Disadvantage and disaffection: What the research tells us



The Department for Education defines ‘Disadvantaged’ students as:

- any child aged 5-16 who is claiming free school meals.
- any child who has been recorded as claiming free school meals at any point in the past six years.
- any child in this age bracket looked after by a local authority.
- any child in the age bracket recorded by their school as having left care through adoption or another court order

What does it mean to be 'disadvantaged,' and how does being disadvantaged play out in an educational context?

Definitions of disadvantage vary - a comprehensive understanding encompasses:

- **Income poverty**
- **A lack of social and cultural capital**
- **A lack of control over decisions** that affect life outcomes
- **A gap in skills, attitudes and aspirations**

The broad in-country picture is this: **disadvantaged children start school behind their more advantaged peers, and the gap in performance widens as they progress through the education system.**
Analysis shows that, on average, disadvantaged pupils are:

- 4.3 months behind in early years
- 9.4 months behind in primary school
- 18.4 months behind at Key Stage 4
- Persistently disadvantaged pupils are 23.4 months behind at KS4

(Persistently disadvantaged pupils: have been eligible for Free School Meals for at least 80 per cent of their school lives).

"Teachers don't understand that we have problems at home – we're passed around to different teachers and end up walking around school. Getting kicked out of school is down to stress at home for poor families and teachers not prepared to listen and help out with problems." (Pupil, Year 10)

A problem!

Disadvantaged pupils can come from all backgrounds. However, statistically the largest group is white British pupils.

“The underperformance of low-income white British pupils matters, particularly because they make up the majority—two-thirds—of such pupils. So the lowest-performing group of poor children is also the largest. If we don’t crack the problem of low achievement by poor white British boys and girls, then we won’t solve the problem overall.”

Sir Michael Wilshaw

“White working class people feel no one is listening or speaking for them. They have been ignored by politicians of all parties as part of broader strategy to woo middle class voters and occupy the political centre’. As a result there are few national strategies or little targeted support to tackle generations of low aspiration and to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.” (Governors and Headteachers focus group)

Disaffected

All schools will have identified pupils whom they class as disaffected in some way. In 2008, OFSTED defined disaffection as one or more of these factors:

- Regularly non-compliant, but not aggressive or threatening
- Caused repeated low-level disruptions
- Regularly disruptive, challenging or both, recurring fixed-term exclusions
- Absent for 20% or more of the available school sessions in the year
- Quiet, withdrawn and uninterested in most lessons

Of course, coming from a disadvantaged background does not mean a pupil will become disaffected. However many disaffected pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds, so understanding the experience of disadvantage can help schools to consider what approaches can be used to tackle this.

"There's nothing we can say about it because to them we're no one, we are a nobody." (Julie)
"I think that no matter what my point of view is, it's not gonna change anything." (Sam)

"We are not looked at, as like people, we're not; I just wish something could be done about bad things, but nothing ever can because that's life stop" (Jane)

The impact of material deprivation

Lacking sufficient money has a direct impact on the resources families can access to support child development and learning. These include **basic items** like nutritious food – critical for healthy brain development - and toys and books that promote cognitive stimulation.
Disadvantaged families are also more likely to live in **poor quality or overcrowded housing** that can negatively affect child mental and physical health.
Additionally, the gap in access to **computers and internet** at home between the poorest and richest households may hamper young people's ability to complete schoolwork and maintain peer relationships; home internet access has been linked to a 10-point increase in GCSE attainment.

"I knew it was a struggle for them and I knew that what I wanted couldn't have been that important to go and ask for money and I just...I've always got a sense when things are wrong and I can tell so I just won't ask 'cos I don't like asking for anything."

(Amy, 15 years old)

"I don't go usually go on trips 'cos they are expensive and that...At our school they do loads of activities and they go to loads of different places...I don't bother asking."

(Martin, 11 years old)

Family stress and functioning

Attachment security refers to the positive expectations infants develop about themselves and others; it stems from positive and predictable interactions with the caregiver on a regular basis during the first year of life. In families with complex needs, up to two thirds of children may be insecurely attached; poor attachment is strongly associated with worse resilience, socio-emotional and behavioural problems, and early school leaving.

