

What the System Cannot See

How human capability is formed and why the next phase of the Young People and Work review must learn to see it

Professor Ruth Deakin Crick, Victoria Ferrier, Claire Crichton-Allen and Shaofu Huang.
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“There’s no measure anywhere. There’s no valued qualification, there’s no metric in any way to say, ‘Look how you develop this human as a learner!’”

Secondary school teacher, 2021

Executive summary

There is a layer of the human system that belongs to no one. It has no budget, no career built around it, no institutional home that owns it. It is the layer every inquiry eventually names in its findings – culture, belonging, relationships, capability – and that no reform has ever made the primary site of intervention. It is the human capability that determines whether a young person engages, persists, recovers, or quietly disappears: the values, attitudes and dispositions that produce engagement in the first place. The Young People and Work review has produced the most serious diagnosis of youth disengagement in a generation, and on its central argument it is right – the problem is not a soft generation but an architecture built for a world that no longer exists. But the review stops one layer short. It diagnoses the structures that fail young people and does not reach the thing those structures exist to produce. That thing – the capability layer – is orphaned, and its orphaning, not a shortage of measurement, is what the next phase must attend to.

This is the through-line the review does not yet draw. The same unowned layer is what the state is now reaching for at national scale under the banner of resilience: personal resilience – the capacity to make sense of uncertainty, to persist, to recover, to act with purpose – is the human ground of the societal resilience the Government increasingly says it needs. A youth disengagement crisis is what the erosion of that capacity looks like in the young. The layer failing in a fourteen-year-old and the layer a whole-of-society resilience strategy names as its goal are the same layer, and neither the review nor the resilience agenda has an instrument that can see it.

That instrument does exist. The system records attendance, attainment and exclusion – lagging indicators that register the absence of capability only after it has become a problem. What it cannot read is the interior, dispositional architecture that produces engagement. The review itself reaches for this when it names the collapse of belonging, then has to move on because no instrument can see ‘belonging’. Capability of exactly this kind has been measured for over two decades, across tens of thousands of individuals, through validated tools that read

it in the individual rather than the aggregate – and that can surface a young person disengaging while there is still time to act.

Capability is not delivered; it is formed, and it forms through relationship and context. The best-evidenced findings in the human sciences – on the therapeutic alliance, on the teacher–student relationship, and on the single stable adult at the centre of childhood resilience – all point the same way, and most powerfully for the young people most at risk. The evidence that capability can be built, measured early, and grown without cost to attainment is not new: much of it has sat in peer-reviewed form for twenty years, waiting for precisely the question the review is now asking, and left unacted upon for precisely the reason this paper names – because the layer it concerns belonged to no one.

This response sets four conditions any solution must meet if it is to build capability rather than a more sophisticated version of the present system: measure capability before the crisis, not after; invest in the relational field in which it forms, not only the structures around it; free the curriculum so that it forms capability rather than suppressing it; and give the capability layer a structural home – a named owner, with a budget and an accountability line, inside the participation system the review will design. Measurement matters here only as the servant of formation: the point of seeing the layer earlier is to be able to grow it, not to record its collapse more precisely. Without an owner, the determining layer is left to chance, exactly as this evidence has been for twenty years.

The stake is larger than youth employment. As generative AI absorbs the routine work the system is built to teach, the human capabilities it fails to form become the ones that decide a young person's economic future – and the same dispositions are the human foundation of the societal resilience the state increasingly says it needs. The measure the system says it lacks already exists. The only question for the next phase is whether it is ready to see what it shows.

1 The fork in the road

The Young People and Work review's interim report is the most serious diagnostic of youth disengagement a British government has commissioned in a generation. It names nearly a million young lives outside education, employment or training – a figure it warns could exceed sixteen per cent, more than 1.25 million young people, within five years¹. It puts the cost to the country at around 125 billion pounds a year, more than the entire education budget. And it describes a system so fragmented that it now produces the very disengagement it was built to prevent.

It says, plainly, that this is not a problem with young people – 84 per cent of whom say they want work, education or training – but with structures designed for a world that no longer exists. On all of this the review is right.

It is right, too, that the country now stands at a fork in the road: one path continues the present logic of measurement and provision with better

coordination, while the other asks what it would take to form capability in young people themselves. The review maps the first with care. This paper maps the second.

