Tackling Disadvantage and Disaffection

With a focus on white British learners: a practical guide



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About this guide

"I believe that poverty of expectations bears harder on educational achievement than material poverty – hard though that can be – and these expectations start in the home. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds very often have high ambitions, especially when they are young. But the odds against achieving them can worsen with age. All too often, there comes a point at which expectations shrink. They don't see their elder sister or her friends going to university, so they think it's not for them. Or no-one in their household is in paid work, so they don't expect to get a job. But where the family is supportive and demanding – of the child and of their school – then in my experience they are much more likely to succeed.

It is sometimes said that 'schools cannot do it alone', but this is not quite true: exceptional schools can make up for grave disadvantages faced by young people. In the process, they often become surrogate parents. However, the job of schools is made so much easier, or so much harder, by the expectations that families have for their children. So, as a society we have to create a culture of much higher expectations for young people both in our homes and in our schools. There are still far too many of these who suffer from poverty of expectations.

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, ex Chief Inspector of schools

This practical guide is intended to support senior and middle leaders in schools, colleges and settings to tackle the underachievement of pupils classed as disadvantaged, and those who become disaffected. It provides practical resources that can be used for staff training, reflection and making a plan to address this in your setting.

This guide sets out a series of tools to help you evaluate the best way to address this issue. Please read this booklet before referring to the support materials. This guide is accompanied by three sections to support you:

A. Identify the issues: what the research tells us
B. Identify the issues: resources to support you to find out more and make a plan
C. What works: examples of what is known to work, and case studies from schools

The materials herein are not exhaustive; they should be seen as a starting point and as working documents that can be added to and improved. Ideally, this body of knowledge will be added to by schools so that all can benefit from effective practice. The issues associated with disadvantage and underachievement are not new to us, nor will they be going away in the foreseeable future, so effective approaches can be understood and used over years, rather than as a one time only strategy.

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

While it is true that many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds can and do achieve their potential at school, there is also a significant number who underachieve in schools across England. Disadvantaged children can come from all ethnicities, but, when we look at disadvantage and underachievement at school, white British children are disproportionately represented compared to other groups of pupils.

Definitions of disadvantage vary across research. However, 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, DfE).

Disaffection

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 are best used to tackle this.

Appendix A: Identify the issues: what the research tells us

This section is available as a pdf or powerpoint document.

It brings together the most up-to-date research on the causes of disadvantage, its impact on children and young people and why this can lead to disaffection.

It is important that we understand the evidence about the possible barriers to success for disadvantaged pupils. Some of them are beyond our control; what is within our control is how we recognise and respond to these issues and how we equip our staff to understand them too. In schools, we all have anecdotes about child X or child Y; we need to take a step back and consider the bigger picture of their lives and to recognise how root causes can become educational barriers. To do this we need to look at the evidence base and then find out more about our pupils. Not all pupils' barriers have the same root causes, nor do they all respond negatively to the challenges they face. We must see them as potentially 'vulnerable to failure' in order to implement the approaches that will give them every chance of success.

Look at the research in appendix A and then consider these questions:

- Who is vulnerable to these issues in your school or setting?
- On a scale of 1-10, how far do you currently feel you can make a difference to disadvantaged children?
- If you asked the question above to your staff body, what would they say?
- What do you currently do explore the range of issues identified in the research?
- Which are issues you haven't previously considered and may need to examine in your school?
- Which of the issues identified affect a range of your pupils (families) and may already be a focus point for you?
- How can you review your own school's attitudes to the teaching and learning of specific disadvantaged children?
- What do children and families do to mask their issues and keep them hidden from school?
- On a scale of 1-10, how well known is the research amongst your staff? Who needs to lead on this and what do they need to know?
- Why should families engage with you? What is good for them about this? How would they describe their relationship with your school, college or setting? What are some of the already known barriers to engagement?
- What do disadvantaged or disaffected pupils say about both themselves and their aspirations, and about their experience of school?

