

Acting on the Engagement Gap: Insights from the Research Cohort

November 2025

Commissioned by ImpactEd Group
and the Research Commission on
Engagement and Lead Indicators



Welcome

We are delighted to share *Acting on the Engagement Gap: Insights from the Research Cohort*, a companion piece to the *Mind the Engagement Gap* national study published earlier this year.

This report shines a light on what happens when research meets the reality of day-to-day school life. It celebrates schools that have not only measured engagement but acted upon it, turning insight into action, data into dialogue, and measurement into meaningful change.

Engagement is of course more than a measurement. It is the energy that connects pupils, families, and educators, providing a foundation on which learning, wellbeing and belonging are built. The examples shared here show that when engagement becomes a collective endeavour, outcomes follow.

We would like to thank ASCL, CST, Reach Foundation and Challenge Partners for helping us to convene the initial Research Commission, and are grateful to each of the Commissioners who have supported this project.

We would also like to thank the many school leaders, teachers, and pupils who have contributed to this growing evidence base. Together, they are helping to shape a national movement; one that treats engagement not as an afterthought, but as a leading indicator of great schools and thriving communities.



Dame Sue John
Chair, Research
Commission on
Engagement and
Lead Indicators



Jonathan Boddington
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Special thanks extended to contributing individuals below:

Professor John Jerrim, Dr Lauren Bellaera, Toby Sutherland and Catherine Beavis (St. Clement Danes School), Jim Barton (The Snaith School), Simon Corner and Matthew Deeney (Wade Deacon High School), Rob Williams (Malton School), Ellie Nichols (Joseph Rowntree school), Sadie Brown (Elstree Screen Arts Academy), Brad Turner (Lipson Co-operative Academy), Nancy Cook (Rockliffe Manor Primary School), Jo Capes (Maundene School), Nicola Saporita-Clark (Clayton-le-Moors Primary), Megan Minnett (Foxfield Primary School) and the TEP community team.



Executive Summary

Building on the national data and insights on pupil engagement in England's schools shared in the comprehensive *Mind the Engagement Gap* report (Jerrim, May 2025) earlier this year, this supplementary publication explores how schools are responding and using TEP data locally, to drive engagement and outcomes. Drawing on examples from across the Research Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators (RCELI) cohort, it highlights emerging patterns and practices that are contributing to stronger pupil experience.

Five key takeaways from this report for education leaders:

- 1. Engagement is a lead indicator:** Drops in engagement often precede declines in pupil attendance, attainment, and wellbeing, as well as employee retention – making engagement a powerful predictive measure for schools. Tracking it regularly allows leaders to act early, not react late.
- 2. Transition matters:** The sharp decline in engagement between Year 6 and Year 8 highlights how vulnerable pupils are during the move to secondary school. Schools that invest in continuity of relationships, culture, and belonging during this phase can successfully reverse the trend.
- 3. Safety and trust are unevenly felt:** Differences by gender and school phase show that not all pupils experience school as a safe or trusting environment. Leaders should monitor perceptions across groups and prioritise psychological safety and inclusion as foundations for engagement.
- 4. Relationships drive outcomes:** Engagement and behaviour outcomes are consistently higher in schools where pupils feel known, valued, and listened to. Investing in the quality of adult – pupil relationships, and creating time for relational practice, is a highly effective lever for driving improvement.
- 5. Enjoyment isn't optional:** Schools that embed joy, through curriculum, culture, and celebration, see measurable gains in engagement and pupil confidence.

By sharing these emerging insights, we aim to contribute to the growing community of practice utilising engagement data, spotlighting how schools are beginning to move the dial on engagement, for the benefit of all young people.

We are grateful to Professor John Jerrim, Dr Lauren Bellaera, the Commissioners, and all participating research cohort schools for their contributions. Special thanks to those who shared their stories; this report offers a snapshot of the thoughtful, joyful and often creative work underway across the sector.



What's next: Scaling the engagement movement

The next phase of research will focus on deepening insights over longitudinal periods and expanding participation. We are building a national movement — a community of school and sector leaders prioritising engagement as a core tenet of school improvement.

Key priorities for 2025–26:

- **Family Engagement:** We are launching a new module to capture family voice, with a national census window in May–June 2026. This will help schools triangulate pupil, staff, and family perspectives to inform action.
- **Leadership & Governance Census:** A fully funded national study launching this spring, designed to help leaders and governors understand what drives strategic clarity and effective decision making at school and trust level.
- **Benchmark Expansion:** With live census windows in November, March, and June, we're broadening contextual benchmarks to support more robust comparisons across phase, disadvantage, SEND, and local context.



How to get involved

Together, the findings in this report underline that engagement is a defining feature of thriving schools. We are now inviting schools, trusts, and system leaders to help shape the next phase of this national movement.

- Join the Leadership & Governance national study (launching spring 2026).
- Register interest for the Family Engagement pilot (national census window May–June 2026).
- Ask about current subsidies to support participation in pupil and employee engagement modules, in order to contribute to the national research findings, as well as understand school and trust performance at a local level.

Together, we can move from isolated bright spots to a national standard for engagement, so every child, every family, and every employee feels connected, valued, and ready to thrive.



Secure your space for the Leadership & Governance fully funded national study.



Book a call with our Partnerships team if you are interested in finding out more about our core engagement.

Introduction: From National Findings to Local Action

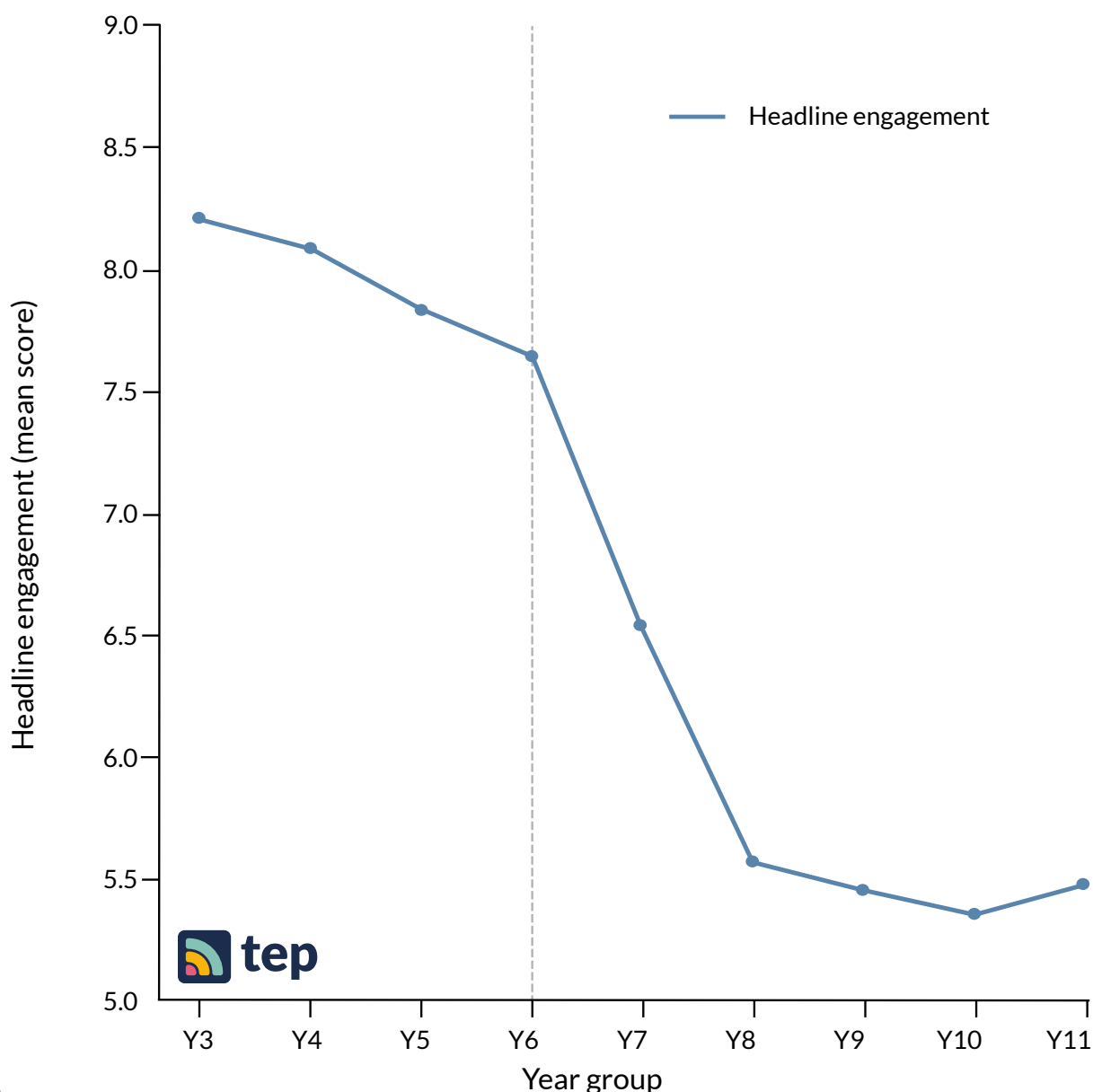
Part 1: What We Learned from the National Study

In May 2025, ImpactEd Group in collaboration with the Research Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators (RCELI) and TEP, published the 'Mind the Gap: A National Study of Pupil Engagement in England's Schools' report (Jerrim, May 2025). This landmark study, authored by Professor John Jerrim, (University College London Institute of Education and Part Time Research Director at ImpactEd Group), measured different components of engagement, with data collected from more than 100,000 pupils through the TEP census. The largest report of its kind, this research prompted a national conversation around pupil experience in schools, after identifying a steep decline in engagement as young people progressed into secondary school.

"Engagement
seeps away.
Attendance
follows. You
know the rest."