The impact of toxic stress resulting from **adverse childhood experiences** (ACEs) on children's brains is highly significant – and has been shown to have a lifelong effect. **Almost half of participants in a 2014 nationally representative English survey report experiencing at least one ACE**. While no single factor causes carers to maltreat children, challenging social and economic environments are more frequently associated with early life neglect and certain types of abuse. Parental support and involvement have been shown to partially buffer the impact of ACEs on outcomes, yet disadvantage also tends to disrupt healthy family interactions. In a school context, ACEs can act as a barrier to concentration and learning, causing children to withdraw from or become aggressive in the classroom. Children in contact with social services, especially those deemed to be at risk of significant harm, are at high risk of poor attainment at every assessment stage.

There is particularly strong evidence supporting a causal link between socio-economic position, **maternal psychological health** and poor child outcomes. Moving into income poverty over time was found to increase the odds of maternal mental ill health by 50 per cent even after employment status was taken into account. Children of depressed mothers have been found to experience poorer parenting and attachment security, delayed development, as well as behaviour problems, worse performance, smaller achievement gains and more absences in primary school.

"He is tagged for burglary but this is not a barrier or an issue for the school. All his life he's never had praise but been told he's a non-achiever. Now he has people who show him they care. His attendance has improved and he's starting to achieve." (Foster carer)

"I get sick often, I get a lot of flu… I get sick so much, then I miss my school work, but I don't stay at home that much…Maybe I catch it from other people or maybe I get it from this home…[The Landlord] never repairs anything…Everything breaks." (Sara, ten years old)

The home learning environment (HLE)

The evidence is conclusive that the HLE, including the extent to which children read with their parents, learn the alphabet and numbers, sing songs, play games and go on educational visits, is crucial for the **development of skills** that determine school attainment. These include reading, verbal and spelling abilities, and positive behaviour, well-being and enjoyment of school; children who experience a strong HLE also have a lower likelihood of being identified with SEND.

Poorer children were significantly less likely to experience a rich home learning environment, even though HLE quality is only moderately associated with parental education or occupation. In addition to the negative impact of deprivation on the physical home environment and quality of caregiver-child interactions, US and UK studies show that low-income parents are much more likely to **underestimate the impact they have on their child's cognitive development and learning** – and therefore may be less likely to engage in the practices listed above.

"'If you don't have the same clothes as other people: they say that you've got rags. If the whole school has got the same clothes except for you they will tease you until you have the right clothes…when you don't have any clothes and you don't have any shoes people bully and people laugh at you when you go somewhere.'
(Seven year old girl)

"My whole sense of myself when I was at school was that I was no good at anything, that I was hopeless at learning."
(Josie, parent)

Parenting strategies

Stark social differences were found in participation in **enrichment activities**: double the proportion of advantaged seven-year-olds participated in sports and other clubs compared with their disadvantaged peers, and 26 per cent of advantaged 11-year-olds took music lessons compared to 6 per cent of disadvantaged children. The same study found an independent positive effect of sport and other organised activities on attainment at age 11.

Inequalities in school preparedness

Additionally, throughout their school years, disadvantaged children and young people are disproportionately more likely to **lack the necessary precursors** – a good level of health and well-being, a nutritious diet, a supportive and stimulating home environment - to learn and perform in school.

Across practically every health outcome, disadvantaged children are worse off; notably, children from low-income families are **four times as likely to have mental health difficulties**, and evidence suggests that social inequalities in behavioural and socio-emotional difficulties have gotten worse in the UK over time. There is a strong link between poverty and special educational needs or disabilities; **over a quarter of pupils eligible for FSM are also identified with SEND**.

"Most kids who are struggling at school aren't struggling at school because they don't want to learn. It's because they're not really in a position to learn in the classroom because of all the other things that are going on in their lives… Alongside many other factors, we find time and time again, with black Caribbean boys and white FSM boys, there's a whole macho, masculine culture around not admitting weakness, being tough the whole time."

Jack Reynolds, Director, Football Beyond Borders

A sense of marginalisation and injustice within the community

In a number of communities across the country, studies reported a sense of **marginalisation** and **perceived injustice** within white British communities. This was more prominent in larger urban areas where there had been considerable demographic change over the last thirty years. Parents themselves lamented a **lack of white culture reflected in school life** which perpetuated for many the marginalisation they felt within their communities. White British parents and their children struggled to find their own **identity within their wider community and within school**.

One of the consequences of this was **an unwillingness of some parents to engage** with their child's school and **a lack of uptake with local services** designed to support disadvantaged families. This lead them to being labelled as 'hard to reach' Parents expressed concern that their children did not always get the support they deserved. They were frustrated at what they saw as an unfair weighting of resources towards immigrant children or those learning English. There was a feeling from some schools that more needed to be done to positively celebrate white British identity and culture, in the same way that other cultures were explicitly celebrated.

