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UNDERSTANDING LITERACY AND DISADVANTAGE

LM Learning Matters

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UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

A concern about discrepancies in educational outcomes between children from different social backgrounds is not new and can be traced back to the first major national report on the teaching of English – the Newbolt Report (1921). Newbolt observed that more privileged communities maintained 'schools and universities for the special treatment of their own sons and daughters' (p. 6) and recommended educating students from different backgrounds together as 'the way to bridge the social chasms which divide us' (p. 6). Some 30 years later, Floud et al. (1957) drew specific attention to the educational outcomes of working-class children, arguing that 'the education, attitudes and ambitions of parents were reflected in the examination performance of children' (p. 144). The same points were made in the 1960s by Douglas et al. (1968) who found that children from 'economically or culturally deprived homes… seemed to be saddled with a cumulative series of educational handicaps' (p. 3). Halsey et al.'s seminal study (1980) of the educational outcomes of students from different social classes found that middle- and upper-class students were significantly more likely to stay at school until age 16; to continue in education post-16; and to go to university. At the same time, new reports were highlighting new disparities in educational outcomes for students from ethnic minority groups (the Rampton Report, 1981; the Swann Report, 1985) and lower achievement by girls (Deem, 1980; Askew and Ross, 1988). More recently, research has drawn attention to the lower attainment of students in care (O'Higgins et al., 2015) and students with disabilities (Chatzitheochari and Platt, 2018). In a nutshell, students in the English education system who differ in some way from the mainstream majority seem predisposed to lower educational outcomes. And of these differences, as highlighted in the recent government report (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021), the outcomes for white working-class students have been stubbornly resistant to improvement.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

Before looking more closely at the data and explanations about social disadvantage, it is important to address some of the problems of language used and definitions of social disadvantage. Even in the opening paragraph, the quotations have used the expressions 'culturally deprived' and 'educational handicaps', which to modern ears seem inappropriate. The term 'working-class' is itself contested, with some feeling that it is a demeaning term. Vincent et al. (2008) note that for some, the term is 'a disrespectful, disreputable phrase' (p. 62), but others choose to use it because they see it as a positive group

identity marker, and it avoids 'a denial of working-class experiences, based on the false assumption that the viewpoints and perceptions of the middle classes are universal' (p. 63). Similarly, the phrase 'ethnic minority' or acronyms such as BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) can be reductionist, failing to recognise that students from the same ethnic backgrounds may also be different from each other in 'socio-economic status, religion and gender, amongst others' (Stevenson et al., 2019, p. 45). It is all too easy to unwittingly generate deficit discourses about students from different groups, with the result that the lower educational outcomes are positioned as a problem within the group, rather than as a societal problem.

Even the word 'disadvantage' is itself a contested term in the context of educational outcomes (Smit, 2012; Gazeley, 2019; Lampert et al., forthcoming). There is a strong argument that the standard educational discourse around disadvantage represents deficit thinking which can lead to stereotypical or biased attitudes towards socially disadvantaged students. In other words, a deficit discourse of disadvantage can sustain and reproduce the very inequality it sets out to address. A Dutch review of European research, for example, found that 'disadvantaged students are the target of more implicit negative attitudes as compared to advantaged students' (Geven et al., 2018, p. 35). The parallel debate about disability has relevance here: is the appropriate adjective for people with disability 'disabled' or 'differently abled', and for people from less advantaged backgrounds, 'disadvantaged' or 'differently advantaged'? Children and young people in school are conscious of being labelled 'disadvantaged', and this risks defining them, rather than a way to channel appropriate support. On the other hand, not to name it 'disadvantage' risks ignoring it or papering over the issue with euphemisms. Francis (2017) maintains that the use of the word 'disadvantage' 'forces schools to attend to materially benefitting those pupils from low SES backgrounds' (p. 100), and Bibby et al. (2017) argue that it is important to talk explicitly about disadvantage because the new generation of teachers may not 'have been exposed to a more economic, historical, spatialised or sociological account of the individual circumstances that present in their classrooms' (p. 198). With this in mind, we use the term 'social disadvantage' in this book to acknowledge and address the way children and young people from different backgrounds are differentially positioned within our educational system, and in using the term we hope to challenge both deficit discourses and social stereotyping.