The second path matters beyond this review, because it leads to the same place the state is now trying to reach from another direction. The Government's whole-of-society resilience agenda has begun to argue that national resilience is not only a matter of infrastructure, supply chains and civil contingency but of people and communities – of a culture in which resilience is part of daily life. That is the capability layer under another name. Personal resilience is the human ground of societal resilience, and it is formed – or eroded – in the same three places: education, the workplace and the community. A NEET crisis is what its erosion looks like in the young, and the review is therefore not only diagnosing a youth-employment problem; it is looking at the earliest and cheapest place to build the human resilience on which the wider system depends. Section 7 returns to this. The rest of the paper stays with the young people the review is about.

The word capability has a lineage the review does not yet draw on. Two decades ago, writing on key competencies in European education policy, we argued that the economically derived version of competence – as task-performance, autonomy and responsibility calibrated to the demands of the knowledge economy – needed replacing by a richer, more holistic notion of competence: the higher-order capacities a person needs to act with purpose across the whole of life, not just at work. It incorporates what a person is able to “be” and to “do,” the movement from the deeply personal (identity, desire, motivation) to the fully public (the competent citizen, worker, learner)². This is closer to Haste's idea of “meta-competence” – the higher-order capacities that are simultaneously necessary for economic survival and for citizenship, community and personal life, such that a competent business person, parent and citizen all draw on the same underlying repertoire, even if the domain of application differs. The review has reached, perhaps unknowingly, for a concept with a settled research history. This paper supplies it.

There is a further reason the question is urgent now. As generative AI absorbs the routine, content-delivery work that the system is best at teaching and testing, the distinctively human capabilities the system fails to form become the ones that decide a young person's economic future: judgement, purpose, the capacity to direct one's own learning. This capability layer is no longer a humane addition to the curriculum. It is fast becoming the part of education that will still hold its value.

2 What the system sees, and what it misses

The system measures almost everything about a young person except their capability. It records attendance, attainment, exclusions, eligibility, special needs. It does not record the thing the review itself says the system needs to build.

Worse than not recording it, the system's central instrument actively erodes it. The most authoritative evidence on this is not new. A systematic review of the impact of summative testing on motivation for learning – carried out by the gold-standard method, for the EPPI-Centre at the Institute of Education – found that high-stakes testing leads teachers to “teach the test” while demotivating the significant numbers of learners who do not achieve success in those terms³. Assessment of this kind, as we later put it, functions as a technology of control: it bestows value, success and status, or failure and exclusion, depending on how it is used. The young people the review is now worried about are the most intensively tested cohort in the history of British education. The regime has been reshaped since – linear GCSEs, the end of National Curriculum levels, Progress 8 – but the mechanism the review named is structural rather than tied to any one examination format: a high-stakes system rations motivation for learning, and thus capability building, whatever its instruments, and successive reforms have if anything raised the stakes. We do not claim that testing is the only cause of the disengagement crisis, nor that a high-stakes system can simply be dismantled; the honest claim is narrower and harder to dismiss. A rigorous review warned, twenty years ago, that the system's primary measurement regime would depress motivation precisely among the lower-achieving young people most at risk of detachment. That review has been widely cited and, by successive governments, left unacted upon. The cohort it described is the one now in crisis.

There is one moment where the report reaches towards what the system misses, and it is worth dwelling on because it is the closest any official diagnostic has come. It names the collapse of belonging – the largest fall in the OECD, with around two-thirds of pupils saying they belong at school – and it names it as a driver of disengagement, not a by-product of it. And then, having named it, the report has no choice but to move on – to curriculum and careers guidance and work experience – because the system possesses no instrument that can see belonging. This is the whole problem in miniature. Belonging is one dimension of capability; the review can count it in the aggregate and lose it in the individual. The thing it most wants to act on is the thing its instruments cannot read. Hold that example: the rest of this paper is about closing exactly that gap.

The same pattern holds for the tools the review asks the system to rely on. It calls, rightly, for better risk-of-NEET indicators, identified earlier. But examine what those tools actually read: attendance, exclusion, special-educational-need status, eligibility for free school meals, the accumulated weight of teacher judgement. Each one is a lagging indicator. Each records the absence of capability after it has already become a problem, never its formation in time to act. They are rear-view mirrors. What they cannot read is the interior, dispositional architecture that determines whether a young person engages, recovers, persists, or quietly disappears long before any of it surfaces in an attendance figure. What is missing is the opposite kind of instrument: a leading indicator that reads those interior conditions in time to act, rather than a record of their collapse after the fact.