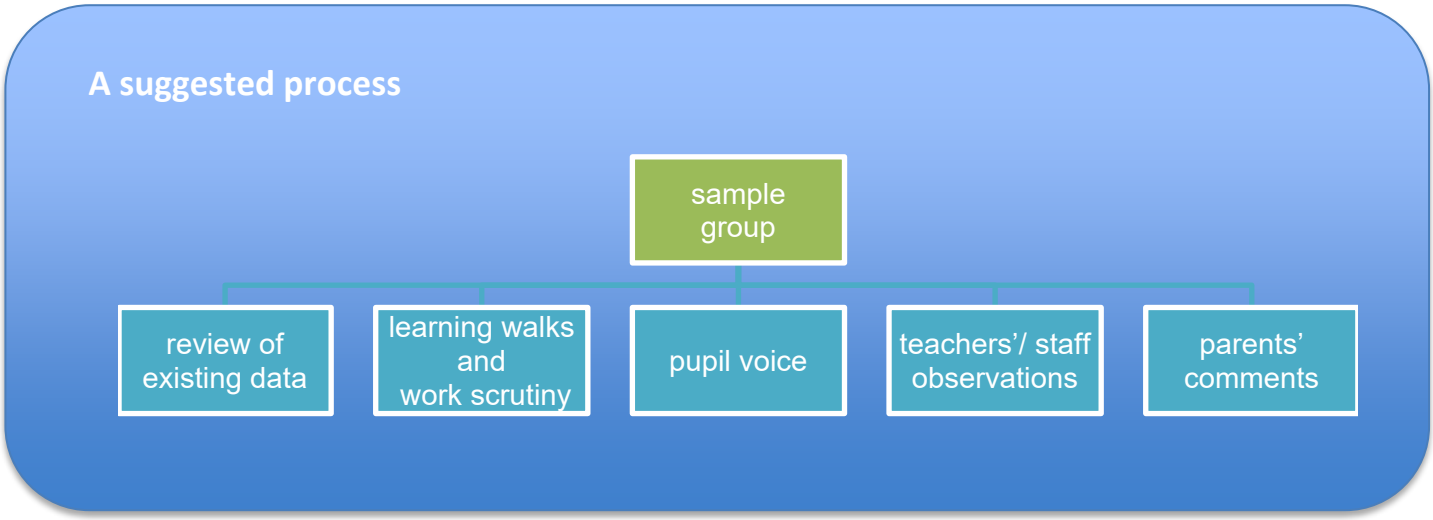
The research has come from:

The Education Policy Institute, ***Key drivers of the disadvantage gap: a literature review***, 2018
The Centre for Education and Youth, ***Boys on Track: Improving support for black Caribbean and free school meal eligible white boys in London: a research report***, 2018
Lambeth Council, ***Raising the achievement of white working class pupils: barriers and school strategies***, 2010
OFSTED, ***Good practice in re-engaging disaffected and reluctant students in schools***, 2008
OFSTED, ***Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on: evidence report***, 2013
Department for Work and Pensions, ***Living with poverty: A review of the literature on children's and families' experiences of poverty***, 2009

Appendix B: Identify the issues in your setting and make a plan

Now we are clear about the possible barriers to success that disadvantaged pupils may face, we need to do a deep dive and find out more about our own disadvantaged pupils.

Appendix B provides some resources that have been used by schools to help them understand the issues in their context, so helping them form a plan of action. As mentioned before, these are not fixed or exhaustive. They may be added to, adapted and improved. Schools have followed a simple process to find out their own issues and the resources are designed to help this process.



A number of schools found it useful to run focus groups of different stakeholders after asking participants to fill out simple questionnaires. Focus groups of pupils and parents provided lots of rich data for schools when deciding what needed to be addressed. Some schools have struggled to get the parents they want to consult with to attend school meetings. They have found much more engagement by:

- Hosting a focus group in a community centre or venue parents are comfortable with
- Asking local people with credibility in the community to lead on the consultation
- Conducting telephone discussions with parents

Some points to consider based on the prior experience of schools leading this type of enquiry.

- Identifying the issues is vital before deciding on a plan to tackle the issues of possible underachievement. However, it can't always be perfect. Non-engagement of a group of families, for example, may be the current situation and that informs what a school needs to focus on.
- It might seem simple to focus on one factor alone, such as improving parental engagement of their child's learning, but schools that have had most success in tackling disadvantage focussed on a number of strands in order to achieve the results they needed. For example, this is an opportunity to shine a torch on the quality of teaching and learning for pupils who are disadvantaged, as well as looking at their support or mentoring needs and how well there is a positive dialogue with their parents and carers.
- The key to success is to not give up! Persistence produces results and if there are setbacks, review what happened, try a different approach and keep going.
- Pupils need to be tracked closely over time. Everything may be fine in Year 7, but that might change. Only close tracking can ensure interventions happen before things get worse.

Appendix C: What works

The 'what works' section provides a range of materials to identify ways forward in addressing potential underachievement of disadvantaged pupils and some of the keys to re-engaging disaffected pupils.
This section contains:

- **What works**: a range of practical approaches that have been successful in raising achievement and ensuring pupils have clear educational and career pathways that they can access.

- **The Academic Resilience Approach:** this approach, created by 'Young Minds' and 'Boingboing', has helped many schools in the United Kingdom to support pupil emotional health and wellbeing and to develop resilience to help improve achievement, behaviour and attendance.
  'Boingboing' presented their work at a Milton Keynes seminar for schools in March 2020. All of their free to download resources are available from their website www.boingboing.org.uk .
  The folder in this guide contains:
  - The academic resilience framework
  - The academic resilience powerpoint
  - A resource that Boingboing produced for East Sussex schools to help them use the academic resilience framework to help address:
    - Anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating issues, ADHD, conduct disorder, PTSD, attachment difficulties
  - A booklet of lesson activities to help teach the aspects of the resilience framework to all pupils. This booklet was designed for pupils in Year 9 and may need adapting.