There is a related definitional challenge in the research: the concept of social disadvantage in studies drawing attention to gaps in educational outcomes is explained and measured in different ways. Hartley and Platt note that 'social advantage and disadvantage are catch-all terms with no established definition' (2016, p. v), and, recognising that 'definitions of disadvantage vary across the literature', Crenna-Jennings suggests we should think about social disadvantage from three perspectives: 'income poverty… a lack of social and cultural capital… control over decisions that affect life outcomes' (Crenna-Jennings, 2018, p. 4). Similarly, Elliot Major (2020) highlights the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage, including poverty, instability, inequality and unemployment, and thus the corresponding complexity of addressing it. In some studies, the term 'socio-economic status' (SES) is used, rather than social disadvantage. For example, Strand (2021) measured SES by also considering parental occupation, parents' educational qualifications and family income. As Early et al. (2020) note, SES is a multi-dimensional construct.

Nonetheless, in England, the dominant way of defining social disadvantage is economic, focusing on financial poverty. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which has a mandate to commission studies that attempt to close the gap in educational outcomes attributable to social disadvantage, sees its role as breaking the connection between family financial circumstances and student attainment. In its 2018 report on the attainment gap, it states 'This report uses the broad term "disadvantage" to refer to those children and young people who face particular challenges because of the economic circumstances

they face when growing up' (EEF, 2018a, p. 1). In practice, this means that the significant majority of studies and government reports in England use Free School Meals (FSMs) status or Pupil Premium (PP) status as the proxy measure for social disadvantage (see, for example: Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Ofsted, 2013, 2016; House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, 2021; Andrews et al., 2016; Classick et al., 2021). Elliot Major (2020) draws attention to the limitations of using FSM as a proxy for 'white working class', not least because FSM is a binary measure, which does not 'reflect the gradations of disadvantage and advantage across pupil populations' (p. 2). The limitations of the FSM measure is acknowledged in many of the reports, but because they are data which are available for all state schools, it is easy to access and use for large-scale statistical analysis. The House of Commons Education Committee Report (HCEC, 2021, pp. 11–17) provides an excellent analysis of some of the challenges of defining social disadvantage and is well worth further reading.

In this book, however, we will be looking at social disadvantage from a broader perspective, drawing on Crenna-Jennings (2018) and Strand (2021) and considering not simply economic disadvantage, but also social and cultural differences, and parental education and support. The Ofsted report, *Unknown Children* (2016) argued that some schools had a too narrow view of disadvantage as economic, and that 'the most effective schools and settings visited had a much wider definition of disadvantage' which recognised 'the unique circumstances surrounding an individual child, group of children or family' (p. 10). It is also important to acknowledge that students are often socially disadvantaged by circumstances over which they have little control, and which frequently serve to perpetuate the advantage of other groups.

DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES LINKED TO SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

The effects of social disadvantage on life chances are pernicious and long-lasting. For example, children from families classed as disadvantaged have a shorter life expectancy and are more likely to suffer from health problems, including mental health issues (BMA, 2017). They are less likely to find graduate employment (Morrison, 2019), and they are also more likely to be unemployed and less likely to earn the same salaries in professional and managerial employment compared with their more socially advantaged peers (Friedman et al., 2017). Our principal interest here, however, is with the relationships between social disadvantage and educational outcomes in school: indeed, some of the deep-rooted inequalities in relation to later health and employment are themselves attributable to lower educational outcomes. Educational attainment is not simply about securing good examination results, but also about how those results shape and influence future life chances.

Gillborn and Mirza's study (2000) of inequalities in educational outcomes provides one of the most comprehensive analyses, considering the different outcomes of ethnic minority students, working-class students and girls, when compared with more advantaged groups. In terms of ethnicity, they avoid simply comparing the group of ethnic minority students with white British students and look instead at specific ethnic groups. They found significant differences according to the ethnic group: Indian students achieved more highly than white British students, while African-Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils are markedly less likely to attain five higher grade GCSEs than their white British counterparts (p. 12). Equally important, they point out that these national level data are not consistent across regional local

authorities, where some nationally low-achieving groups do very well. For example, in some local authorities, Pakistani students outperformed white British students. They also found 'a strong direct association between social class background and success in education: put simply, the higher a child's social class, the greater are their attainments on average' (p. 18) and draw attention to the interaction between ethnicity and social class in attainment patterns. In other words, you can be doubly disadvantaged by being both working-class and from an ethnic minority group. Nonetheless, their data lead them to conclude that 'social class factors do not override the influence of ethnic inequality: when comparing pupils with similar class backgrounds there are still marked inequalities of attainment between different ethnic groups' (p. 21). They also highlight that while there had been steadily rising examination results for all groups, the gaps in attainment between groups were not narrowing and indeed were growing wider for Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani students.