Much of the evidence we draw on for the alternative comes from a single research lineage: our own. We offer it not as disinterested proof but as the most developed body of work directly addressing the gap the review itself cannot see. At its centre is Learning Power – the framework, developed and validated across more than twenty-five years, that describes the cluster of dispositions, values and attitudes which coalesce to make a person an effective, self-directed, lifelong learner. That this capability declines inside the system rather than outside it is itself a matter of peer-reviewed record. In the study that first established the framework, Learning Power was measured across more than a thousand young people from age six to eighteen, and several of the dimensions most central to engagement were found to fall as children moved up through school: creativity and imagination declined steadily across the key stages, and the quality of learning relationships dropped sharply by the end of secondary education⁴. The study's authors concluded that the experience of schooling, as currently practised, may be making learners progressively more dependent on the teacher and less creative and self-motivated – that children may well be becoming increasingly dependent learners as they go through school⁴. The review's own finding that warning signs are visible from ages four to five, and that children not school-ready then are nearly three times as likely to be NEET at sixteen to seventeen, sits on exactly this trajectory. The review sees the early signal; this evidence shows the slope it sits on.

This human capability architecture is not invisible; it is measurable. And the young people it misses most completely are the ones who generate no outward signal at all: the quietly, passively disengaged, compliant on the surface and slipping underneath it. There is a sharp way to see what is happening to them. We usually ask what a disengaged child is failing to take from the curriculum. The more exact question is what the curriculum is taking from the child – their attention, their time, their self-trust, and in the end their story about themselves as a learner. By the time disengagement surfaces in an attendance record, that quiet extraction has been running for years.

It can be surfaced before then. When we set out to study underachievement directly, we identified by statistical regression a group of fourteen-year-olds whose actual attainment fell more than a standard deviation below what their reasoning tests predicted – young people whose problem lay in their learning, not their ability. A Learning Power assessment distinguished them from their peers with statistical force: they were significantly weaker on precisely the dimensions that name a person's relationship with their own learning. Asked to talk about their lives, they could offer vignettes and opinions but could not recount sequences of events in which they were active participants. They were not, in the study's phrase, the authors of their own lives⁵. This is what a forward-looking, dispositional measure makes visible: the young person disengaging while there is still time to act.

We have seen the same thing in our own practice. In a programme in 2021, a dispositional profile flagged young people at risk of disengagement ahead of the conventional indicators – before the attendance and behaviour data the system

relies on had registered anything. That finding is disciplined practice-based research rather than peer-reviewed and is offered as such; but it points to precisely what the peer-reviewed work above establishes in principle.

The detail bears this out. Of a baseline cohort of 513 students, CLARA profiles placed 67 in the highest-risk cluster and a further 154 in a passively disengaged cluster. Of those 67, the schools' own systems had pre-identified only 19 as at risk – leaving 48 of the highest-risk young people invisible to conventional identification. For the passively disengaged – compliant on the surface, generating no externalising signal – the gap was wider still: of the 154, schools had flagged just 12, leaving 142 unseen⁶. These are the young people the system cannot see. The limitation is stated honestly: the project ran during the pandemic, which disrupted attendance and exclusion records and made full statistical testing of those relationships impossible. What the data established clearly was the timing – the cluster patterns were present before the conventional indicators had registered anything.

3 The layer the review stops short of

Name the layer plainly, because everything else follows from it. The human capability inside a complex system belongs to no one. There is no unified budget for it, no career built around it, no institutional home that owns it. It is the layer every inquiry eventually names in its findings – culture, relationships, trust, capability – and that no reform has ever made the primary site of intervention. The structural failures the review identifies – institutions in parallel, activity measured instead of outcomes, young people lost from view at eighteen – are not separate problems to be solved one by one. They are what an unowned layer looks like from the outside. This is the orphaning, and it is the argument of this paper: the determining layer of the system is the one layer the system has never made anyone accountable for.