"One of the major problems for us is that we are not recognised. There is no extra help for our children. There is a Portuguese club after school, but not one for English children; if there was we would be called racist. We are not racist we just want a balance." (white British parent)
(The Portuguese club is externally funded)

"This area has a thriving local neighbourhood centre, which is the designated Children's Centre for the area which also has strong links with the school. Yet few of the poorer White families use it."
(Parent governor London)

Stressors experienced by disadvantaged children in school

Once in school, disadvantaged pupils tend to have a **different experience** compared to their more affluent peers: it is more likely to be characterised by instability, lower quality teaching and curricula, and psychosocial stressors arising from the disconnect between the school and home environments. These aspects are explored on the next pages.

Hannah: I'm really scared about the SATs . Mrs O [a teacher at the school] came and talked to us about our spelling and I'm no good at spelling and Mr D [the class teacher] is giving us times tables tests every morning and I'm hopeless at times tables so I'm frightened I'll do the SATs and I'll be a nothing.
Researcher: I don't understand Hannah. You can't be a nothing.

Hannah: Yes, you can 'cause you have to get a level like a level 4 or a level 5 and if you're no good at spellings and times tables you don't get those levels and so you're a nothing.
Researcher: I'm sure that's not right
Hannah: Yes it is 'cause that's what Mrs O was saying.

(Year 6 pupil)

Mobility

Non-compulsory moves, at times other than the transition from primary to secondary, are strongly linked to **social disadvantage**, and especially affect certain low-attaining groups, notably Roma, Gypsy or Traveller children. An analysis of school census data from 2003 found that 30 per cent of movers were eligible for FSM compared to 17 per cent of stayers. The research suggests that **non-compulsory moves are detrimental for attainment**. A meta-analysis of the impact of school mobility on reading and maths achievement in primary school found a three to four-month lag effect, while UK evidence suggests that it is the socio-demographic factors driving school moves that lead to reduced attainment in the primary phase. In secondary school, the independent impact of mobility on attainment is more clear-cut: at Key Stage 4, after accounting for individual characteristics, pupils who were mobile in Years 7 to 9 were found to experience a depressed average point score of over 20 points, while pupils mobile in Year 10 saw an average score 70 points lower than their non-mobile peers. In addition, the transition from primary to secondary has been shown to be particularly difficult to navigate for disadvantaged pupils.

"And I've been hearing that if you don't get into any of the good schools they send you to one of the crappy schools. In school I've been hearing everyone saying 'I hope I don't go to Cxxxxxx' and stuff like that. So I then thought that was really awful."

(George, white English, working class)

Social psychological factors

It is well established that so-called 'non-cognitive' factors influence how a child performs in school.
From a young age, pupils are **aware of social differences** and of how they may be perceived differently because of them. In interviews with young people across the socio-economic spectrum, Reay and colleagues concluded that 'the shame and humiliation of being thought of as stupid [was] ever present' for the disadvantaged children interviewed. Findings from experimental studies suggest that a **sense of belonging** is one of the most important determinants of whether an individual decides to enter, continue or abandon a pursuit. Belonging is associated with positive attitudes towards school, which are in turn positively predictive of attainment.

In a 2018 study, Easterbrook and colleagues found that, after accounting for attainment, lacking a sense of belonging and feeling that people from similar backgrounds did not usually do well in school significantly predicted lower GCSE grades, application to lower-ranked universities, worry about academic work and self-reported stress among pupils eligible for FSM. The relationship was found to operate through **role model visibility**: individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities may be less aware of people with similar backgrounds who have progressed successfully through education.

"There can be an emotional barrier and a lack of self-esteem; it can be true of any minority. If you feel undervalued within the whole school community, it can have a profound effect from an early age. Children can feel confused about where they fit into the world. In our school we are very good at diversity, but maybe there is an assumption that because you are British and White, you are already included in things. But do we celebrate being British?" (Primary school teacher)

Attitudes and aspirations

Attitudes and aspirations are widely viewed as important drivers of the gap.
Much of the evidence suggests that most pupils and families have high educational and career ambitions. The evidence on the link between attainment and both aspirations and **attitudes towards education** is inconclusive, with a recent study of PISA data finding both an association between attitudes and achievement, and significantly more positive attitudes among first- and second-generation immigrant pupils than native children.