*Bridget Phillipson,
Education Secretary,
CST Conference 2025*

Figure 1. Headline engagement score by year group

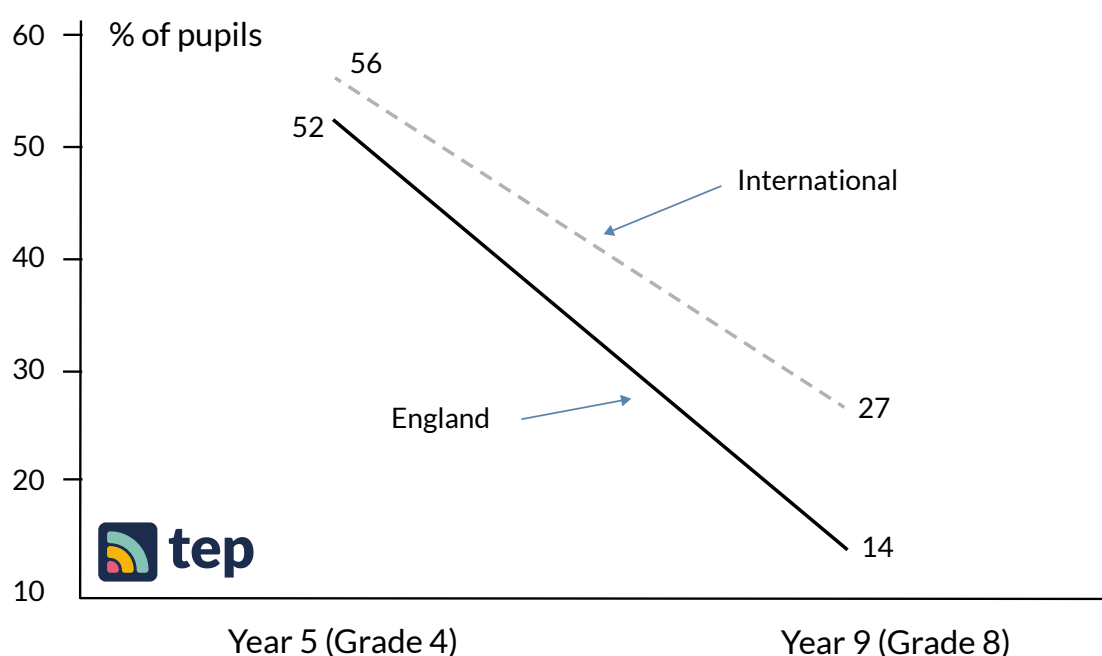


What did we learn?

The research defines school engagement as the commitment and enthusiasm that various stakeholders have towards their respective role with a school and its activities. The domains of engagement include cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement and can be applied to a range of stakeholders within a school setting — acting as a powerful measure that can be used to monitor school experience over time.

The study shows that there is lower engagement at certain time points within the school year, lower engagement for specific groups of pupils, and crucially we see a significant drop in engagement between the end of primary school and the start of secondary school, with a further and steep decline between Year 7 and Year 8 in secondary school (figure 1.1). These findings mirror what we see in international studies using the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) data, which shows that by the end of primary and mid-secondary school, pupils' level of emotional engagement falls in almost every country with data available. The magnitude of this fall is, however, more pronounced in England than elsewhere (Jerrim & Kaye, 2025, Figure 2).

Figure 2. Primary to secondary drop in belonging and engagement in England in relation to other countries (TIMSS)



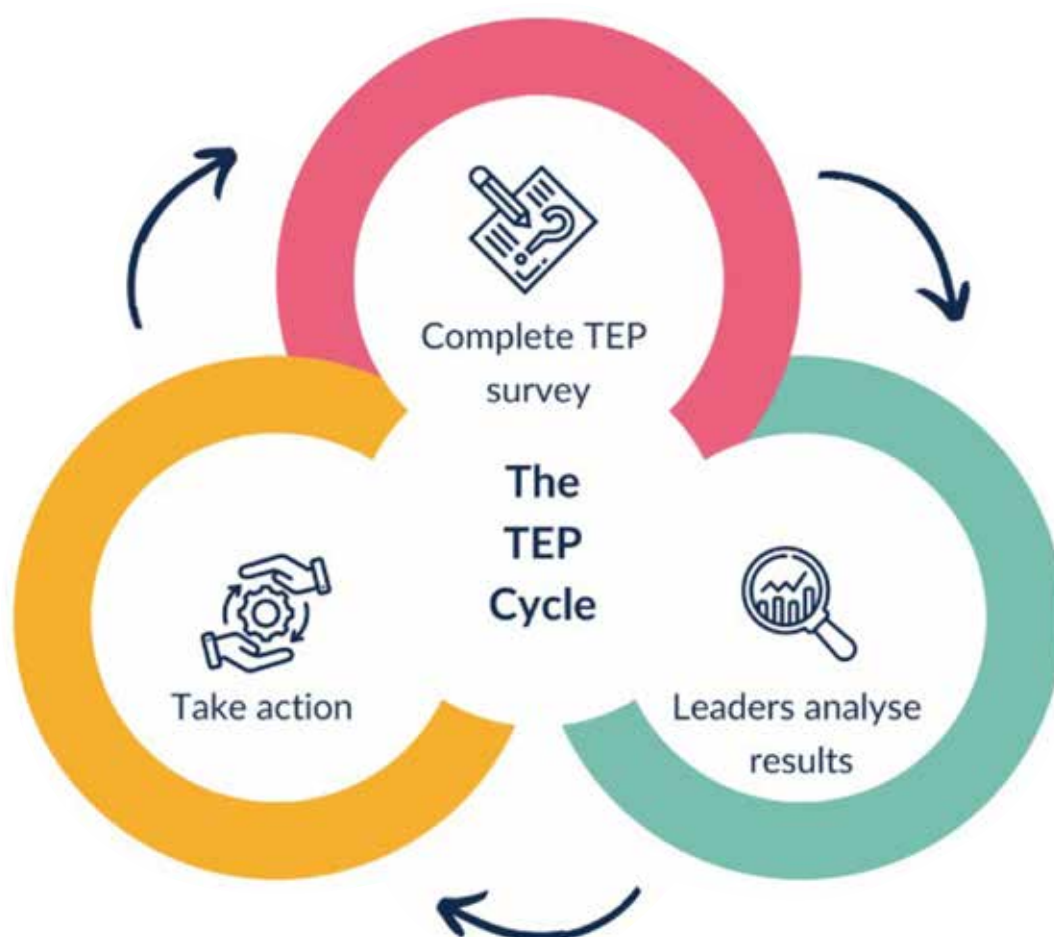
Crucially, the dataset shows how engagement data tracked over time can act as a lead indicator for other outcomes. Pupil engagement drops before we see shifts in attendance. For employees, those showing declining levels of engagement go on to present the biggest retention risks. Overall, the findings, both from the national study and wider international datasets, demonstrate that school engagement metrics should be understood and acted upon as a crucial driver of pupil success. With these engagement insights to hand, schools can intervene before drops in engagement turn into poorer outcomes.

This report, published as a supplement to the national study (Jerrim, May 2025), aims to connect the 'big picture' research findings with what schools are telling us on the ground. Across a range of thematic areas, we seek to demonstrate how schools are using engagement data to support action and drive outcomes. As the TEP engagement community grows, we will continue to build the depth and breadth of the case studies we share, to support the dissemination of best practice and capacity building in the system.

Part 2: How Schools Are Using Engagement Data to Support Action

Practice around using engagement data is as important as the data itself. Engagement monitoring is designed as a sustained practice, providing a continual cycle of feedback throughout the academic year. The data is collected in TEP national census windows (November, March, June) to provide live, time-stamped benchmarks with robust comparison points.

Schools, using engagement data effectively, see it as part of an ongoing conversation about improvement rather than a single judgment point. This approach transforms data from a compliance exercise into a powerful tool for understanding and enhancing pupil experience.



Using engagement data as a tool for improvement

TEP's engagement data provides schools with granular insights into pupil experience, revealing gaps between perception and reality, and highlighting where different groups may be struggling. The most effective schools in our cohort share a common approach: they use data with curiosity rather than defensiveness, involve stakeholders in interpretation, and focus on understanding rather than quick fixes.

"This kind of data feels different – it's not just about outcomes, it's about how they're experiencing school. We've made a huge number of changes off the back of it. Our spring data looks totally different to autumn." *Elstree Screen Arts*



Effective use of engagement data shares common features:

- **Curiosity over defensiveness:** Leaders who approach challenging data with genuine interest in understanding create conditions for improvement,
- **Stakeholder involvement:** Including pupils, staff, and families in interpreting data generates better insights and stronger buy-in,
- **Look for disconnects:** Gaps between different perspectives (staff/pupil, leader/teacher) often reveal the most important learning,
- **Celebrate and challenge:** Data can affirm strengths whilst revealing surprising areas for growth,
- **Targeted action:** Specific data points can drive focused interventions with measurable impact,
- **Patience with complexity:** Understanding data takes time — rushing to solutions often misses deeper insights.

TEP support framework:

Schools and trusts are set up to engage in this cycle of data in three ways by TEP:

- Technical assistance provided during the census collection cycle
- Training and guidance materials
- Ongoing data review support and troubleshooting

This structure attempts to address a common problem with school data: collecting it is easy, but using it effectively is hard. The framework ensures schools don't just get numbers dumped on them — they get the support needed to turn data into actionable insights and meaningful change. The “continual cycle” aspect is crucial because engagement can change throughout the year (as we see with Year 7s), so regular monitoring allows schools to spot problems early and adjust their approaches.

With support in place and three census windows of the RCELI research cohort now undertaken, what did we learn from schools who are beating benchmarks and moving the dial on engagement?

Engagement in Practice

– Stories from the Research Cohort

At a national level five key themes came through from the aggregated dataset in the national study (Jerrim, May 2025), which have been the subject of much dialogue and debate across the sector:

1. Primary to Secondary Transition
2. Safety and Gender Differences
3. Pupil-Teacher Relationships
4. Enjoyment and School Experience
5. Agency and Academic Drive

Working closely with the research cohort we have examined the datasets to identify examples of emerging practice in each of the key thematic areas, to share for wider system benefit.

Methodology

Schools that we have asked to share their stories demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Schools who were consistently in the top 10% of schools for their engagement scores based on the TEP census data for more than one census window.
- Schools where they had identified gaps based on their TEP data and who wanted to use the findings to improve engagement scores in certain areas.

For each of the five areas, we present strategies and approaches from different schools and then synthesise the 'key insights' to draw out the main features that underpin school engagement.