This study remains important because it provides a nuanced and critical analysis of the data: it does find a link between social disadvantage, in terms of ethnicity and social class, and educational outcomes. But it also highlights *within-group* differences, with some ethnic groups achieving above average, and regional differences which do not reflect national patterns. Crucially, they remind us not to simplistically attribute these gaps to home or social backgrounds and caution against the assumption that 'all (or most) of the reason for differences in attainment lie outside the school' (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000, p. 19). Instead, they note that ways of working in school may contribute to or exacerbate these differential outcomes for different groups: for example, the setting processes used, the quality of teaching and teacher expectations.

REFLECTION POINT

Read Gillborn and Mirza's report '*Educational Inequality: Mapping Race, Class and Gender*' (2000). Although some of the data patterns have altered since 2000, the way this report avoids simplistic reading of the data and looks at within-group as well as between-group differences remains highly relevant. In practice, this is a reminder that national data point to patterns, but these patterns may not be applicable to individual students you teach.

Since 2000, as political consciousness of the gaps in educational outcomes has grown, there have been a succession of reports analysing school test and examination results to monitor these differences and implement strategies intended to close the gap. Ofsted's *Unseen Children* report (2013) notes that at Key Stage 2 the gap between children with FSMs and their better-off peers had narrowed by 8 percentage points. Like Gillborn and Mirza (2000), they also found different outcomes for different ethnic groups: Indian and Chinese students were achieving higher than average; Bangladeshi and Black African at or above average; and only Pakistani and Black students attained below the average (Ofsted, 2013, p. 25). The GCSE results in 2019 point to similar patterns, with Chinese, Asian and Mixed groups attaining above the average and Black groups attaining below (DfE, 2020). As awareness of the risks of broad generalisations spread across large ethnic groups, research is increasingly examining outcomes in more granular detail: for example, identifying the lower educational outcomes of Gypsy/Roma students.

White British students are, of course, the ethnic majority in England and it is typically their performance against which other groups are compared. However, Ofsted highlighted the interaction of class and ethnicity, finding that white British students from disadvantaged backgrounds were 'consistently the lowest performing of all of the main ethnic groups and gaps in attainment to other groups have widened over time' (Ofsted, 2013, p. 29). While being white might be an educational advantage, being white and working-class is less so. More recently, this has been the source of increasing attention, partly because some of the gaps in ethnic minority attainment have been narrowing and partly because the group of white working-class students is numerically large and thus affecting the futures of many students. The House of Commons Education Committee report (HCEC, 2021) refers to white working-class students as the 'forgotten', and their analysis indicates that white students with FSM are less likely to achieve the Development Goals for 4- to 5-year-olds and less likely to access higher education than the average for all students with FSM. They also attain less well at GCSE, as measured by Attainment 8 score, than other peers with FSM (p. 3). A more rigorous study (Strand, 2021) which uses more complex measures to determine social disadvantage and analyses the statistics using regression modelling comes to a similar conclusion. The report observes that, nationally, ethnic minority students are more likely to be socially disadvantaged than the white British majority, but nonetheless:

> *the overwhelming picture is that ethnic minority groups have higher educational achievement at age 16 than White British students of the same sex and SES. This is particularly notable at low and average SES, where no ethnic minority groups have a significantly lower score than White British students, and indeed in 23 of the 32 comparisons the mean score for ethnic minority students is substantially higher than for comparable White British students*.
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> (Strand, 2021, p. 5)