Evidence suggests that pupils have higher aspirations for themselves during primary education, but that, for many, these goals change as they enter adolescence. Studies found that pupils were influenced to be more 'realistic' by peers, families and teachers. Deprived children are less likely to feel a sense of control over their ability to affect outcomes at school – known as a lower **locus of control**. Studies show that this is a result of being under pressure to perform tasks in which they may lack confidence. There is some evidence that participation in programmes such as mentoring, service learning, outdoor adventure and social and emotional learning have been shown to have an impact on self-beliefs and other 'non-cognitive' skills that are important for school performance.

"I feel like it's actually just a whole society point of view. …You'll just think, 'oh, white boys from estates', 'that boy is from a working-class estate', 'they're just going to be a distraction and just ruin the class'." (Young person, 15)

"You're fighting the media stigma that is attached with that particular identity. …If you put on BBC News and they start talking about underachievement, failure in school, I would almost guarantee that the image that they choose to portray that would be either of a black Caribbean kid or a white working class boy." (Alison Kriel, CEO, AMAYA Trust)

Teaching

The most important school-level factor for pupil attainment is **teacher effectiveness**: evidence shows that the difference between being taught by a good versus bad teacher is equivalent to a whole year of learning for disadvantaged pupils. However, disadvantaged pupils are more likely to experience **lower quality teaching**.

In schools serving disadvantaged communities, teachers, on average, are less likely to have a formal teaching qualification, have less experience, and are more likely to lack a degree in the relevant subject; these schools are also more likely to see a higher teacher turnover rate. Within schools, pupils in lower sets and streams, who are disproportionately FSM-eligible, are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers. The **extra work** for teachers in schools with a higher intake of disadvantaged pupils, including providing emotional support, more one-on-one time with pupils with barriers to learning, and having to adapt to changing circumstances that come with high levels of mobility, may be more difficult for those with less experience.

Additionally, schools with a higher intake of disadvantaged pupils have been shown to employ **worse classroom practices**. A study of 125 year 5 classes found that schools with a higher intake of disadvantaged pupils offered fewer opportunities for pupils to practice maths problem solving and demonstrate subject knowledge in the classroom, less social support for learning, e.g. taking every pupil's contribution seriously and using pupil error as a learning opportunity, and poorer organisation of work and classes.

"This is a really good school. There's lots to do. The teaching is good. People really listen to you and no one wants to leave school."
(One of the school's most challenging students)

*The ability of the teacher to be a good listener was an important attribute and this appeared a lot in interviews. When asked what made a good teacher, one boy answered '**patience, being able to listen to people**.' He added that: '**Some listen to you and talk to you reasonably, but others just shout at you when you ask a question**.'*

Low literacy levels and language deprivation

Low literacy levels and **language deprivation** act as a barrier to learning from the Early Years Foundation Stage to secondary school and college. In a study of the low attainment of white British pupils in Lambeth, two secondary schools reflected on how the low prior attainment of some pupils starting school in Year 7 was **the greatest barrier to achievement** and was a **causative factor in behaviour problems** and low achievement throughout their school life. This was first seen in the Foundation Stage, where teachers talked of some young children coming to school only being able to grunt because they had been 'stuck in front of a TV all day.' The consequences of an inability to express one's self either verbally or in writing had both **an emotional impact**, leading to low self- esteem and aggression, and **an academic impact** as pupils did not have the required language and skills to be successful in a more formal exam based environment. Too often these issues were known from an early age, but not systematically addressed and so were a barrier to learning all through a pupil's educational journey.

"The English that many white students speak at home is often different from what they speak, or are expected to speak at school. They do not have an enriched vocabulary or academic language but we have to be careful that we do not denigrate the language they speak at home, the way their parents might speak." (Primary school)

"He started to camouflage his lack of progress with bad behaviour. He slipped through the net. He was 16 when he left school to do a college course in motor mechanics. The first year was practical and he got on well but the second year was theory and he dropped out because his literacy skills are not good. With support he got an interview for a part time job but he told me he wasn't going to sit in a room full of dunces. He was talking about himself of course." (TA about her pupil)

Unconscious bias

Furthermore, some evidence suggests disadvantaged and other minority pupil groups experience unconscious bias in the classroom. A study of teacher assessments of primary school pupils' reading and maths attainment found that these varied according to family income, ethnicity, special educational needs status, spoken language and gender. An analysis of school census data found that black and poor white British pupils were **marked down in teacher assessment** relative to their Key Stage results, while Indian and Chinese pupils were marked up, after controlling for individual characteristics and school effects; discriminatory marking was found to be more pronounced in areas with fewer black or poor children, and teacher assessments were found to be partially informed by the past year's performance of members of the pupil's group. Other studies show that the allocation of pupils to 'ability' groups is often done on an inconsistent and subjective basis: disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be allocated to lower attainment groups, after controlling for prior attainment.