Capability is not something that can be built into a young person through transmission of knowledge; it is a formation that happens within them, and it happens through relationships which are encountered in particular contexts, over time. The review's structural diagnosis is precise: institutions operating in parallel, measuring activity rather than outcomes, losing sight of young people the moment they turn eighteen. Each of those failures is real. But each is also enacted by people – teachers, work coaches, employers, the adults a young person actually meets – and the review never turns to whether those people have the capacity to contribute to the formation of capability in the young. It asks, carefully and well, whether today's young people are different. It does not ask whether the adults around them are equipped to form them.

That question matters because of what the evidence on human development shows. The quality of the developmental relationship is one of the best-evidenced findings in the human sciences. In psychotherapy, a synthesis of nearly three hundred studies and more than thirty thousand patients finds the working alliance among the most consistent predictors of outcome, across every model of

therapy⁷. In education, a meta-analysis of close to a hundred studies finds the affective quality of the teacher-student relationship a significant predictor of both engagement and achievement – and strongest, tellingly, for the students most at risk⁸. And the single most consistent finding in the science of resilience is that children who do well despite serious adversity almost always have at least one stable, committed relationship with a supportive adult⁹. Our own Templeton-funded study of sixteen-to-nineteen-year-olds found the same thing from the inside: the single most important factor in the formation of character was the quality of the relationship between teacher and student. Capability is formed within the relationship, not delivered into it.

If the relationship is where capability forms, then the part of the system that matters most is the part it manages least. A doctoral study using the same instrument in two English secondary schools found, by structural equation modelling, that the relational culture of the individual classroom significantly shaped the growth of young people's active learning dispositions over time¹⁰. The relational field is currently neither explained nor managed by any of the levers the system pulls. A reform that perfects the structures while leaving the relational field to chance is improving the part it can already see and ignoring the part that actually forms capability.

And the dispositional architecture of capability is not vague. Belonging – the very dimension the review reached for and could not hold – along with mindful agency, curiosity, creativity, hope and optimism and the capacity to make sense of the world and persist in it: these have been measured for over two decades, across tens of thousands of individuals and organisations, through a validated instrument, CLARA, whose eight-dimension structure of a person's learning power – a measure of their capability – holds together with strong statistical fit. Its validity has been established not once but repeatedly, including through an independent cross-cultural adaptation using both Classical Test Theory and Item Response Theory¹¹, as well as the original structural validation¹². What the review could only count in the aggregate, this instrument can read in the individual. It can be measured and thus seen, and the same data used to measure it is used formatively for self-directed personal growth and improved personal performance. It is also used diagnostically for targeted pedagogical interventions and leadership strategy.

The reason it has been absent from policy is not that the evidence was missing. It is the orphaning named at the head of this section. The review of testing and motivation discussed in Section 2 is the clearest proof of how it works in practice. Here was a rigorous, heavily-cited systematic review that identified a consistent pattern: high-stakes testing depresses motivation among the lower-achieving learners most at risk of detachment. It was funded by the government and not acted upon, because the harm it identified belonged to no minister, no budget, no metric. That is the orphaned layer made historical rather than abstract. The question facing the next phase is not whether the evidence exists. It has existed,

authoritatively and unacted-upon, for twenty years. The question is whether anyone will at last be made accountable for it.

4 The evidence already exists

This should give the next phase confidence rather than pause: the evidence for how capability is formed, that it can be measured, and that building it raises attainment rather than competing with it, is not new. Much of it has been sitting in peer-reviewed form for twenty years, waiting for precisely the question the review is now asking.

Two systematic reviews – the gold-standard method, carried out for the EPPI-Centre at the Institute of Education, with pre-registered protocols, paired independent reviewers and formal weighting of every study – speak directly to the review’s anxieties. The first, on citizenship education and the provision of schooling¹³, found that rigid control and the hidden curriculum actively exclude certain young people: disengagement is formed inside the school, long before it surfaces as labour-market detachment.

The second, on student learning and achievement¹⁴, met the qualifications-versus-capability fear head-on. It found that a facilitative, dialogical, learner-centred pedagogy enhances academic achievement and higher-order thinking – that such approaches complement and sustain achievement rather than divert attention from it. The choice the review worries over is a false one: building capability and raising attainment are the same act. Read alongside the review of testing and motivation³ and the decline-through-schooling data⁴, the three together form a coherent account: the system’s assessment regime depresses the motivation of the lowest achievers, capability duly falls as young people move up through school, and a different, learner-centred pedagogy reverses the loss without any cost to attainment.