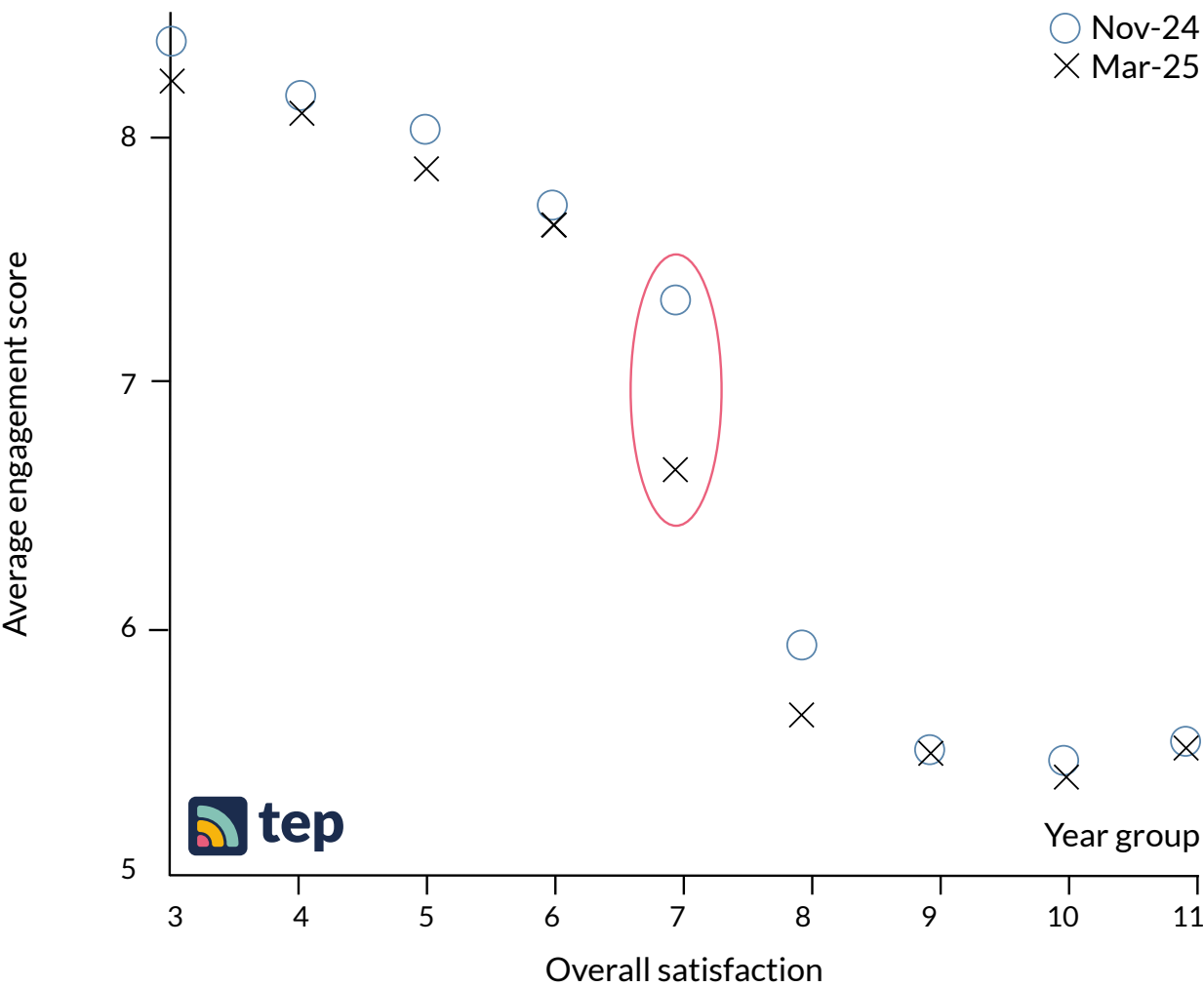


1.Primary to Secondary Transition

The transition from primary to secondary education represents a pivotal stage in pupils’ academic and socio-emotional development. Our national study shows that there is a pronounced decline in engagement during this period for pupils, also known as the “engagement cliff” in the wider literature (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). The findings show that average school enjoyment scores fall significantly from 6.0 in Year 6 to 3.8 in Year 7, with a further decline to 3.2 by Year 8, indicating a sustained deterioration in pupil experience.

Furthermore, Year 7 headline engagement scores dropped from 7.7 to 6.3 between November 2024 and March 2025 (figure 3), while engagement levels in other year groups remained comparatively stable.

Figure 3. Changes in engagement by year group between collection point 1 and 2 (Nov 24 and March 25)



The data suggests that the transition to secondary school is associated with a significant disruption in pupils’ sense of belonging, safety, and trust.

The implications of this disengagement are substantial. Pupils with low engagement in secondary school are 10 percentage points more likely to be persistently absent, underscoring the link between emotional connection to school and attendance patterns.

Therefore, it is important to understand what can be done in practice to support transition. Based on emerging trends in the TEP data, we have identified the Wade Deacon High School, The Snaith School, and St. Clement Danes School as examples of schools who have implemented targeted strategies and approaches that sustain and enhance Year 7 engagement, outperforming national benchmarks in this area.

Wade Deacon High School:

Wade Deacon High School reported Year 7 headline engagement scores +1.6 above national benchmarks in autumn, with these gains improving into spring. Their success is attributed to three core strategies:

- Year 7 teachers are prioritised second only to Year 11, ensuring that experienced staff support pupils during transition, enabling strong relationships to build with staff from the start.
- A “grow your own” professional development model ensures all staff are equipped to foster engagement, embedding best practices across the school.
- Systematic monitoring using TEP and proactive family engagement enable early identification and support for disengaged pupils.

Building on these foundations, Wade Deacon has deliberately extended its transition approach beyond September to sustain momentum once the initial excitement fades. As Head of School Matthew Deeney explains, *“We realised we need to put things in place for the long term. Everything can feel brilliant in September. But what are we doing after this?”*

Using engagement data as an early-warning system, staff track wellbeing and motivation across the year, intervening before issues become embedded. Pupils who begin to lose confidence receive additional check-ins and small leadership roles to strengthen belonging. This attention has paid off: Year 7s have remained consistently above national benchmarks across all domains, with teacher and peer-relationship scores +1.1 and +1.2 above benchmark and enjoyment scores for SEN pupils rising steadily through the year.

For Simon Corner, Headteacher, the lesson is cultural as much as procedural: *“Every interaction counts. When staff see that their daily words and tone shape whether pupils feel they belong, that’s when engagement becomes part of who we are.”*

The Snaith School:

Despite integrating pupils from 29 different feeder primaries, The Snaith School consistently achieves above-benchmark engagement scores. Their transition programme begins well before formal enrolment, with detailed information gathered on each child’s social, emotional and academic needs to ensure every pupil feels known before arrival.

The process doesn’t end with induction week. Snaith treats transition as an ongoing, whole-school priority — creating calm, confidence and connection that extend far beyond the first few days. Pupils start with a quieter induction alongside Year 11 only, giving them space to learn the building, meet key staff, and establish routines in a calm environment before the rest of the school returns. Teachers and tutors are carefully chosen for their warmth and consistency, greeting pupils by name and checking in regularly. *“We don’t just see transition as a week of activities,”* a senior leader explains. *“It’s about creating the conditions where they feel safe, confident and cared for right from the start.”*

This deliberate emphasis on relationships and structure is paying off. TEP data shows that Year 7s at Snaith report feeling notably calmer and more confident than national peers, with *“I feel calm the next day after school”* scoring +0.7 above benchmark, and enjoyment rising between autumn and spring — from 3.9 to 4.1 out of 10 — against a national decline. Staff attribute this to visible presence, clear routines, and a shared ownership of transition across all adults in school. As one leader put it: *“It’s not just SLT — everyone understands the role they play in helping students feel like they belong.”*

St. Clement Danes School:

St. Clement Danes School approaches transition through culture, consistency, and connection. Headteacher Toby Sutherland describes it as *“not about jumping into the timetable — it’s about setting the tone.”* Year 7 pupils begin before the full school return, giving them space to learn routines and expectations in a calm, structured environment. Staff visibility is central — adults are present on corridors and at gates, modelling calm behaviour and offering reassurance through informal check-ins.

The school’s focus is on helping pupils feel part of a wider story from day one. Each November, Year 7s visit St. Clement Danes Church in Holborn — a ritual that connects them to the school’s history and values — while small-group meetings with the Headteacher ensure every pupil is personally known within their first term. During these sessions, Toby shows pupils the historic commendations book containing the name of every child who has ever attended the school, a tangible reminder that *“every pupil matters — and their journey is just beginning.”*

This blend of visibility, structure and belonging underpins strong Year 7 engagement. Two-thirds of the cohort agree that they are happy to come to school, and staff continue to use TEP data to monitor how that evolves over time. For St. Clement Danes, sustaining transition success is about reinforcing the culture daily: clear routines, visible adults, and a deliberate message that pupils are part of something larger than themselves.

Key Insights:

Overall, the underpinning features of the strategies helping to foster effective transitions are:

- **Relationship First:** All three schools prioritise building strong, positive relationships between pupils and staff from the earliest opportunity. This isn’t left to chance but is systematically planned and resourced.
- **Extended Transition:** Rather than viewing transition as a single event, these schools see it as an extended process beginning well before pupils arrive and continuing throughout Year 7.
- **Whole School Commitment:** Success requires buy-in across the school, from strategic decisions about timetabling and staffing to the culture created in every classroom.
- **Celebration and Belonging:** Whilst maintaining high expectations, these schools ensure Year 7 includes moments of celebration, fun, and connection that help pupils feel they belong.
- **Family Partnership:** Early and sustained engagement with families creates a support network extending beyond the school gates.

