

CLF Education Executive Think Piece Four | Disadvantage

August 2020 | the thinking behind the Strategic Plan for 2020-2021



Equity in Action | Making the difference with disadvantage

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I write this at 7.25am on 14th August 2020, the morning after the release of the A Level results for the first year where the exam series has been cancelled. My twitter feed is raging with stories of students whose predictions and centre assessment grades have been downgraded by the government algorithm and as such their university places have been missed, their sense of self battered, their trust in those that lead them undermined, perhaps irreparably. Newspaper headlines point out what those in the sector knew would be the case before the results landed: that the most advantaged schools have seen rises in outcomes, whilst the least advantaged have seen drops. It's galling, and unjust, and it has angered many.

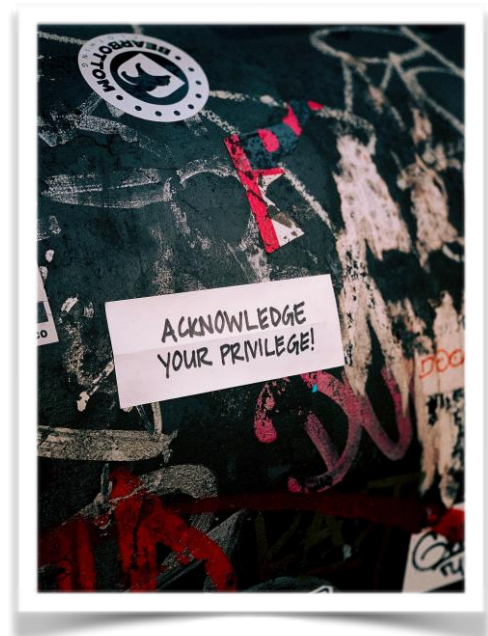
“A lifetime of disadvantage has seen them penalised by a system which purports to be fair.”

The approach taken speaks to my long held and deeply rooted beliefs about disadvantage and its uneasy relationship with the classroom and the system. In itself there's nothing wrong with the algorithm - in many ways it makes sense to measure grades assessed by a centre with other empirical data: that centre's performance over time, and the starting points of the students concerned. On a national level, this balances out and allows for grade inflation to be managed. The difficulty is, though, that its lack of nuance, its tone-deafness to the issues that individual children, schools and local areas face, means that for many students a lifetime of disadvantage has seen them penalised by a system which purports to be fair.

And so this morning I find myself reflecting on this as a cautionary tale to us all, because it speaks to what I know about how disadvantage works for students. I believe that with a very small number of exceptions, schools and teachers everywhere want students who are disadvantaged to have a fair experience of school and to do well. Many of us chose the profession because we wanted to make a difference and often that difference is most stark for those who begin with disadvantage and overcome challenges to be successful;

this is the stuff that makes a teacher's heart sing. Why then, is it still the case that after years of focus on the issue, we see outcomes largely unchanged? More importantly, why does it appear that some settings, some schools, some teachers seem to have so much more success with disadvantaged learners than others?

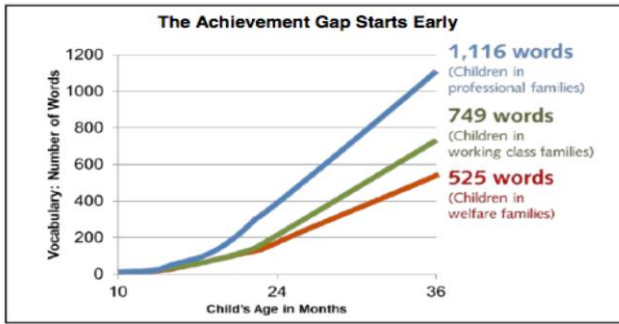
I don't think it's actually that complicated, but I do think it's hard to emulate. Tackling disadvantage is not a set of things that you do. It's a set of beliefs and behaviours that you have. Collectively, as a school, a staff team, a community it's *who you are*. Deeply understanding disadvantage and letting that understanding **permeate every decision and every conversation** is what makes the difference. Schools that are steeped in a good knowledge and understanding of what disadvantage is and feels like, coupled with the very strongest desire to see these things overcome and to use high standards and **high expectations** to address it - these are the schools where children who are disadvantaged thrive. They thrive because they are understood, but not patronised; they are challenged and still respected; they know that they don't have to do this on their own but daily the school, the people around them, help and support them to be able to navigate whatever life holds for them alone once they leave. They are not berated for lack of **resilience**, though academically this may sometimes be the case, but instead there is an understanding that for many children who are disadvantaged it takes extraordinary **resilience** to get to school each day, sometimes having to overcome significant barriers that many of us who teach may never have faced. There is a need for **tolerance** in some circumstances where families' values and priorities differ significantly from those we hold as individuals and sometimes as an organisation. And critically, there is an understanding that every disadvantaged child - every child - is different, and must be treated as an individual; that whilst there are national statistical trends that tell us what common experiences might be, we cannot know each child's experience and we cannot assume that because they fall into a particular category on a spreadsheet that their life experiences can be known except by learning about them from the child themselves.



