

Launch of **Three Thousand Voices: Growing Up in South East London**

Roundtable Discussion

Date: 3 October 2025

Host: Dr Sam Parrett CBE, Group CEO, Elevare Civic Education Group

Chair: JL Dutaut, Commissioning Editor, *Schools Week*

Attendees:

Jean-Louis Dutaut (Chair) – Commissioning Editor, *Schools Week*

Leora Cruddas – Chief Executive, CST

Catherine Sezen – Director of Education Policy, AoC

Michelle Rankin – Assistant Director Economy and Skills, Royal Borough of Greenwich

Shane Chowen - Editor, *FE Week*

Julian Blake – Partner, Stone King LLP

George Ryan – Associate Director, Public First

Dr Carlie Goldsmith – Senior Policy Advisor, Impetus

Dr Kerry Scattergood – Research College Group (AoC) Solihull College

Steve Besley – Policy Advisor in Education

Iman Hashim – EA to CEO, Cafcass

Rama Venchard MBE – Owner of Silica Associates Ltd and Chair of LSEAT

Ian Valvona – Senior Leader in Education, Skills and Children’s Social Care

Mark Burnett – CEO, Southwark Diocesan Board of Education and LSEC Trustee

John Hunt – Deputy Group CEO and Chief Financial Officer, Elevare Civic Education Group

Neil Miller - Deputy CEO, London South East Academies Trust

Asfa Sohail - Deputy CEO and Executive Principal, London South East Colleges (LSEC)

Beth Moore - Deputy Principal Student Experience and Group Safeguarding, LSEC

Roseanna Gooder - Assistant Principal SEND and Foundation Learning, LSEC

Neil Coates - Deputy Principal Adults, Apprenticeships and HE, LSEC

Janet Curtis-Broni - Group Chief People Officer, Elevare Civic Education Group

Philip Tagoe – Headteacher, Bromley Beacon Academy

Vivienne Avery - Group Director of Policy & Research, Elevare Civic Education Group

Learner Ambassadors:

Nicole Mundondo - former Student Governor, LSEC

Adedolapo Sadiq - Student President, LSEC

George O'Neil - Bromley Beacon Academy

Kacey Hylton - Bromley Beacon Academy

Romeo Marshall - Bromley Beacon Academy

Summary of Discussion

Opening Remarks – Dr Sam Parrett CBE

Sam welcomed guests and outlined the purpose of the research - a landmark study capturing the views and experiences of 3,000 young people across Elevare Civic Education Group's multi-campus FE College and network of schools in south east London.

Sam emphasised the importance of listening directly to young people and acting on their lived experiences to inform policy and decision-making at local, regional and national levels. She spoke about the Group's aim to ensure that every child and young person has the chance to grow up feeling supported.

Sam added that the purpose of the roundtable was to share the findings of the research and use them as a catalyst for action – building stronger, cross-sector partnerships to address the challenges raised and transform lives.

Vivienne Avery, lead researcher, talked through the methodology and explained how the research was conducted.

- The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods, collecting the views of learners aged from 6 to 18. In the College, this included learners on courses for 16–19-year-olds, and those aged 19-24 studying in our SEND provision (Nido Volans)
- We received 3000 responses to our survey, which consisted of 15 questions about different dimensions of wellbeing, using a simple agree/disagree scale. With the consent of learners, we matched the college survey data to administrative data we held about them
- Staff in our specialist schools helped us develop a visual version of the questionnaire to collect the views of our students with SEND
- We also undertook statistical modelling to better understand the different types of wellbeing across our group. This showed that our learners are categorised by six different groups
- Survey data was complemented with 1:1 interviews across primary and secondary schools, and workshops in the College. This gave us an in-depth understanding of learners' lived experience

