 and which would bridge the divide between 'academic' and 'vocational' areas of the curriculum, an official from the then Department for Education and Skills commented:

"Alongside that reform we have made record investment in education. We need to continually push for higher standards, and that means giving schools more freedom and a greater say. We have had real improvements in performance because we have had tough targets for school results and halved the number of failing schools. We make no apology for doing what is right and what is needed.....Our proposals for 14-19 reform will for the first time ensure that real options are open to every child - both traditional academic options and vocational ones..... We are making sure that in the future effective advice and guidance is available to every young person so that they can make intelligent informed choices about the study that best suits them."

But, 'giving schools more freedom and a greater say' included giving them more licence to exclude, both for infractions and for breaching school rules, as well as for poor academic performance. While '...we have had tough targets for school results and halved the number of failing schools' might sound innocuous, the DES offered no comment, either on the implications of those 'tough targets for school results' for those students who had an absolute right to education but who nevertheless needed schools to also attend to their needs, including the need for support in dealing with the complex challenges many of them were facing in school itself, as in their families and their communities.

One obvious answer to the question, though, is to study the percentage of young people in custody who are functionally illiterate or only marginally literate.

Again, I would say that the education system would stand a better chance of equipping young people with the necessary skills to succeed in the employment market if it kept them in school rather than excluding them and shunting them into dysfunctional alternative provision and if schools focused much more on addressing their needs, however complex, and equipping them with necessary social and life skills.

The racial profiling of black boys in the schooling system and in society generally has a damaging effect not just on how others see and treat them, but on how they see themselves and on the level of their aspirations. If they get a sense that the schooling system expects little of them, irrespective of how focused they may be on learning and if as a result they do not or cannot build positive, trusting and supportive relationships with teachers and significant adults, they are unlikely to have an orientation towards the workplace.

In this regard, let me say how retrograde it is that some schools in urban areas have abandoned their work experience programmes on account of budget cuts. Through those programmes, students were introduced to the world of work and encouraged to raise their aspirations and to develop the discipline and skills necessary for the workplace. Many were assisted in gaining more insight into what happens in the jobs or careers to which they aspired. This was especially valuable for less advantaged students in the system, especially looked after children and those with special educational needs and disabilities whose parents did not have the kind of networks that more or less guaranteed work experience opportunities for their children other than those organised through the school.

Here again is an example of how the absence of social and cultural capital has an impact upon schooling outcomes and life chances for some students in the system and why 'young people' cannot be seen as an undifferentiated mass as the question appears to suggest. For not only are some parents in the learning community of a comprehensive school able to pay for costly extension classes for their children while other parents struggle to give children a decent meal once a day, the former can also guarantee work experience opportunities and mentoring for their children, even when the school has no resources to operate such programmes.

**8. How can we incentivise young people to train for the world of work, rather than getting involved in gang/drug related activities, especially when their pay is likely to be low and they don't see the role models who've succeeded out there?**

Working that same group of young people in Bristol (see 5. Above), I set them an exercise to discuss among themselves the following question:

Why is it that some young people (boys **and** girls) from the same family do well at school, live peaceably with their peers and manage themselves well in their community, while their siblings do the complete opposite and.... end up dead?

The students identified a range of key issues to do with, among others:

- Self esteem
- Level of aspirations
- Capacity to resist peer pressure
- Making fast money
- Reasons for and consequences of resisting parental guidance and discipline
- Self management skills
- Society's expectations that black boys can't do well
- Quality of support from people they respect, including some teachers
- Not wanting to be seen as a 'goodie two shoes'
- 'My brother is a geek. He so would never survive on road'
- 'Need to be tough and deal with mans that disrespect you'
- 'You have to be able to handle yourself on road'

Students don't get up one day and decide that they would choose the alternative economy of drug dealing, street robberies or whatever it is, rather than 'training for the world of work'. This is a rather stereotyped view of school leavers, white or black, male or female.

The above responses indicate that students are only too aware that they have agency and that a range of factors inform their decision to engage with learning and to work according to their potential in the school setting. Students react to the profile they feel they have in the schooling system and in their particular school. Some choose to act according to type, especially when teachers write them off and make it clear that they would sooner see the back of them. The classification schools use to determine which students are worth the investment of time and effort in building positive and supportive relationships with them and providing them with quality teaching and which are better off excluded or offloaded to other provision, typically mirrors the academic and non-academic divide that stubbornly persists in the schooling system.

Incentivising young people to train for the world of work requires that we change our mindset, acknowledge that ability, talent and student attainment cannot be measured wholly by tests and examinations and put in place meaningful training and apprenticeship opportunities that could make young people confident of effecting sustainable change in their life or/and lifestyle. It means acknowledging that many young people are turned off learning during their schooling career as a consequence

of a range of experiences and that it is therefore wrong and abhorrent to assume that their poor schooling outcomes are necessarily a measure of their talents and abilities.

**9. For young people who have been involved in violence, what do you see as the greatest barriers they face to gaining qualifications and employment?**

One of the major barriers they face is the possibility of reprisals and escalating violence, whether or not they are prosecuted/convicted/imprisoned for the offence. The absence of restorative justice programmes, or similar initiatives, makes it more difficult for assailants and victims to have a forum to air and clear differences and afford themselves the opportunity to learn, heal and seek closure.

Another barrier is the emphasis on punishment with scant regard to the need for rehabilitation. Prison inspection reports, prison managers' reports and the probation service all highlight issues to do with mental ill health and the absence of general wellness among young offenders, especially those found guilty of serious youth violence.

Employers have shown themselves to be very reluctant to employ people convicted of violence. Many have a justifiable concern about risk and about the welfare of staff and customers, especially as quite often people's involvement in violence is seen as indicative of anger management issues, or of a reckless disregard for human life. A focus on wellness and rehabilitation should be matched by awareness raising initiatives with employers, so that they are made aware of what is being or has been done to engage with young people involved in violence and the support that will be available to them as employers if they committed to employing such young people.

People involved in violence face internal as well as external barriers and that is why a focus on wellness and on violence as a public health issue is so necessary, whether that be domestic violence or violence in the streets. A focus on health and wellbeing can help such folk to examine their conduct and the background to it and determine how they wish to go forward. Gaining qualifications and employment might well be part of a wider set of goals such people choose for themselves.

**10. How can policy-makers best support employers to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?**

See answer to foregoing question.

Professor Gus John is a former director of education, a former adviser to Jack Straw when Home Secretary on race and social inclusion and a special adviser to Boris Johnson, former Mayor of London, on serious youth violence. Professor John is a Visiting Professor at Coventry University and Associate Professor at the UCL Institute of Education. He chairs the board of trustees of the Communities Empowerment Network (CEN), a charity dedicating to providing advocacy and representation on behalf of excluded students and their families, as well as to students at risk of exclusion.