There are, however, stories we can tell ourselves, patterns we can reflect on, research we can engage with that helps us to more deeply understand the *types* of experience that a disadvantaged student may have - and by engaging with these, by taking them on and by committing to learn and reflect and learn again, we develop staff bodies and school cultures that are intuitive, that are empathetic, that are passionate and driven and motivated to succeed, and **we start to see results**.

The thing about disadvantage is that it starts early. The gap in language development between a child who is disadvantaged and a child who is not opens up at 22 months. A child from a disadvantaged background will *typically* have heard thousands of words fewer in their life than a child from a more advantaged background, because of the level of education and life experience of their parents and the communities around them. The landmark Hart and Risley study in 1995 identified "remarkable differences" in the early vocabulary experiences of young children. Researcher and author Betty Hart described the results of their observations: "Simply in words heard, the average child on welfare was having half as much experience per hour (616 words per hour) as the average working-class child (1,251 words per hour) and less than one-third that of the average child in a professional family (2,153 words per hour)".¹

¹ Hart & Risley 2003, 8 as referenced in <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2014/the-word-gap>



This is important because vocabulary development during the preschool years is related to later reading skills and school success in general. The word 'typically' is so important here. This is not to say that every child born into disadvantage (*whatever that means - and that's a different blog*) has this experience, because that is simply untrue. Some children are born into disadvantage to extremely well-educated parents with very broad vocabulary, and their exposure to language is the same as or better than many children in more advantaged

households. However, it is more often the case that a disadvantaged child has this narrower experience in terms of language, and this matters because the exposure to breadth of vocabulary at an early age has an impact upon learning at a later age.

A fascinating more recent study from Stanford University suggests that the gap may open even earlier. The layering up of schema - and the illustration of how disadvantage rails against this, is summed up in the example:

"If you say 'the dog is on the sofa,' and the baby at 18 months is slow to process 'dog,' they're not open for business when 'sofa' comes along," Fernald said. "If they're quick on 'dog' and understand that the dog is on something, but don't know what it is, the faster kids are more likely to learn 'sofa' from the context."¹²

If the gap opens up at 22 months, by the time a child starts reception at somewhere between 48 and 60 months, it is only wider. What we know currently is that on a national level this gap only widens throughout primary school so that when students start at secondary school, at somewhere between 132 months and 144 months old, the gap is often significant, and plays out in SATs and other assessments which are then used to set and stream children in order to effectively organise them - and the gap tends to widen throughout secondary school so that we see smaller numbers of young people getting onto and staying on A level courses, yet smaller numbers into university and that's how we end up with the kinds of statistics that shame us all about the tiny proportion of disadvantaged students who take their places at top universities (0.8% of Oxford University students qualified for free school meals at school, whilst more than 40% are purported to be drawn from just eight private schools).

“Small things can make a big difference.”

Without pigeonholing or patronising our young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, we need to wake up to this difference by degrees. **It starts young and it's cumulative.**

What we know about disadvantage is that it layers up -

disadvantage begets disadvantage and small things can make

a big difference. It's also true that when policies are made, when changes occur, when austerity bites, it's often those who are already disadvantaged who feel the effects the most. If (as national statistics have told us to date) you are a young person who does not have many books at home, who does not have a table to study at, who lives in an over-crowded home and whose parents struggle not only with finances but with occasional mental health difficulties, it's *just that much harder* to have the same focus at school and to make the same progress as your peers. If the over-crowding in your house is your older siblings who themselves have struggles and are known in the community for their anti-social or criminal actions, and if these siblings went to your school and are known to your teachers, that too can make all the difference. If your SATs scores mean that you are in the lower sets with many other children just like you, it's less likely you're going to hit the highest outcomes and yet, born to a different family only a street or two away, you might find yourself having a completely different school experience.