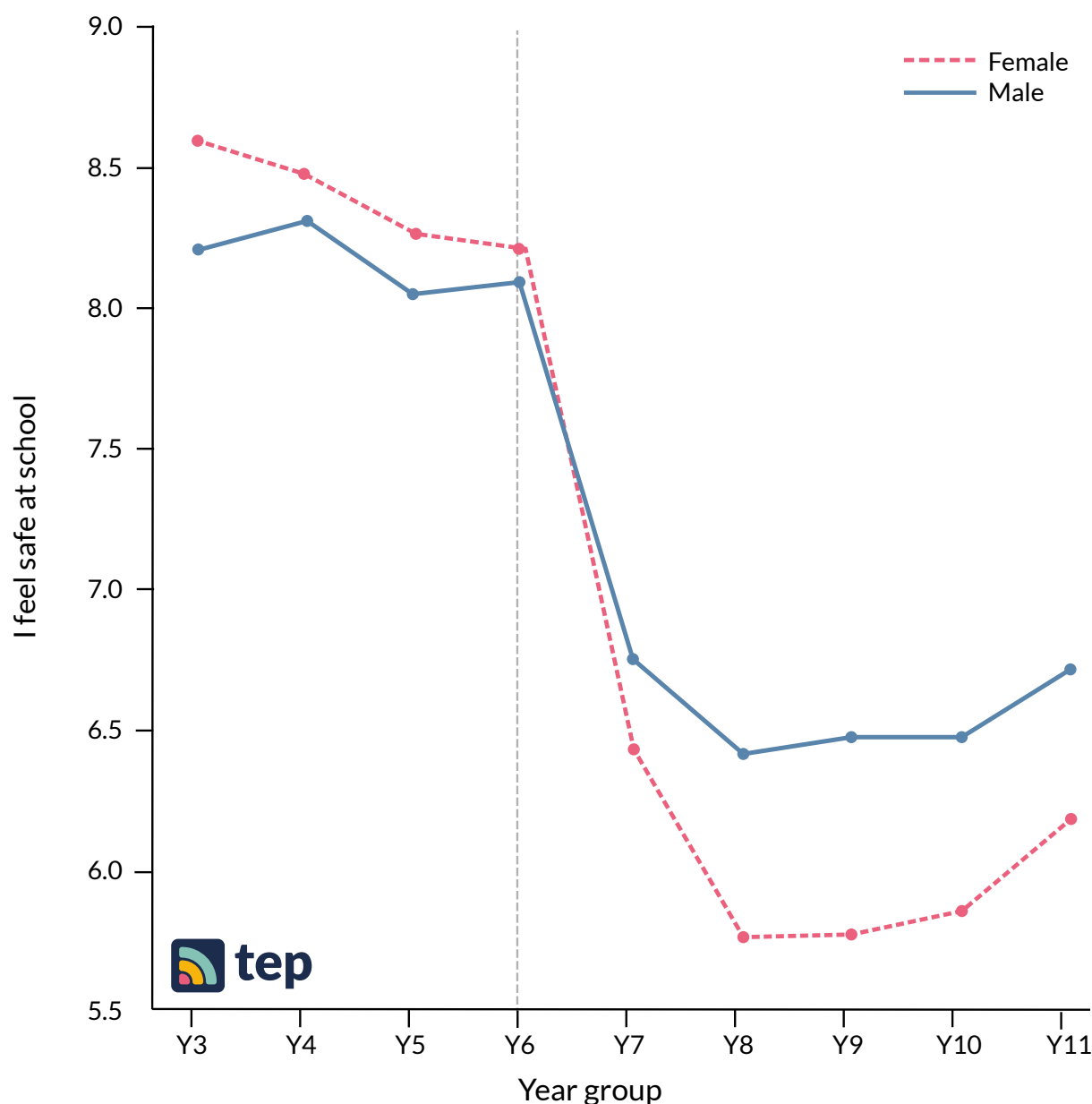
2.Safety and Gender Differences

The data from our national study highlights differences in pupils' perceptions of safety within school settings, especially in relation to gender. Overall, one-third of pupils rate their sense of safety at school as 5 or below on a 10-point scale, with secondary school pupils reporting markedly lower feelings of safety compared to their primary counterparts.

Key indicators of safety concerns include:

- In primary school, girls report feeling slightly safer than boys. However, this trend reverses in secondary school, where girls' perceptions of safety decline significantly.
- By secondary school, girls' average worry scores are 1.5 points lower than those of boys, indicating higher levels of concern and stress.
- The most pronounced gender disparity is observed in peer trust; Year 9 girls rate trust in peers at an average of 4.3 out of 10, whereas Year 9 boys report a higher average of 5.2 out of 10.

Figure 4: Changes in feelings of safety by year group and gender.



This study aligns with other research which shows that female pupils, in general, experience a more rapid decline in safety perception during adolescence compared to male pupils (Ahn & Yoo, 2025). Linked to this, evidence shows that pupils who feel safer at school tend to have higher levels of wellbeing (Jerrim, 2025). Furthermore, the wider societal context cannot be ignored — schools are navigating complex cultural pressures around gender, safety and adolescent development. The dramatic shift in girls' safety perceptions during secondary years suggests influences beyond individual school control, requiring both school-level interventions and broader societal examination.

Therefore, it is important to understand what can be done at a school level to increase feelings of safety across different age ranges and pupil groups and especially taking into consideration girls' perceptions of safety. Based on emerging patterns in the TEP data, we have identified Malton School, Elstree Screen Arts Academy (ESA), and Clayton-le-Moors Primary who have implemented targeted strategies and approaches that enhance pupils' feelings of safety and wellbeing, outperforming national benchmarks in this area.

Malton School:

Malton School explicitly grounds its approach in making pupils feel *“safe, secure and happy”* — deliberately championing these foundational needs by:

- Leadership challenging traditional norms by prioritising emotional and relational safety.
- Emphasising that psychological safety is foundational, with the belief that *“you’ve got to feel safe and secure before you can do anything else”*.
- Fostering a school culture where emotional, relational, and physical safety are non-negotiable elements of the learning environment.

Elstree Screen Arts Academy (ESA):

ESA works with high proportions of pupils arriving with trauma or negative educational experiences. With 40% of Key Stage 4 as *“re-engagement pupils”*, they prioritise rebuilding institutional trust through:

- The school's Culture, Career, Catalyst framework which underpins its approach to re-establishing a sense of belonging and safety.
- Initial phases of enrolment focus on rebuilding institutional trust, with staff acknowledging that *“the first term and a half is regaining that trust”*.
- Emphasising relational practices to co-construct a safe and supportive school community, enabling pupils and staff to *“relearn how to be in a school community”* together.

Clayton-le-Moors All Saints CofE Primary:

Clayton-le-Moors explicitly teaches pupils about equity versus equality, helping children understand why different pupils need different support to feel safe and included. With 27% of pupils on an early help watch list, this framework has proven essential – their inclusion scores stand at 9.5/10 (+1.3 above benchmark), with ‘People at school treat me the same as everyone else’ scoring 9.4/10 (+2.2 above benchmark). Headteacher Nicola Saporita-Clark explains: *“We say to them... Let’s go back to that image about equity and equality. Actually for some people, they need that step to be able to see over the fence.”*

This philosophy enables radical solutions prioritising emotional safety. An older pupil working significantly below age-related expectations now learns alongside Year 2 children, carefully introduced as helping teach *“how we learn to read at our school.”* The school also brings in visitors with disabilities for workshops like wheelchair basketball, demonstrating that challenges don’t define limitations. TEP data shows children with SEN score above benchmark across all drivers, with enjoyment at +2.1 above the national SEN benchmark – suggesting that explicitly addressing different needs helps all pupils feel more secure.

Key Insights:

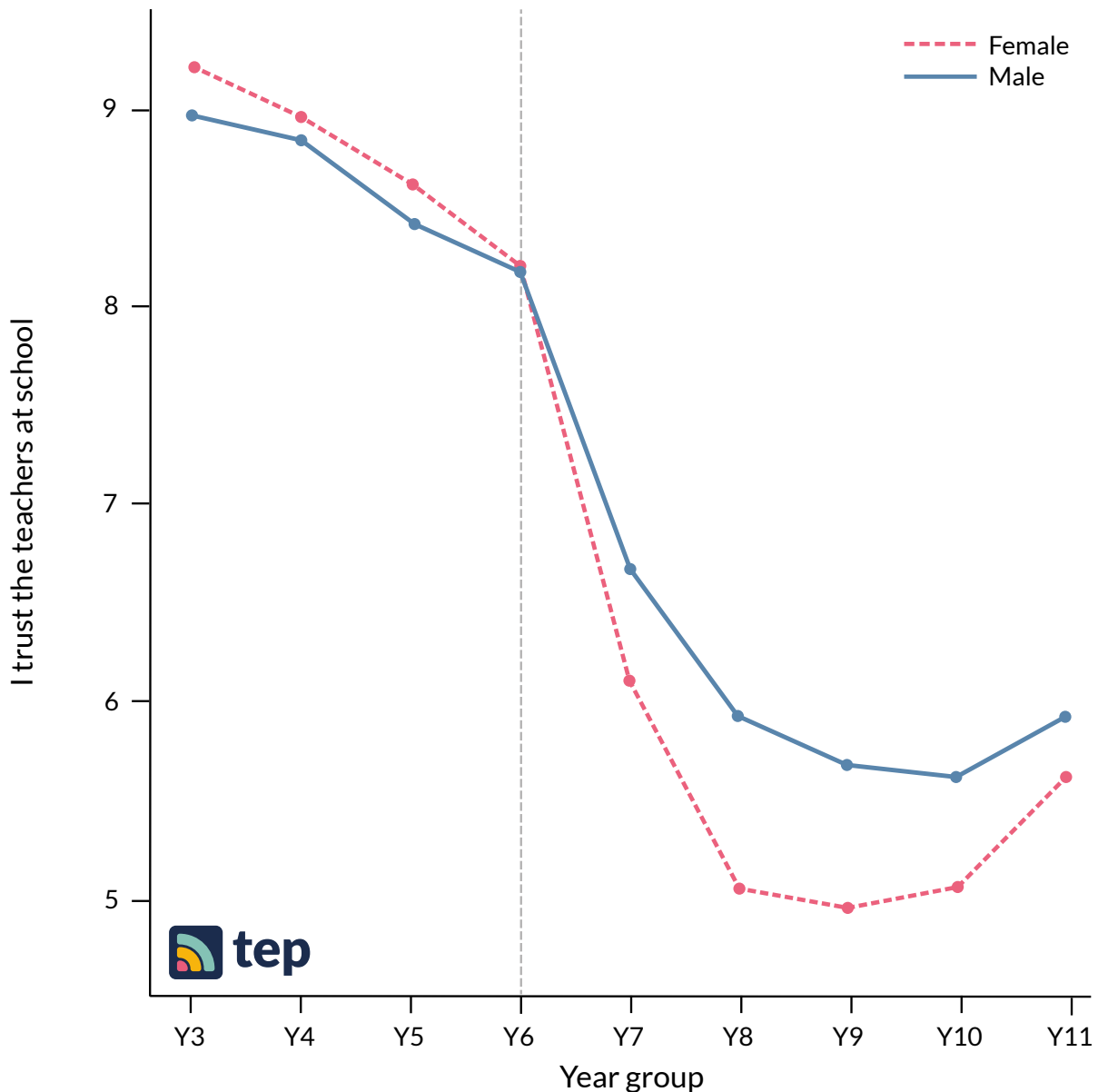
Overall, these examples highlight promising directions whilst acknowledging this remains an area requiring further evidence and understanding:

- **Culture as foundation:** Schools creating strong overall cultures of belonging and trust may indirectly address safety concerns, though more targeted gender-responsive approaches are needed.
- **Explicit prioritisation:** Schools naming safety as foundational see better outcomes, but few specifically address gender differences in safety perceptions.
- **Equity frameworks:** Teaching pupils to understand why different children need different support (equity vs equality) can paradoxically help all pupils feel safer and more included, as seen in Clayton-le-Moors’ strong SEN engagement scores.
- **Whole-community approach:** Inclusive cultures that welcome diversity and build trust with all families create environments where pupils feel more secure.
- **Making support visible:** When schools explicitly discuss and demonstrate different needs (through disability awareness, cross-age learning groups, or tailored support), it normalises difference and reduces the stigma that can make vulnerable pupils feel unsafe.
- **Time and patience:** Rebuilding trust, particularly for vulnerable pupils, requires sustained investment and cannot be rushed.