Key Research Findings

- Half of learners (the largest Group) report high wellbeing, feeling loved, healthy, safe, and optimistic about their future
- But we also found three groups of learners (around 19%) who are struggling with their wellbeing
- Learners in Alternative Provision and SEND settings, especially those with EHCPs, show lower wellbeing, often feeling unsupported and unsafe. The group with the lowest overall wellbeing feel that they are not listened to, unsupported and unsafe. Learners in this
- group were more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ (College) or not to identify as male or female
- Although 4 out of 5 learners agreed they had someone supportive to talk to, this dropped by 30% between the ages of 11 and 12/13 years, suggesting challenges in transitioning from primary to secondary schools.
- Learners feel safe online and in their local area, though female students from age 7 report feeling less safe online. While many learners have strategies to stay safe online, they know others who have had negative experiences
- Many learners have strong friendships and enjoy spending time with friends, but others feel lonely and would welcome more support to build connections
- Three-quarters of learners value their teachers, praising staff who offer personalised support and understand their needs

Learner Ambassador Q&A

Five learner ambassadors - **Romeo, Ade, Nicole, Kacey, and George** - shared personal insights about their own wellbeing, challenges they have faced and their plans for the future.

- **Romeo** spoke about struggling in mainstream education before receiving life-changing therapeutic and emotional support at Bromley Beacon Academy.
- **Ade** reflected on loneliness and the challenge of making friends when starting college. Through the Student Union, he is helping to create more clubs and social spaces for students: "You realise that others are lonely as well."
- **Nicole** discussed anxieties about the future, from jobs and housing to taxes and independent living skills. She called for safe spaces where young people can ask questions about adulthood 'without judgment'. She also said that information needs to be delivered through channels/formats young people actually use: "If the message isn't in a 15-second TikTok video, many young people won't engage!"
- **George** highlighted both the positives and negatives of social media - a powerful platform for self-expression, but one that can harm mental health if offline support networks are lacking. He called for more education around responsible digital use.

- **Kacey** described how specialist provision, therapy and consistent support helped her to thrive after struggling in mainstream education.

JL Dutaut noted how these stories reflect the courage it takes for learners to connect with others - and the crucial role institutions play in creating inclusive, welcoming environments.

Roundtable Discussion

Student Voice, Inclusion and Belonging

George Ryan emphasised the need for student-led initiatives, supported by staff, which can bring together learners with shared interests or identities - particularly those least likely to join groups or clubs.

He highlighted the loss of community youth spaces and the need for education settings to fill that gap. He also noted the upsetting findings around LGBTQ+ learners having lower levels of wellbeing, commenting that while much progress has been made for this group in terms of policy, society hasn't always caught up.

Dr Carlie Goldsmith linked these findings to some recent research that Impetus has carried out with Public First. This revealed how a lack of places for young people (Year 10) to socialise and a narrow academic focus in schools leave many feeling disconnected – leading to poor attendance for those who feel that school 'just isn't for them'.

Steve Besley reflected on evidence from the Covid Inquiry suggesting a relationship between increased loneliness and the long-term social impacts of the pandemic.

Vivienne Avery added that although the pandemic wasn't explicitly mentioned by learners in the research, it's hard to see how this major event in their lives would not have affected them.

Asfa Sohail confirmed that LSEC has seen rising loneliness among students and shared details of the college's new Loneliness Strategy designed to build connection and community.

Civic Engagement, Democracy and Belonging

Shane Chowen raised the issue of misinformation online and the implications of lowering the voting age to 16, asking how schools can better prepare young people for civic participation.

Cath Sezen noted how few respondents felt heard by national leaders. She suggested that the curriculum reform could introduce a 'curriculum guarantee' which covers democracy, volunteering and civic engagement – helping young people to better understand the political system.

JL Dutaut noted that there is a chasm between what the government says and where young people actually are.

Poverty and the role of schools/colleges

Leora Cruddas called attention to the impact of poverty and housing insecurity revealed in the research. She highlighted that we are seeing a rising number of children who don't have a home or don't feel safe at home, which of course affects their sense of belonging and outcomes.