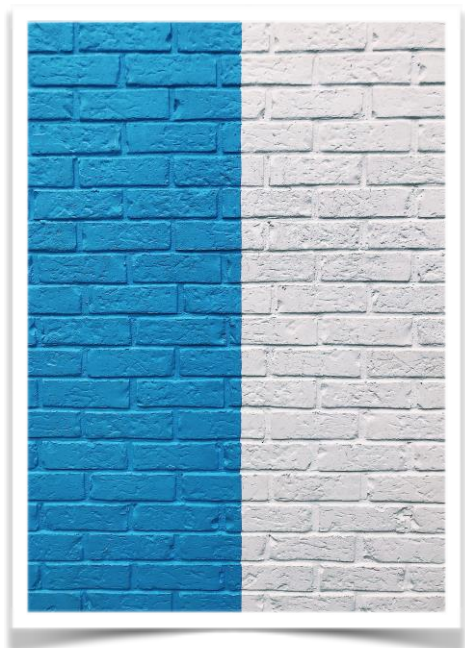
² <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/september/toddler-language-gap-091213.html>

If when it comes to the weekend your friends ask you to come to the cinema but you know you can't afford the ticket, the bus fare, the snacks, you make your excuses and don't go. They ask you again but it's the same response...eventually they stop asking, you find friends who are just like you and you do things together that you can all engage with. You might as a group be a minority in your school. These friendships play out at school and **the divisions, invisible as they might be, are very much there.**

More than that, though, you become used to thinking that opportunities do not apply to you - because your life experience is that many opportunities do not. This sense of self follows you beyond the usual and obvious ski trips and extra-curricular activities and into other areas - as simple as putting your hand up in class or joining the lunchtime drama club. Things which are in principle perfectly accessible (no cost, within school time, within expectation even) can become mentally off limits in a completely unconscious and insidious way. This self-deselection can follow a

“...mentally off limits in a completely unconscious and insidious way.”

person throughout their entire life. I've worked with talented, able, successful leaders who, on discussing this very phenomenon have been able to attribute those behaviours to themselves even now as successes of the system. “I had free school meals when I was a child. I had a supportive family but things were hard at times. I never did the school trips or the extracurricular stuff but it's only now, understanding the effects of self-deselection that I realise it's why I never considered putting myself forward for that promotion. I just assumed it didn't mean me.”



It takes adults to understand these possible patterns and it takes **intentional work to challenge and address** them - but the answers can be really quite simple. “Have you thought about drama club at lunchtime? **Shall I meet you there?**” can make the difference for a child who might otherwise not have self-promoted. Creating the kinds of relationships where young people feel trusted can make the difference. Having ongoing and intentional conversations about careers and IAG, and creating opportunities for young people (all young people, with the volume turned up for disadvantage) to have meaningful experiences of work and different careers can make the difference. **Brilliant assessment with high quality feedback** - given verbally, tutorial style and with follow up to check - can make a difference. There are lots and lots of things that people and schools can do. The critical thing is not just to do them, but to live them, and to bring to every single conversation a deepening understanding of what disadvantage means for the young person you are dealing with, and to make the appropriate adjustments for them without somehow marking them out as ‘having intervention’.

“Shall I meet you there?”