A third study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation and launched in the House of Lords on 28 November 2006¹⁵, examined character and disposition across 551 sixteen-to-nineteen-year-olds in three Bristol sixth-form centres between 2004 and 2006 – the review’s exact transition band. It found that character, attainment and learning dispositions move together; that the single most important factor in formation was the quality of the teacher-student relationship; and that these young people had aspiration and a sense of justice in abundance, but no channel through which to act – aspiration present, opportunity absent, two decades before the review names that same gap.

And the loss is reversible. In the underachievement study introduced in Section 2, eighteen of the identified fourteen-year-olds were offered fortnightly coaching conversations built around their Learning Power profiles for twelve months – support, encouragement and challenge, with the young person genuinely in charge of their own decisions. Of the eighteen, sixteen completed both pre- and post-intervention assessments. At the end of the year the coached group had improved significantly across five of the seven dimensions – Changing and

Learning, Critical Curiosity, Meaning Making, Creativity and Strategic Awareness – while two comparison groups who had not been coached declined⁵. The decline is not destiny. With the right relational intervention, on the review’s own age band, the dispositions that produce engagement can be measurably grown – and the control groups moving the other way rule out maturation as the explanation. The same pattern has since been demonstrated at organisational scale: a leadership cohort at Hunter Water in Australia improved significantly across six of the eight dimensions, including belonging, over three years, in peer-reviewed measurement¹⁶ – adult evidence, offered as proof of principle that the dimensions of learning power move with deliberate intervention. This improvement in capability ran in parallel with significant improvements in hard measures of performance.

These are the lineage from which CLARA grew: a validated measure of capability across eight dimensions, now used at scale. Nor does the approach sit outside the academic mainstream. CLARA’s method – using a validated, multidimensional self-report instrument to generate not a score but personalised, rapid, formative feedback – is recognised in the peer-reviewed literature as a worked exemplar of dispositional learning analytics, a field that has begun to turn its tools directly onto the measurement of belonging¹⁷. What the next phase would need is not a proprietary novelty but the most developed instance of an established approach.

No single study above is decisive on its own; two are systematic reviews with the usual limits of their evidence base, one a case study in one city, one an intervention with modest numbers. But together they triangulate a serious and coherent foundation – the system forms disengagement, the formation is measurable and visible early, and it reverses under the right relational conditions – and the honesty about their reach is itself the mark of a research body rather than a vendor. The load-bearing claim does not rest only on our own evidence: that the quality of the developmental relationship drives engagement and achievement is established independently, by several meta-analyses¹⁸, and the instrument that reads it has been independently validated across cultures by researchers independent of WILD¹¹.

5 What the next phase cannot afford to miss

The recommendations are rightly the review’s own to make, and the autumn phase will make them. This response offers something narrower: four conditions any set of solutions will need to meet if a Working State is genuinely to build capability, rather than produce a more sophisticated version of the system we already have. By a “Working State” we mean a state that takes as its purpose the building of capability for work and participation – the ambition behind “Get Britain Working” and the Youth Guarantee – and which, this paper argues, cannot achieve it without learning to see the capability layer its own instruments miss.

First, measure capability before the crisis. Better risk-of-NEET tools, identified earlier, are welcome – but improved lagging indicators are still lagging indicators, and the system’s existing forward-facing instrument, high-stakes testing, reads

attainment in a way that suppresses the very dispositions, values and attitudes that produce engagement. They must be supplemented by an instrument that reads the interior conditions and hands the responsibility, authorship and accountability for change to the young person themselves, supported by their key relationships and local networks: the dispositional profile that shows a young person disengaging while there is still time to act, rather than after the attendance record has caught up. Our own practice already points to what this makes possible – a dispositional reading that surfaced risk ahead of the conventional indicators. The system needs a forward mirror as well as a rear-view one.

Second, invest in the relational field in which capability is formed, not only the structural architecture around it. If the relationship is where capability forms, then coaching, mentoring and the deliberate cultivation of the relational container cannot be treated as soft additions to the real work of reform. They are the work. And because, for the review's sixteen-to-nineteen band, the most powerful relational contexts are the ones that connect a young person to real work and real purpose, this condition reaches beyond the classroom: the next phase should fund the relationships and the authentic places – mentoring, internships, work-integrated learning – in which young people actually develop. Section 6 sets out what that formation looks like in practice.