The evidence is clear that there are **systemic inequities** according to socio-economic position, ethnicity and gender in how schools discipline children. Notably, even when a comprehensive set of factors including attainment and SEND are accounted for, black Caribbean pupils are still more likely to be excluded, indicating systemic bias in how exclusions are administered. School exclusion is one of the most important risk factors for poor attainment and later life outcomes.

'It does label you, there's no question about it…if you are poor, shall we say, not as wealthy as some, you are considered to be worse in some ways, socially worse – you are literally socially worse, but even as a person, quality of character, it's automatically 'you're poor' therefore you steal or may steal. You're not worthy, you're untrustworthy.'

(Unemployed person)

Stereotyping and blame

The **portrayal of youth culture** in large urban areas – and of **black Caribbean** and **white free school meal-eligible boys** in particular – can be disproportionately **negative**, often focusing on crime and anti-social behaviour.

This was a theme that came through prominently during interviews with practitioners and experts, and in focus groups with young people across London. Young people talked about **the threat of crime** in London. However, they also described the **prejudice** they feel from the media and society more generally. This prejudice can have a racial and class dimension and mean black Caribbean and white free school meal-eligible boys can feel singled out. There was concern that this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: how young people are portrayed affects how they see themselves and, in turn, their behaviour. This disproportionately impacts black Caribbean and low-income white boys, because stereotypical portrayals of these groups in the media are more likely to be negative.

"I just feel like it's a lot to do with stereotyping [of] the actual students before they (teachers) even know what they (pupils) really are [like]. So, while you're treating them how you perceive them, they're actually taking on the characteristics of what they think [they] are."

(Young person during a focus group)

"I was involved in a large study, …where we interviewed 62 middle class black Caribbean parents about their experiences at school when they were kids, and then their experiences now as parents. …They're teachers, they're lawyers, solicitors, doctors, and yet they're coming up against a set of ingrained low academic expectations, and heightened expectations of disciplinary trouble."

(David Gillborn, University of Birmingham)

Attainment grouping

Across the English education system, grouping pupils according to attainment, whether into streams, sets or within classes, is the norm. Despite this, research from the last 30 years show that these practices have a negligible impact on pupil achievement, with the Education Endowment Fund's review indicating a negative impact on the attainment of pupils in lower attainment groups – who are disproportionately disadvantaged – and a positive effect on pupils in higher attainment groups. There are several explanations for this. Aside from the evidence showing unconscious bias in how pupils are allocated into groups, placement into lower streams or sets can be **stigmatising**, and can **undermine confidence**, discourage learners' beliefs that they can affect outcomes through effort, and negatively affect attitudes and engagement in the long term. Moreover, pupils in low-attaining groups have been shown to be more likely to experience worse quality teaching and fewer educational opportunities.

They (the Lions) think they're better than us. They think they are good at every single thing and the second group, Tigers, there are some people that think they are good and more important than us. And one of the boys in Giraffes, he was horrible to me and he said "get lost slow tortoise" but my group the Monkeys and we are only second to bottom. (Six year old boy)

"The behaviour, it gets worse in the bottom set when, like teachers, don't pay attention to you. And they pay attention to, like, the higher ability students and, like, you get bored because there is nothing for you to do if you don't understand the work." (Shula, in a lower set)

Curriculum

Disadvantaged pupils tend to have less access to **a broad curriculum** compared to their advantaged peers. In Years 5 and 6, the amount of time spent teaching languages was found to be negatively related to the proportion of FSM pupils: 13 per cent of high FSM schools teach languages for less than 30 minutes per week compared to 7 per cent of low FSM schools.
There is also evidence that pupils in high-deprivation schools have fewer opportunities for **out-of-classroom education**. A range of studies show that educational experiences outside of the classroom benefit attainment, and skills crucial to school performance, including motivation, behaviour and self-esteem – factors that have been linked to the gap. Schools that require parental contributions to fund these experiences restrict access to children from low-income families.

'We have to look at a more vocational type of education in our secondary schools for our young people, as we did years ago, when if you didn't go to College you could do an apprenticeship somewhere or work in an office or factory. The worrying thing is no-one seems to care about them and there is nothing going for them at all.' (Headteacher)