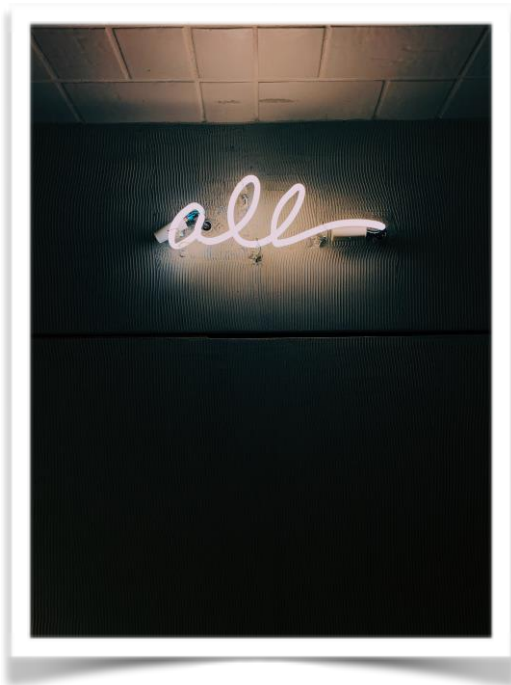
When I walk to school with my two children, one speeds ahead with his friend. The other hangs back; we don't walk with her friends and so she is to some extent socially excluded, as much as the boys are pleasant to her. She doesn't much enjoy the walk because ahead of her is the reminder of how much further ahead the others are. The bigger the gap, the slower she goes. I can't change the dynamic in relation to who walks to school and when. I can make a huge difference to the journey. If I talk to the mums as I go (which I love to do - they are ace) then pretty quickly my daughter starts to hang on my wrist and will start to whine - because she feels doubly excluded, first from my son's conversations and then from mine. If she's carrying lots of bags she feels weighed down and gets de-motivated.

One solution is to change the expectation: I could just take them in the car. However, I know that this won't benefit them in the longer term and in fact will make it less likely that they'll be willing and able to walk the distance needed.

I could have lots of elaborate plans for catching her up - occasional piggy backs, anyone? Totally possible, and quite a lot of hard work.

What I need to do is set off with the intention that she does not fall behind. I make sure she has the best footwear for the journey, that her clothes are comfortable and that we've found a way to carry things that works for us both. I engage her in conversation with the other children at first so that she at least starts out at the front, and then instead of talking exclusively to the other mums I talk with her and with them, keeping her with us mentally and emotionally. When I feel her starting to tire we have mini races to the next point and she wins at least a couple and together we get there.

In our classrooms and in our schools we have to have the mindset where we won't let children fall behind - we plan for it, we engage with them, we traverse the landscape with them. We don't shortcut and we do expect them to do the full journey alone but we do whatever it takes to ensure that they have the support for the journey for themselves. It comes from a deep understanding of them as individuals - whether competition piques their interest or what makes them tick - and our best hope for their outcomes is that they cross the line at the same time as their peers, wearing their successes and taking their places on the podium as they ought.



When schools do this, led from the top and steeped in professional learning at all levels, the culture grows up around the students and the staff see disadvantaged students doing better - and that is certainly our experience in the CLF.

“led from the top and steeped in professional learning at all levels”

Where we are successful, we know that a disadvantage strategy is not about trying to give disadvantaged children all that their more advantaged peers have experienced; there is not enough time, it is physically impossible and it is not what they need. Being intentional about creating as many benevolent childhood experiences in and beyond school is possible and important - but we must recognise that this is not the same as levelling up life experience in general. Instead we have to recognise the difference, begin to understand what it means to live the difference, and tailor *all* our approaches to *everything we do* in order to make the difference for disadvantaged children so that *all children* get an exceptional educational experience.

We should think more deeply about curriculum: to consider that which is most leveraging - we need to **dip down and up through the curriculum to create the structure to learning, judiciously selecting knowledge**

“Make fewer assumptions about what children do and don’t know”

that is highly relevant, that reinforces or exposes the leveraging concepts, avoiding duplication, unnecessary noise and the stacking up of pub quiz knowledge. Instead we are seeking the most direct learning paths in order to support children to orientate, understand and thrive in their future. In terms of pedagogy we need to be consciously enabling schema to be built up and using stories to link ideas and to support children to build up their own picture of learning, and critically we must make fewer assumptions about what is and isn’t known - *we must use assessment to effectively find out what each child in our class does not know and teach them that* - from a point which they do securely know.