3. Pupil-Teacher Relationships

A pronounced decline in pupil-teacher relationships emerges as one of the most significant trends in the *Mind the Engagement Gap* report, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary education. Crucially, there are sizeable differences in pupil perceptions of pupil-teacher relations across the primary and secondary sectors. For example, when asked whether they trust their teachers, only 11% of primary pupils responded with a score of 5 or below, compared to 46% of secondary pupils.

Figure 5: Changes in trust of teachers by year group and gender



Key indicators of pupil-teacher relationships include:

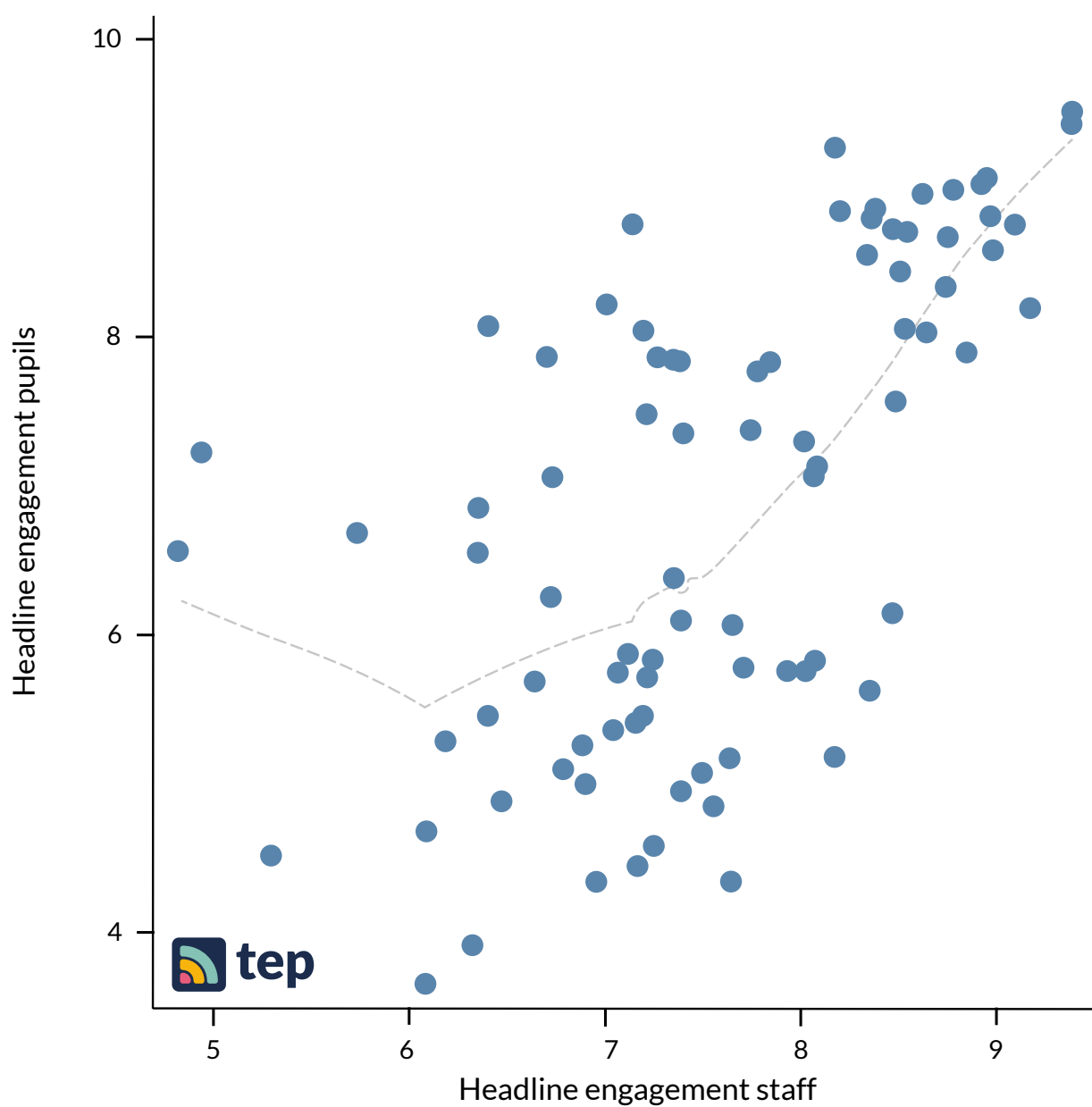
- Boys are more likely than girls to report trusting their teachers. However, girls are more likely than boys to report respecting school staff.
- In primary school, both boys and girls report high levels of trust in teachers. However, a gender gap in trust emerges during secondary school, with girls' trust in teachers declining more sharply than that of boys.
- Black pupils in secondary school report lower levels of trust in teachers, with an average trust score of 5.2, compared to 5.7 among White pupils.

The quality of the teacher-student relationship is significantly associated with a range of behaviour and outcomes for pupils, including externalizing and internalizing behaviour, peer acceptance, academic performance, and emotional regulation in children (García-Rodríguez, Redín, & Abaitua, 2020). There is also evidence showing that strong student-teacher relationships can promote school belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

In addition, in terms of the interaction between teacher and pupil engagement, our research shows in schools where teachers are more engaged in their work, their pupils are more engaged in their studies (figure 6). These findings underscore the critical role of teacher engagement in shaping pupils' educational experiences. This is why TEP is uniquely placed, via its census data, to look at the perspectives of both teachers and pupils, whereas much of the previous research has only focused on the quality of the pupil-teacher relationship from the perspective of teachers (García-Rodríguez et al., 2020).



Figure 6. Pupil engagement vs Staff Engagement (school level)



bandwidth = .8

Given the potential transformative effects of pupil-teacher relationships, we need to understand more about what creates these positive dynamics, especially for at risk pupils who don't trust their teachers. Based on the TEP dataset, we have identified Rockliffe Manor Primary, Lipson Cooperative Academy, Joseph Rowntree School, and Elstree Screen Arts Academy (ESA) who have implemented targeted strategies and approaches to enhance pupil-teacher relationships.

Rockliffe Manor Primary:

Rockliffe Manor Primary found that their autumn term data from TEP revealed gaps in pupils' perceptions of safety and trust, and school leaders used this to respond and engage their pupils with strategies and approaches which would enhance perceptions of safety and trust further:

- Pupils were actively involved in interpreting the findings and co-creating solutions, reinforcing a culture of agency and partnership.
- The school shifted from encouraging pupils to identify a single *"trusted adult"* to promoting a collective ethos: *"All adults are here to keep you safe"*.
- Prompt responses to student feedback — such as replacing a broken football goal — demonstrated the school's commitment to listening and acting on pupil concerns.

Headteacher Nancy Cook emphasised the importance of understanding pupils' daily lived experiences, stating: *"Your voice counts here — and when you speak, we listen"*. This is an example of how TEP data can be used as a diagnostic tool to help schools develop strategies and approaches in areas where the engagement scores are lower.

Lipson Cooperative Academy:

- The school intentionally dissolves traditional boundaries between pastoral care and curriculum, fostering a holistic approach to student wellbeing.
- A shared sense of responsibility among staff ensures that all pupils are known and supported across multiple dimensions of school life.
- Hiring practices prioritise relational competencies alongside academic qualifications, reinforcing the school's commitment to nurturing relationships.

Staff express a deep emotional investment in their pupils, encapsulated in the sentiment: *"We probably love our students more than anybody else...we love them so that they can do well..."*.

Joseph Rowntree School:

Based on TEP data, the Joseph Rowntree School has identified a strong correlation between staff engagement and pupil engagement, with positive outcomes reflected in both data sets. While scores in teacher-pupil relationships were high (52% in the top third of scorers nationally), leaders wanted to ensure that the quality of interactions remained strong in all classrooms, not just some. Ellie Nichols (Assistant Headteacher) said: *"It's not about chasing numbers. It's about keeping our values visible, and making sure every pupil feels seen."* Their strategies and approaches to developing positive pupil-teacher relationships include:

- They shared the TEP data with staff at department level, helping them reflect on both academic and relational aspects of their work.
- Simple, consistent practices – such as teachers greeting pupils at the door – create predictable opportunities for connection and recognition.
- Regular staff briefings include student *"shout-outs,"* reinforcing a culture of appreciation and relational visibility.
- Staff report feeling more connected to their work when they see tangible evidence of student voice being acknowledged and acted upon.

Elstree Screen Arts Academy (ESA):

ESA rebuilds relationships with pupils who often arrive disconnected from education and all staff receive specific training in relational working as outlined below:

- Staff receive targeted training in relational practices, recognising that *"how you talk to kids is how you get it back"*.
- Actions such as phoning home for absent pupils and creating space for mutual respect are embedded in the school's daily routines.
- Staff report increased motivation and engagement when pupils feel emotionally safe and connected, creating a virtuous cycle of relational engagement.