She also expressed concern that so many young people "don't feel that they matter" – which needs to be a call to action for educators and policymakers.

Neil Miller highlighted the systemic pressures facing schools, particularly the lack of support services and long waits for CAMHS, which are often forcing schools to fill the gap themselves.

He noted that we are seeing children who are being failed by the system at age 5, and then this gap just gets bigger. He also expressed concern that the Curriculum Review won't go far enough in terms of making the changes that are needed to support young people who struggle in mainstream.

Beth Moore suggested that future research could include parental perspectives, as her and her team are seeing families of LSEC students struggling to meet even basic needs. She noted that the most disadvantaged learners, who need social connection the most, face the greatest barriers. Many have to work to support their families, so enrichment opportunities need to be woven in throughout the school/college day to help mitigate this.

Systemic change and cross-sector collaboration

Julian Blake said that the findings point to a wider societal challenge, not just an education issue. This requires partnerships to identify key social priorities and act collectively at a local level. He highlighted the significance of social value and the need for a more mission-driven economy (that is less about money).

Leora Cruddas added that children with SEND are too often seen as a cost to the state, rather than a value, and called for a shift from a transactional to a relationship-based system.

Ian Valvona highlighted the need to look across whole cohorts to identify priorities and assess where interventions are most needed.

Neil Miller highlighted the success of the Alternative Provision (AP) Taskforce pilot in East Sussex, led by London South East Academies Trust. The multi-agency model provides coordinated wraparound support, ensuring services work together to deliver early intervention and gives young people a far better chance of moving on successfully.

JL noted the obvious benefits of this approach and **Beth Moore** added that LSEC has also introduced a student-led LGBTQ+ taskforce.

Michelle Rankin highlighted some of the initiatives being undertaken in the Royal Borough of Greenwich to support vulnerable groups of young people, including care leavers, to engage with civic leaders and have their voices heard.

Rama Venchard talked about the hierarchy of needs and suggested that schools and colleges can act immediately on things that are within our control – for example, providing mentoring and life-skills education that support independence and progression for young people.

Neil Coates outlined ongoing work with parents and employers at LSEC to build resilience and social capital among learners. He highlighted the importance of aligning education with workplace expectations and personal development - to better prepare learners to 'stand on their own two feet' and thrive.

Steve Besley stressed the economic case for early investment in young people, arguing that preventative spending delivers savings in health, crime and education over time.

Neil Miller agreed, noting the need for more investment in early years education. This would prevent issues further up the line – yet it remains the least invested-in stage, with low wages and under-professionalised practitioners.

JL suggested that this should be the focus of our next piece of research – looking at the benefits of early intervention.

Learner Ambassador reflections

Nicole explained that her generation has grown up in a world with limited face-to-face interaction – but is then expected to move into the workplace and have developed these social skills. She said that they are not prepared for this step and called for ‘pop up life skills corners’, which help young people to do things like set up a bank account and navigate the transport system.

JL noted that a key barrier to this is the curriculum, which leaves no space for these skills. Participants hope that the current curriculum review may address this.

Closing Remarks – Dr Sam Parrett CBE

Sam closed by recognising the depth and sincerity of the conversation:

She highlighted that we have seen the multi-faceted nature of the issues raised in the report, many of which are systemic. Sam added that this report reminds us of the power of storytelling and the importance of sharing the experiences and insights of young people.

“What is particularly striking about this research is how often it challenged our assumptions. The views of respondents underline why understanding wellbeing through a local lens is so important. National data can show the trends, but only by listening directly to our own young people can we grasp the complex realities behind them and then take the right action to make a difference.

“We are committed to measuring ourselves against these voices – through a lived experience index or similar accountability tool – to make sure their insights drive real change.”

Sam closed the event by saying that in two years’ time, let’s hope we have better accountability in terms of what success looks like.