As simple as this sounds, this is all great learning is - and yet as teachers we fail to execute it well in classroom after classroom because we make assumptions about what children do and don’t know and teach to the room, rather than to the child. Precision is everything: **being picky and precise about language** both when we speak and write, and when our children do, and maintaining the highest expectations for all, being exacting and giving serious feedback for serious work - this is what helps **all children**, and in particular the most disadvantaged, to thrive. Being sure to **prioritise the disadvantaged child during questioning, assessment, feedback, class discussion, with just enough pressure to elicit graft and just enough support to ensure competence and confidence** - this is the skill of the teacher for whom disadvantaged learners thrive. Underpinning this there is an authenticity - “I’m asking you now not because we have a school policy to question disadvantaged students first, but because right now I know that you need me to ask you.” The shift in focus is subtle - the school may well have this policy and it may well be absolutely the right thing to do - but a child knows when they are being targeted because they ‘should be asked’ and when a teacher is asking them because it’s their learning need to be pressed. Remember, for many disadvantaged learners they are unlikely to self-promote and typically have less academic **resilience** and confidence than they might in other areas of life. For this reason, their need is to be asked, monitored closely, always with the expectation that they have the wherewithal to perform, to wrestle with the problem and arrive at the answer - and without the intentional, precise work of a skilled teacher, this need can easily go unmet.

The life experience of a more advantaged child is *typically* different and the feedback loop that shapes their view of the world is unswerving. From typically being more exposed to broad language in the first few months and years of life, to typically having tougher rules and greater structure within and beyond the home (and more experiences beyond the home that demand such rules and structure) to expectations around use of language, social norms, behaviours, manners - typically in more advantaged homes these are shaped, enforced and challenged in a way that aligns well with the current education system. Typically (although of course not exclusively) the feedback loop on these matters is less strong in homes of children who experience disadvantage and as such the parallel feedback loops in school are less imbued and can hold less potency. As teachers we need to first create the thirst for feedback and then provide the kind of feedback that makes the difference, that leaves students at once buoyed by a sense of achievement and keen to take on the next challenge in learning.

“Create the thirst for feedback and then provide the kind of feedback that makes the difference”

We know that more advantaged children, shaped by their life experiences, typically benefit from greater self-confidence and self-esteem and have a greater understanding of the world beyond their own daily experience - indeed, this is what makes them advantaged, in that they can *take advantage* of the opportunities presented to them in the world they move through. **They have more opportunity and cumulatively more tools to exploit each opportunity.** Our role as educationalists is to **increase the opportunities that disadvantaged children have wherever we can and equip them to make the most of each opportunity that is presented.** This is as much the work of the classroom teacher, the school leader, the form tutor and the leader of extra-curricular activity.



This is tough work and it takes a deepening insight, a growing knowledge base and a daily commitment to living out our calling through the eyes of disadvantaged children. It is immensely satisfying and at the same time it is *work*. As members of the Cabot Learning Federation, our **HEART** values are imbued in all that we do, and working to them with integrity is exacting. They drive us towards a better deal for the children and communities we serve, **so that daily we help children to 'trade up' on their futures.**

And even beyond this, **we need to go upstream.** We need to go as far back upstream in education as is possible to address disadvantage - because there is not enough time to reverse disadvantage and once it becomes 'baked in' it becomes inevitable and self-fulfilling.

As educators and leaders, we must have a twin track approach:

1. address disadvantage before us right now, for each child, in each decision that we make, meeting them where they are at, rather than where we want or estimate them to be
2. work daily to build the dam to stop the effects of disadvantage from accumulating both within and beyond school.

I realise that even the most brilliant teachers, leaders, schools and trusts will not be able to create the kind of societal change where the effects of disadvantage are eliminated. There are so many forces at play that create daily these inequities.

It will never stop us trying and that is the ambition and drive behind our 3-year Trust-wide disadvantage strategy.

I also know, from the experience of the children and adults in our own trust of schools, modest in scale and rich with values and purpose, that key differences can be made to the lives of children who would otherwise be failed by the system. We are not the policy makers, but there are moments where some of us can have influence - and we seize them. We are not the system, but we act within it - and we act positively. We are not consciously the creators of disadvantage, ***but we do make choices, minute by minute, which either confer that disadvantage or mitigate it. Let us be the people who individually make those minute by minute choices not to let disadvantage win over a child's future, so that collectively, consciously, together, we enable our disadvantaged children to write their own stories, to grasp and shape and wrestle with their own futures with all the hope and confidence and dignity we would want for our own.***



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