Key Insights:

Overall, these schools demonstrate that strong pupil-teacher relationships don't happen by accident and consistent culture and routines set these dynamics:

- **Whole-school responsibility:** Breaking down pastoral/academic silos ensures all staff build meaningful connections with pupils and have access to engagement data at all leadership levels.
- **Simple, consistent routines:** Door greetings, recognition systems, and daily check-ins create predictable relationship-building moments.
- **Staff engagement matters:** When teachers feel valued and purposeful, this translates directly into pupil experience.
- **Honest reflection:** Comparing staff and pupil perceptions reveals important gaps and drives improvement.
- **Pupil voice as relationship builder:** Genuinely listening to and acting on pupil feedback strengthens trust and connection.
- **Recruitment and retention:** Hiring for relational skills and maintaining staff stability both contribute to relationship quality.

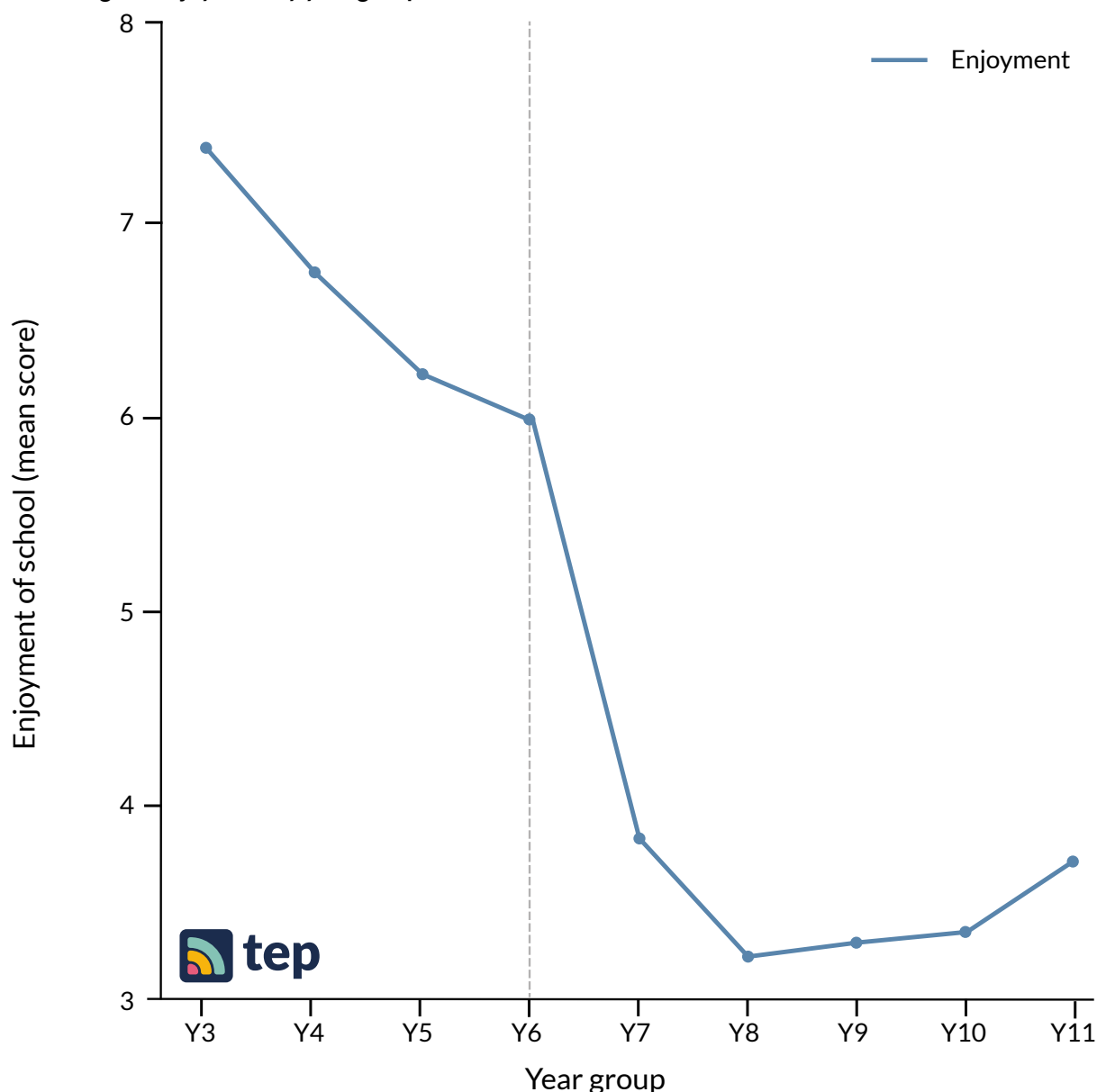
4. Enjoyment and School Experience

National data from the RCELLI cohort revealed concerning trends in pupils' emotional engagement with school, again, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary education. These trends have implications for attendance and wellbeing in educational settings. On average, pupils rate their agreement with the statement "*I feel happy to go to school in the morning*" at 4.6 out of 10, indicating a general lack of enthusiasm for attending school.

Key indicators of enjoyment and school experience include:

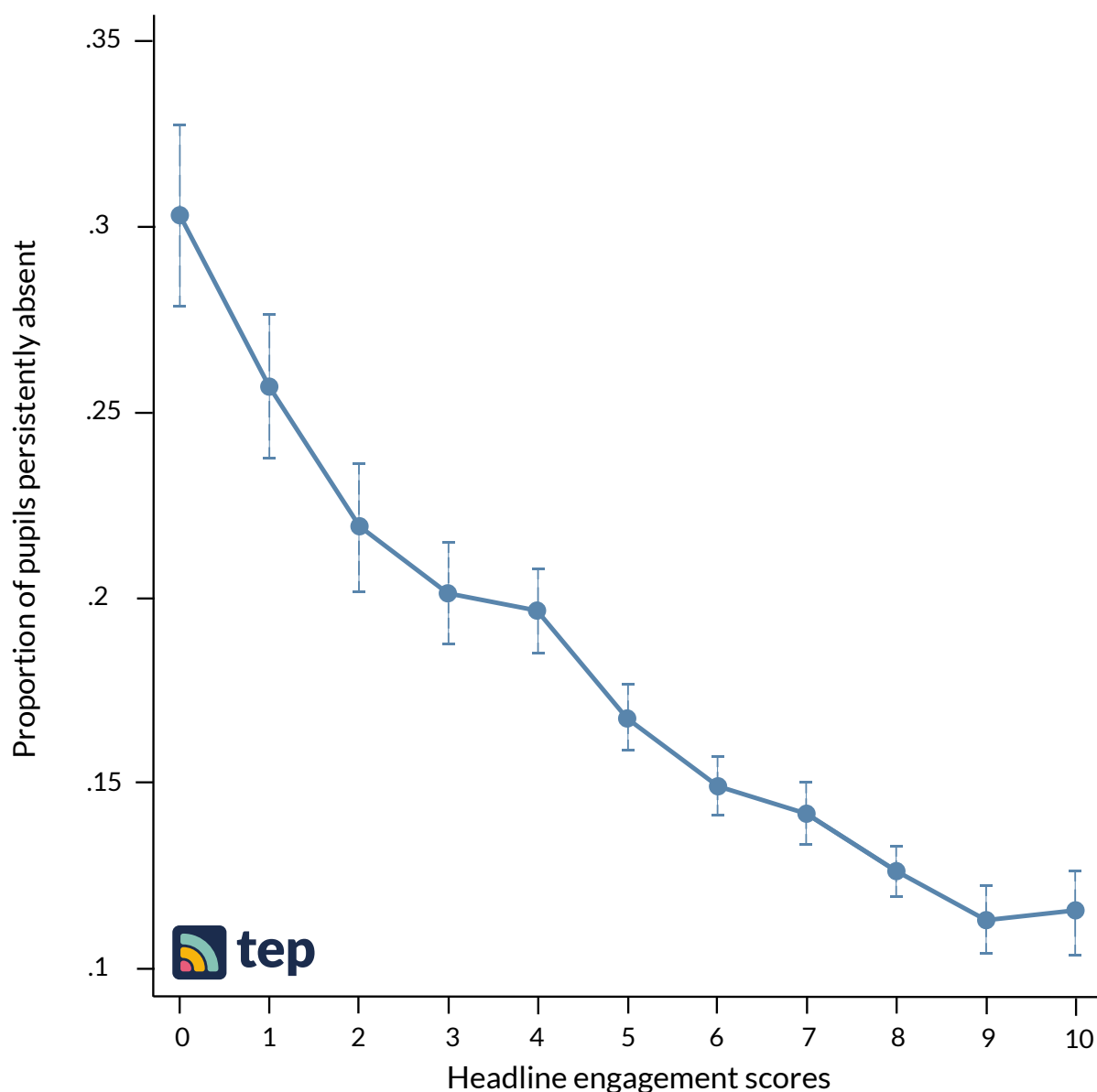
- Year 6 pupils report an average enjoyment score of approximately 6.0. This declines to 3.8 in Year 7, and further to 3.2 in Year 8.
- Boys and girls report similar levels of school enjoyment on average, indicating no substantial gender gap in looking forward to school. However, girls are more likely to report school-related worry. In response to the statement "*I don't worry about the next day after school,*" girls report an average score of 5.6, compared to 6.6 for boys.
- While boys and girls in primary school report similar levels of worry, a gender gap emerges and widens in secondary school, with girls' scores falling nearly 1.5 points below those of boys.

Figure 7: Change in enjoyment by year group



Furthermore, pupils with the highest engagement scores are 10 percentage points less likely to be persistently absent compared to those with the lowest engagement scores (figure 8), suggesting a strong link between emotional engagement and attendance. This mirrors what we see in other studies internationally, which show that low happiness is associated with poor school performance (Zapata-Lamana et al., 2021).

Figure 8: Persistent absence vs headline engagement scores



Collectively, these findings underscore the need for schools to address emotional wellbeing and engagement, particularly during key transition periods and among groups at greater risk of disengagement or anxiety. Interventions that support positive school experiences and reduce worry – especially for girls – may play a critical role in improving attendance and academic outcomes.

Based on TEP data, we have identified Maundene Primary, Foxfield Primary School, The Snaith School, and Malton School as schools who have implemented targeted strategies and approaches to enhance enjoyment of school.

