

GUEST COLUMN – June/ July 2023

Addressing disadvantage with small numbers of disadvantaged pupils

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- Getting the climate right through teacher agency, shared understanding, shared ambitions. Through building strong relationships, having high expectations. It may be even MORE important to be mindful of these issues where the majority of children are growing up in families with more stable, higher incomes.
- A risk of making presumptions about pupils' prior experiences, or the lives they are living may be higher. Some families may feel excluded if access to the other curriculum (formal and informal) is linked to social or financial capital. Be wary of social isolation of families. All school families, across the socio-economic spectrum, are part of efforts to ensure social inclusion.
- Ensuring that all staff, irrespective of roles, understand how low incomes impact on the school experience. Think of these families first, however few they may be, when making decisions or plans. See school life through the lens of low-income families, and those that may be less confident about having a voice in the school community. Where families may be less confident in advocating on behalf of their child, for many complex reasons, teachers and leaders need to advocate for the pupil.
- It is always important to remember that some families will always struggle to engage with school life. There are lots of complex, acute, or systemic reasons why this may be the case. It is NOT because those families are less well off. Avoid generalisations about families, or labelling pupils.
- Accurate assessment of need, based on the needs of individuals, provides useful information for teachers and leaders to ensure precise responses, rooted in early intervention. The earlier the intervention, the more likely pupils are to thrive in the school community. Strategies should focus on helping pupils be better learners. Assessments should help inform:
 - o Teaching and learning strategies
 - o Targeted academic support
 - o Personal development
 - o Pastoral care

- With more limited resources, working with other schools or agencies may be necessary around enrichment, pastoral care, expert input around key issues such as SEMH.
- Each are essential to ensure that disadvantaged pupils are experiencing meaningful success and thriving on a day-to-day basis. Be mindful, particularly with targeted academic support, about how pupils may perceive themselves, and how their peers may perceive them. Be wary of how families may perceive intervention. Always be clear and unequivocal about the why.
- Be wary of making presumption about prior knowledge, language and communication, friendships, learning behaviours, whether pupils are experiencing success in the classroom or wider school life. Pupils may well learn to mask and give the veneer of success, particularly around high performing peers. Ensure that disadvantaged pupils get at least equitable access to high quality, well trained, expert staff.
- Avoid targeted academic or pastoral support which is not aligned to the needs of pupils. This is particularly important when an adult may be an expert in a particular approach, but that approach is not tightly aligned with the needs of the pupil. This can be a risk with more limited finances in school.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of approaches based on the impact on pupils, not whether actions have taken place. Pupil and parent voice, about being included and experiencing success academically, and socially, is most helpful.
- Take care using percentages of pupils achieving a particular standard to measure success or otherwise. Ensure all assessment data, diagnostic and summative, is meaningful for teachers and leaders.
- See low pupil numbers as an opportunity, rather than a problem. Be an expert in pupils!

This is an extract from a major report launched this month.

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