Third, free the curriculum so that it forms capability rather than suppressing it. This is not a peripheral matter of content; it is structural, and the evidence points to the prescribed national curriculum itself as part of the problem. The systematic review of testing and motivation found that a high-stakes, test-driven regime demotivates the lower-achieving young people most at risk³; the learning-power data found capability declining as children move up through precisely that increasingly prescribed system⁴; and the review of student learning and achievement found that a facilitative, dialogical, learner-centred pedagogy raises attainment rather than competing with it¹⁴. Taken together these say something the review does not yet say: a curriculum organised around the delivery of prescribed content, paced and tested uniformly, is one of the mechanisms by which the system forms disengagement. A curriculum that is freer and more personalised – one that begins from the young person's own sense of purpose and generates knowledge with them rather than delivering it to them – is not a soft alternative to rigour. On the evidence, it is the condition under which capability and attainment grow together, and it can be enhanced significantly by the purposeful use of generative AI. A Working State that means to build capability cannot leave the prescribed curriculum untouched.

Fourth, give the capability layer a structural home. The orphaning has to end. Someone must own this layer, budget for it, and build careers around it – not another framework laid over the system, but genuine institutional accountability for the dispositional development of the people inside it, young and adult alike. We are not asking for a particular instrument to be adopted; we are asking that the function – measuring and forming capability before crisis – be owned by

someone with a budget and a career path, by whatever means and whatever tools best serve it. That ownership has somewhere obvious to live. The Get Britain Working settlement already funds the machinery in which young people are counted – the Youth Guarantee, Pathways to Work, the expanding network of Youth Hubs – and the review’s final report is to set out who is accountable for the participation system that joins them up. The capability layer belongs inside that architecture: whoever is made accountable for keeping a young person in view should also be accountable, on a dedicated budget, for forming the capability that keeps them there – reported against alongside attainment and destinations. Without an owner, even the most sophisticated reform will once again leave the determining layer to chance, exactly as the testing evidence was left to chance for twenty years.

6 From reading to formation: how capability is grown

A reading is only the beginning. To measure a young person’s capability and stop there would be to repeat the system’s deepest habit – to treat the profile as another record, another label, another thing done to the young person rather than with them. The value of a dispositional reading is realised only when it becomes the ground for formation, and capability is formed, on the evidence of this paper, when a young person is helped to act on their own learning in a context that is real to them.

The first move is to turn the reading into self-knowledge the young person owns. CLARA does not ask whether a young person is attending or misbehaving; it asks how they stand in relation to their own learning – whether they approach difficulty with persistence or avoidance, whether they can initiate or depend on direction, whether they experience themselves as capable of change. A profile of this kind is designed not to categorise but to be handed back: the basis for a structured conversation in which the young person moves from receiving an account of themselves as a learner to constructing one – interrogating their own dispositions, asking questions of them, and identifying self-directed strategies for change. This is what authentic enquiry provides: a disciplined process through which the data serves the learner rather than describes them, activating the internal authority for learning that turns self-understanding into agency¹⁹. It is the same mechanism the underachievement study put to the test, where coaching conversations built around young people’s own profiles measurably grew the dispositions that produce engagement⁵. The practitioner’s role shifts accordingly, from administering a reading to facilitating a learning journey in which the young person is genuinely in charge.

But for the review’s sixteen-to-nineteen band, the conversation is not enough on its own. Capability at this age is formed where learning meets the real world – in the settings where a young person can act with consequence, take responsibility, and discover themselves as someone who is capable of contribution. This is the half of the formation the review’s own domain most needs and the system most neglects. Work-integrated learning design – internships, placements, community

projects, enterprise and authentic real-world challenges built deliberately around a young person's developing capability rather than bolted on as work experience – is where the dispositions a profile reads are exercised and grown. An internship is not, in this account, a glimpse of a possible job; it is a context in which mindful agency, belonging, curiosity, creativity, sensemaking and the capacity to persist are put to work and built up – producing hope and optimism and the sort of flexible self-belief that enables a person to achieve their goals. The Templeton study named exactly the gap this closes: young people with aspiration and a sense of justice in abundance, but no channel through which to act¹⁵. Authentic, work-integrated settings and real-world complex problem solving challenges are that channel. They are where aspiration becomes capability.