Foxfield Primary School:

At Foxfield Primary, joy is a deliberate part of the school's strategy. Co-headteacher Megan Minnett and her team recognised that pupils' most memorable experiences often come from moments of fun rather than academic content. In response, they introduced three annual events — Inflatables Day, a whole-school Bake Off, and Foxfield's Got Talent — designed purely for enjoyment, with no curriculum objectives attached. These events sit alongside a curriculum that reflects the school's diverse community, including history topics like Black Tudors and Nepalese soldiers, and local geography trips to places like the Thames Barrier.

This joyful and representative approach has had a measurable impact. Foxfield's enjoyment score in the TEP census stands at 8.6, 2.1 above the national benchmark. The school also prioritises inclusive leadership, ensuring quieter pupils are given opportunities to shine. As Minnett explains, *"Children are engaged, they want to learn... it isn't boring. It is a lot of fun."* Foxfield shows that embedding joy and relevance into school life can drive both engagement and achievement.

Maundene Primary School:

Maundene Primary School identified unexpectedly low enjoyment scores in their autumn term data and to address this, school leaders engaged pupils in dialogue to better understand the underlying cause and identified new strategies and approaches that they could put in place:

- Pupils identified Monday mornings as particularly challenging. In response, the school launched *"Magic Monday"*, replacing traditional morning routines with high-energy, student-led activities such as music, physical games, and *"Dough Disco"*.
- The initiative was implemented within days of being proposed and, as a result, by spring, the school's enjoyment driver increased by 1.6 points.
- Overall, pupil agreement with *"I look forward to going to school on Monday"* rose from 6.6 to 8.8 out of 10.

Headteacher Jo Capes described the initiative as adding *"a little extra sparkle"* to the school experience, highlighting the value of joy and responsiveness in school culture, and this example highlights the importance of acting on benchmarking data quickly.

The Snaith School:

The Snaith School recorded an increase in enjoyment scores from autumn to spring and this is due to a range of support and enrichment:

- A comprehensive three-day transition programme engages pupils from 29 feeder primary schools prior to entry.
- The Year 7 calendar includes enriching experiences such as educational trips (e.g., to Whitby) and industry partnerships (e.g., visits from Siemens).

The school's approach blends structure with celebration, fostering a sense of confidence, connection, and readiness to learn.

Pupils consistently cite teacher warmth and care as key to their engagement: *"They just care about you"*.

Malton School:

Year 7 pupils are described as “*bouncing in excitedly*”, defying national trends of disengagement during the transition to secondary school:

- Pupils identify professional development sessions as highlights of their school experience, suggesting that delivery style and relational dynamics may outweigh subject matter in shaping enjoyment.
- In partnership with the Youth Sport Trust, the school launched a Year 9 girls’ programme combining Apple Watches, fitness tracking, and self-regulation tools to enhance both physical education and overall school enjoyment.
- Headteacher Rob Williams attributes this to a deliberate focus on making school “*positive, purposeful, and inclusive*”.

Key Insights:

Overall, these schools demonstrate that enjoyment isn’t frivolous but foundational:

- **Small changes, big impact:** Simple innovations like Magic Monday or inflatables day can dramatically shift pupil experience without major resource investment.
- **Culture over activities:** Authentic staff enjoyment and warmth creates conditions where pupils naturally feel happier.
- **Purpose drives enjoyment:** Whether through creative curricula or engaging delivery of traditional subjects, pupils enjoy learning that feels meaningful.
- **Joy throughout the journey:** From transition programmes through to summer celebrations, weaving enjoyment into the school calendar sustains engagement.
- **Enjoyment and achievement align:** Far from being in tension, schools with strong enjoyment see better attendance and outcomes.

The stark enjoyment gap between primary and secondary demands urgent attention. These examples show that with intentional strategies — from Monday morning energy to curriculum innovation to teachers in inflatable costumes — schools can create environments where pupils genuinely want to be.

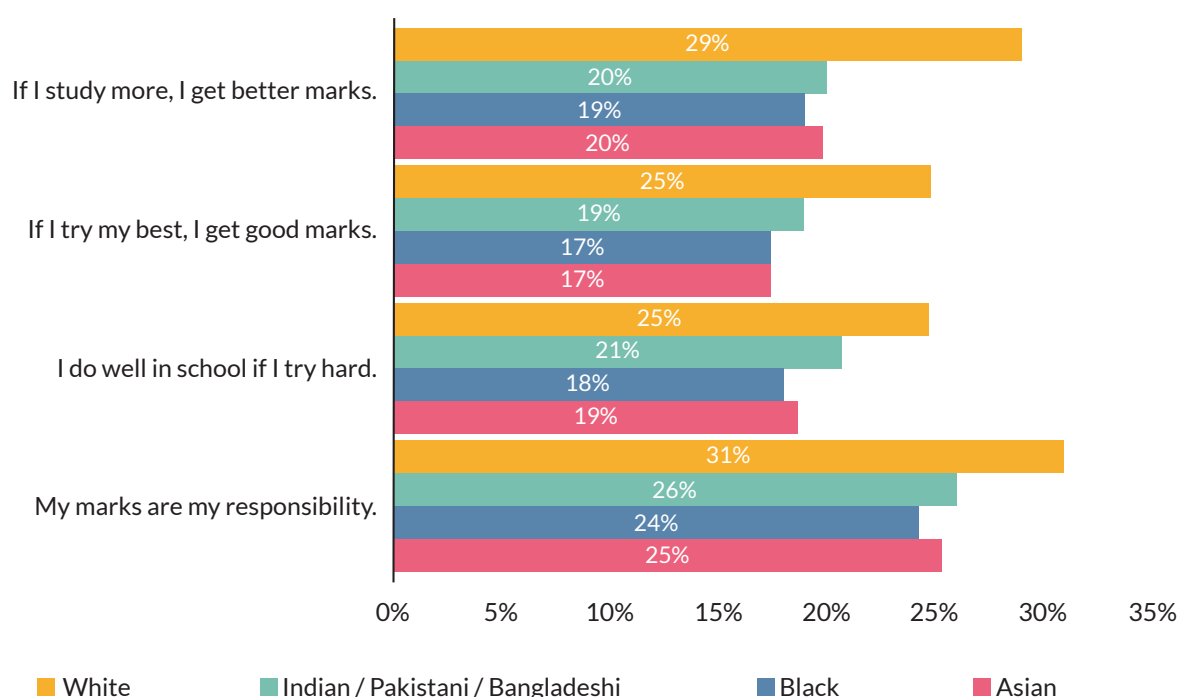


5. Agency and Academic Drive

Pupils' sense of agency — the belief that their effort influences academic outcomes and that they hold responsibility for their success — emerges as a critical dimension of engagement. Across all pupils, average responses to statements such as “My marks are my responsibility” and “I do well in school if I try hard” range between 7.0 and 7.5 out of 10, indicating a generally positive, though not uniformly high, sense of agency. However, while average scores suggest moderate levels of perceived agency, disaggregated data reveals significant disparities across educational phases and demographic groups.

Among secondary pupils, White pupils are more likely to report lower levels of academic responsibility: Nearly one-third of White pupils score below 6 on the statement “My marks are my responsibility”. This compares to 25% of pupils from other ethnic backgrounds.

Figure 9, Secondary pupil perceptions of agency by ethnic group



Pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) also consistently score 0.3 points lower on agency-related measures compared to their non-FSM peers.

Table 1: Differences in pupils' sense of agency by FSM eligibility

Question	Not FSM eligible	FSM eligible
My marks are my responsibility.	7.3	7.0
I do well in school if I try hard.	7.7	7.3
If I try my best, I get good marks.	7.7	7.4
If I study more, I get better marks.	7.5	7.2

These findings highlight the importance of fostering academic self-efficacy and agency, particularly among those pupils from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds. Furthermore, these findings are supported by wider evidence which shows the importance of academic self-efficacy across the student lifecycle, especially at points of transition (Thomson et al., 2022).

Targeted strategies and approaches that reinforce the link between effort and achievement, while addressing structural barriers to engagement, are essential for promoting equitable educational outcomes, and for this we draw upon two examples, from Rockliffe Manor Primary, and Clayton-le-Moors Primary.

Rockliffe Manor Primary:

Rockliffe Manor Primary demonstrates how schools can rebuild pupil agency through genuine partnership and visible impact. When autumn engagement data revealed concerns about enjoyment and inclusion, the school's response offers a masterclass in developing pupil ownership.

Headteacher Nancy Cook's first instinct was curiosity rather than defensiveness: *"It wasn't about being shocked, but it made us look again at how children were experiencing life in our school day to day"*. Rather than adults interpreting the data and imposing solutions, Rockliffe made a bold choice — they handed ownership to the pupils themselves.

"This gave the ownership to the children: this is your voice — so what would you want different?"

The school's approach was comprehensive and authentic. Pupils were involved at every stage:

- Assemblies where children discussed and interpreted the findings together
- Class reflections gathering perspectives from every year group
- Pupil-led mapping where children identified spaces in school where they felt less safe or heard
- Co-designed action plans with pupils directly shaping the responses

Crucially, the school acted quickly and visibly on pupil suggestions. When children identified a broken football goal as a priority, it was replaced promptly. As Nancy noted, this helped build credibility: *"They could see their voice had impact"*. Scientific lessons and computing were moved to Mondays based on pupil feedback about lacking motivation at the week's start. Assembly themes were restructured with pupils even scribing during sessions to reflect on fairness, belonging and celebration.

The impact was measurable — by spring, engagement scores had risen significantly, particularly in enjoyment. But Nancy is clear about what mattered most: the process modelled to pupils that they had genuine power to shape their experience. *"Your voice counts here — and when you speak, we listen"*.

This wasn't a one-off exercise but part of embedding agency into school culture. The survey became one tool in a *"broader toolkit for listening, reflecting and adapting"*. By demonstrating that pupil voice leads to real change, Rockliffe helped children understand they could influence their own educational experience — the very essence of agency.

Clayton-le-Moors All Saints CofE Primary:

Clayton-le-Moors ensures every child from Year 1 to Year 6 holds a leadership position, with Agency scores averaging 9.3/10 (+0.9 above benchmark). Rather than selecting only confident pupils, teachers strategically choose curriculum champions including *“somebody who’s SEN and somebody who really doesn’t engage well and somebody who really does love it”* to ensure authentic representation. Children design their own surveys, collect peer-to-peer feedback, and present findings with solutions: *“They’ll go, ‘We think there’s a problem. So we designed a survey and we’ve gone and asked them.’”*

The school teaches pupils that agency requires thoughtful engagement — explaining that silly answers don’t help improvement whilst dishonest feedback prevents meaningful change. Recognition systems specifically target quiet contributors after pupil feedback revealed these reliable children felt overlooked. Both Ofsted and Challenge Partners noted that pupils feel their voices genuinely influence school decisions, with TEP data showing ‘What I learn at school will help me in the future’ scoring 9.5/10 (benchmark 8.6), suggesting pupils see the direct connection between their agency and their outcomes.

Key Insights:

Overall, these schools demonstrate that pupil agency requires systematic approaches and genuine transfer of power:

- **Transfer power authentically:** True agency develops when pupils genuinely shape decisions, not through token consultation. Both schools show pupils leading research, designing solutions, and seeing real change.
- **Universal participation:** Ensuring every child holds a leadership role or responsibility prevents agency becoming the preserve of confident pupils. Strategic selection of representatives across the engagement spectrum generates more authentic insights.
- **Make impact visible:** Quick action on pupil suggestions proves their voice matters and effort creates change. When pupils see their surveys lead to action or their feedback changes provision, they develop belief in their ability to influence outcomes.
- **Teach agency skills:** Explicitly teaching pupils how to gather meaningful feedback, design effective surveys, and provide constructive input transforms consultation from opinion-sharing to genuine research partnership.
- **Recognise quiet agency:** Agency isn’t just for the loudest voices — systems that specifically acknowledge quiet, consistent contributors ensure all pupils understand their power to influence their learning.
- **Build systematic involvement:** Agency grows through repeated experiences of influence, not one-off events. When voice becomes embedded in daily routines rather than special occasions, pupils develop genuine ownership.
- **Start with curiosity:** Approaching pupil feedback with genuine interest rather than defensiveness creates conditions for authentic partnership and meaningful change.

What's Next on the Engagement Journey

This year has shown what's possible when schools look at engagement as a lead indicator — not a lagged reflection. The stories from the research cohort are uplifting and motivating. If we can build engagement pupils will be set up to thrive. The RCELL cohort and wider TEP community have begun to change the conversation from compliance to connection; from managing problems to preventing them. The next step is scale: deeper insight across pupils, employees, families and governance, with comparable, contextual benchmarks that leaders can really trust.

Deeper Pupil Engagement Insights: Attendance and Outcomes

Exploring links with intermediate outcomes

Our national data continues to show a strong association between engagement and school attendance — pupils with the highest engagement scores are around 10 percentage points less likely to be persistently absent than those with the lowest. But emerging analysis by Professor John Jerrim highlights a deeper layer: the role of peer relationships as a mediating factor.

Pupils who report feeling connected to their peers — through friendship, collaboration, and mutual trust — are markedly more likely to attend school regularly. In contrast, those who feel socially isolated show early signs of disengagement that often precede attendance decline. This reinforces what schools have long observed: attendance challenges are rarely just logistical; they are relational.

These findings point to a new way of thinking about attendance: not simply as a compliance issue, but as a relational and engagement issue that sits at the heart of school culture. Across the RCELL cohort, schools improving attendance most successfully have approached it through belonging, connection and relevance, not enforcement. **Lipson Cooperative Academy, Elstree Screen Arts Academy, and Joseph Rowntree School** demonstrate this in practice — removing barriers, rebuilding trust, and ensuring that every pupil feels known and valued. Their shared principles include:

- **Engagement drives attendance:** When pupils feel connected and purposeful, attendance follows naturally.
- **Relationships as intervention:** Re-establishing peer trust and staff-pupil connection can be more powerful than attendance incentives.
- **Shared responsibility:** Attendance is everyone's business — integrated into curriculum, pastoral care, and leadership routines.
- **Data integration:** Schools combining engagement, attendance and peer relationship data identify emerging risks earlier and target support more precisely.

This developing evidence base will be expanded through the next phase of analysis, led by Professor Jerrim, exploring how shifts in **peer connection** correlate with attendance patterns over time. We are beginning to connect the TEP data to **attainment and reading age** measures, with early insights showing that lower reading ages can dramatically impact engagement levels. Our analysis on this area is due for publication this academic year. We'll also continue exploring experiences of intersectional groups, strategies and impact across different settings (particularly specialist settings, middle schools and all through schools), to bring deeper insights to leaders across the sector.

Families: Closing the Triangle

In 2025–26 we're piloting our Family Engagement module, with an internal test with current partners in Autumn and a national census window in May–June 2026. Adding family voice completes the triangle alongside pupil and employee insights — helping schools:

- Spot early drops in belonging and confidence at home that precede attendance issues.
- Understand differences by phase, year group and context.
- Align pastoral, curriculum and community work around what families say will help.

We'll publish early findings and practical guidance so schools can triangulate action with confidence.

Leadership & Governance: The Conditions for Success

Leadership and governance shape everything that happens in schools, yet we measure them the least. TEP data already shows that strong leadership underpins strong engagement — for pupils and employees.

The Leadership & Governance Census, fully funded by ImpactEd, builds on *Beyond the Agenda* and the RCELI findings to help every leader, trustee, and governor understand what drives effective leadership, strategic clarity and organisational engagement.

It's designed as a personal reflection with context — showing how your experience compares with leaders across the country, while giving trusts a clear view of where intent and experience align.

For the first time, we can quantify the conditions that enable leaders to thrive and trusts to improve sustainably, turning assumptions about leadership into evidence that informs real action.

Launching this spring. Fully funded. National in scope. Personally insightful.

Build the Benchmark: Join, Compare, Improve

Engagement varies by time of year, phase and context. That's why TEP runs live national census windows (November, March, June), so you can:

- See early warnings before attendance, retention or outcomes dip.
- Compare like with like (phase, disadvantage, SEND, local context).
- Track interventions across terms and evidence what works.

For 2025–26, subsidies are still available across pupil, employee and family engagement so more schools can join and more leaders can rely on a robust national benchmark.

Building the Benchmark

Over the past three years, The Engagement Platform has supported hundreds of schools to monitor engagement throughout the year, contributing to decision making, strategic action and improvement, both at a school level, trust level and national policy level. This is only the start of what is to come.

Even in the next census we will see participation almost double, expanding coverage across every phase and context, and deepening our understanding of what drives engagement for pupils, employees, families and leaders alike.

As more schools join, we can broaden the range of contextual benchmarks available, supporting the most robust comparison, helping to identify not just where engagement is strongest, but why. This growing dataset will enable leaders to make more confident, evidence-based decisions, and create shared standards for what meaningful engagement looks like in education. We are particularly keen to hear from schools in underrepresented contexts – including single-sex settings, all-through schools, and middle schools – to ensure the benchmarks reflect the full diversity of the education system.

This is no longer a single study, but a movement to build a lasting, national benchmark for engagement – one that reflects the experiences of every type of school and every learner.

A Standing Invitation

If you share our belief that engagement is one of the foundations of great schools, we'd love you to be part of the next chapter.

- Join the fully funded Leadership & Governance national study launching this spring.
- Register interest for the Family Engagement pilot (national window May–June 2026).
- Ask about current subsidies to support participation.

Together, we can move from isolated bright spots to a national standard for engagement – so every child, every family and every employee feels connected, valued and ready to thrive.



Secure your space for the Leadership & Governance fully funded national study.



Book a call with our Partnerships team if you are interested in finding out more about our core engagement.

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Appendix:

Schools Participating in the Case Studies

Participating School Overview

School (Trust)	Maundene School (Inspire Partnership Academy Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Medway, South East
School Type	Academy, Primary
FSM	25.1%
Pupil numbers	398
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and one employee engagement census window.
Case study interview	Jo Capes

School (Trust)	Clayton-le-Moors All Saints' Church of England Primary School (Forward As One Church Of England Multi Academy Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Lancashire, North West
School Type	Academy, Primary
FSM	17.6%
Pupil numbers	256
Notes	Case study collected July 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and one employee engagement census window.
Case study interview	Nicola Saporita-Clark

School (Trust)	Rockliffe Manor Primary School (Inspire Partnership Academy Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Greenwich, London
School Type	Academy, Primary
FSM	41.9%
Pupil numbers	209
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and one employee engagement census window.
Case study interview	Nancy Cook

School (Trust)	Lipson Co-operative Academy (Ted Wragg MAT)
Local Education Authority, Region	Plymouth, South West
School Type	Academy, Secondary
FSM	41.7%
Pupil numbers	1102
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows.
Case study interview	Brad Turner

School (Trust)	Elstree Screen Arts Academy (Danes Educational Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Hertfordshire, South East
School Type	Academy, Secondary UTC
FSM	23.3%
Pupil numbers	514
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and multiple years of employee engagement census windows.
Case study interview	Sadie Brown

School (Trust)	Joseph Rowntree School
Local Education Authority, Region	York, Yorkshire and the Humber
School Type	VC school, Secondary
FSM	18.9%
Pupil numbers	1,283
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows.
Case study interview	Ellie Nichols

School (Trust)	Malton School
Local Education Authority, Region	North Yorkshire, Yorkshire and the Humber
School Type	Academy, Secondary
FSM	19.9%
Pupil numbers	980
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows.
Case study interview	Rob Williams

School (Trust)	Wade Deacon High School (Wade Deacon Academy Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Halton, North West
School Type	Academy, Secondary
FSM	26.5%
Pupil numbers	1,614
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and one employee engagement window.
Case study interview	Simon Corner

School (Trust)	The Snaith School (The Education Alliance)
Local Education Authority, Region	East Riding of Yorkshire, Yorkshire and the Humber
School Type	Academy, Secondary
FSM	13.4%
Pupil numbers	778
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows.
Case study interview	Jim Barton

School (Trust)	St. Clement Danes School (Danes Educational Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Hertfordshire, South East
School Type	Academy, Secondary
FSM	4.8%
Pupil numbers	1,596
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and multiple years of employee engagement windows.
Case study interview	Toby Sutherland and Catherine Beavis

School (Trust)	Foxfield Primary School (Inspire Partnership Academy Trust)
Local Education Authority, Region	Greenwich, South East
School Type	Academy, Primary
FSM	29.1%
Pupil numbers	682
Notes	Case study collected May 2025 following participation in two pupil engagement census windows and one employee engagement census window.
Case study interview	Megan Minnett