This closes the loop between measuring capability and forming it. The system's instruments can see a young person only after they have already begun to disappear. A dispositional reading can see the interior conditions before they surface – and that reading, handed back through authentic enquiry and exercised in authentic and work-integrated settings, is how the capability the review wants to build is actually built. Measuring capability and forming it are not two policies but two halves of one act: see the young person in time, then give them the relationship and the real-world context in which to become the author of their own learning. The evidence that this works, on this age band, already exists²⁰. What is missing is not the method. It is the decision to build the system around it.

7 The larger stake: from youth disengagement to national resilience

The layer this paper has traced does not stop at the edge of youth policy. The dispositions it describes – the capacity to make sense of uncertainty, to persist, to recover, to act with purpose – are not only skills for a changing economy. They are the foundation of personal resilience, and personal resilience is the human ground of the wider societal resilience the state increasingly says it needs. This is where the argument of this paper meets the largest thing government is currently trying to do, and it is worth being exact about the connection, because it is not a metaphor.

The Government has adopted a whole-of-society approach to national resilience – the principle that resilience is built not only by the state but by every organisation, community and individual, and that it rests on prevention rather than cure. Its own Resilience Framework and subsequent action plan frame the ambition in exactly the language of this paper: the goal, in the Government's words, is a culture in which resilience is part of daily life. That is a developmental aspiration. It concerns the human capacity to adapt, to hold together under pressure, to recover – the same capacity, in adults and communities, that this paper has described in the young. And it meets the same wall. The resilience apparatus can map risks, harden infrastructure, rationalise civil-contingency structures and survey how prepared the public feels. It has no instrument that measures or develops the human capacity it names as its goal. It is the capability

layer again – named as the objective, owned by no one, invisible to the instruments – this time at national scale.

The through-line is then simple to state. The whole-of-society resilience agenda treats human adaptive capacity as an endowment or an aspiration; this paper's contribution, on twenty-six years of evidence, is that it is a cultivated capacity – measurable, developable, and formed through relationship and context over time. It is formed, or eroded, in three places: education, the workplace and the community. A NEET crisis is what its erosion looks like in the young. Which means that closing the gap in education is not only youth policy. It is the first and cheapest place to build the resilience on which the whole system depends – and the young person whose capability is formed rather than left to collapse is also the adult, the worker and the citizen on whom a resilient society later rests.

The economics follow the same logic. The review puts the cost of youth disengagement at around 125 billion pounds a year – the price of reading capability only after it has collapsed, and acting only once a young person has already detached. The dispositional architecture this paper describes is cheapest to build early and most expensive to leave late; the four-to-five-year-old whose warning signs the review can already see becomes, untouched, the sixteen-year-old who costs the system many times over. Forming capability before the crisis is not a competing call on the budget. It is the highest-leverage spend available to a Working State – and in an economy where AI is steadily absorbing the routine work the system is built to teach, it is fast becoming the only part of education with a durable economic return.

The teacher quoted at the front of this paper said there was no measure; no metric anywhere to show how you develop a human as a learner. She was describing the absence at the centre of the review's problem – and, it turns out, at the centre of the nation's resilience problem too. But she was wrong about one thing. The measure exists. Capability can be named, formed, measured and grown, and the evidence for how to do it has been waiting for the question the review is now, at last, asking. The only question the next phase has to answer is whether the system is ready to see what it shows.

About WILD Learning Sciences

WILD Learning Sciences CIC is a research and advisory body constituted as a Community Interest Company. Its intellectual property, validated instruments and evidence base – developed across more than twenty-five years of peer-reviewed research, much of it cited in this paper – are held under a statutory asset lock, in trust for public benefit, and cannot be extracted, sold or redirected to private profit. This is why the paper recommends that a function be owned rather than a product bought: WILD's concern is that the capability layer be designed, measured and formed well, by whatever means and tools best serve it.

The research programme described here originates with Professor Ruth Deakin Crick, WILD's founder and chief scientist, who has led the development of the

learning-power and capability research since the late 1990s. She is co-founder of the Centre for Whole of Society Resilience and an adviser to the Cabinet Office – which is why the connection this paper draws, between the capability failing in the young and the human resilience the state is seeking to build, is one WILD is positioned to carry into the national resilience conversation as well as the youth-and-work one.

Endnotes

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