In summary, then, performance data have consistently confirmed the close link between social disadvantage and educational outcomes. Indeed, Andrews et al. (2016) make the point that, in general, 'a disadvantaged pupil falls two months behind their peers for each year of their time at secondary school and, by the end of school, that disadvantaged pupil is almost two years behind' (p. 40). While this relationship is replicated internationally, the effect of disadvantage appears to be stronger in England than elsewhere. Hansen and Vignoles (2005) found that England has one of the strongest correlations in the OECD between social class and educational outcomes; a finding replicated in Knowles and Evans' study, which found that 'the impact of pupils' socio-economic background is significantly higher than the OECD average' (Knowles and Evans, 2012, p. 1). Analyses such as these led Cassen and Kingdon (2007, p. 1) to conclude that 'England ranks internationally among the countries with relatively high average educational achievement but also high inequality in achievement'. Worryingly, there are recent signs that the gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged students has stopped narrowing and in some cases is widening (Hutchinson et al., 2020, p. 9). The COVID pandemic appears to have intensified this increasing gap: although, overall, grade levels at GCSE and A level in 2021 are significantly higher than in previous years, the increase is principally in the already-advantaged groups. At GCSE, 'independent schools had the biggest increase in top grades – 61.2% of results at grade 7/A, compared with 26.1% in comprehensives, 28.1% in academies' (Long et al., 2021, n.p.). At the same time, students with FSM slipped further behind. A similar pattern is true at A level, with independent school students achieving 70% of their results at A* or A, compared with 39% in comprehensive schools (Coughlan, 2021a).

It is evident from school examination and assessment data that there is a very real problem with educational inequalities in England. But there is also a potential problem in how we respond to these data. It can lead to

deterministic attitudes or unconscious bias towards students from different groups, borne of an underlying belief that their social disadvantage means their educational outcomes are inevitable. It is important that this viewpoint is challenged. The data analyses draw on large-scale collated data, which are good at highlighting general differences between groups; however, these patterns may not be replicated within your school or even within your class. While the data can reveal 'big picture' *between-group* variation, they are not good at detecting *within-group* variation. Like Gillborn and Mirza (2000), Andrews et al. (2016) emphasise that national patterns of lower educational outcomes can be different in regional contexts. They cite the example of Newham, where socially disadvantaged five-year-olds achieve the same standards as five-year-olds without FSM nationally and conclude that this 'indicates the potential scope for dramatic improvements in narrowing the gaps across the rest of England' (Andrews et al., 2016, p. 6). Within-group variation, however, is not simply about regional variation – students are unique individuals, shaped by a unique constellation of experiences, and it is important 'to challenge the assumption that the white working class is one homogeneous cultural group' (Elliot Major, 2020, p. 1). Moreover, most of the studies using large datasets are *correlational*: that is, they identify a link between social disadvantage and educational outcomes. However, they are not *causal* and cannot tell us that social disadvantage causes poor educational outcomes. Nonetheless, national analyses of educational outcomes are important because they reveal hidden inequalities – but in your own settings, the data should be used to raise critical questions, provoke discussion and stimulate close analysis of the outcomes of students you teach. The data should not be the trigger for deficit discourses about social disadvantage nor a predictor of how students will attain.

Of course, knowing there is a problem is only the first step in achieving a solution to these inequalities in educational outcomes. In order to address these educational inequalities in your own professional practice, it is important to also understand the possible causes which create or exacerbate inequality. The next sections in this chapter look more closely at this, particularly at how the out-of-school home environment and the in-school practices might be contributory factors.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOME BACKGROUND AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Understanding how home background might influence or shape a child's learning experiences in school is crucial if we hope to make interventions which support learning. Crenna-Jennings (2018) conducted a systematic literature review to establish the key drivers of the 'disadvantage gap' and synthesised the research into four main categories, each with sub-categories, as represented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Key drivers of educational disadvantage: summarised from Crenna-Jennings (2018)

Main thematic category	**Sub-categories**
Inequalities in child development	Perinatal factors (affected by health inequalities) The physical and social home environment • The impact of material deprivation • Family stress and functioning • The home learning environment • Child-rearing strategies The role of community disadvantage

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Main thematic category	Sub-categories
Inequalities in school preparedness	Access to high-quality Early Years' education
Stressors experienced by disadvantaged children in school	Mobility (moving schools) Social psychological factors
Differential school practices	Teaching Unconscious bias Attainment grouping Curriculum

The table is helpful in foregrounding the complexity of the issue and the multiple ways in which inequality in educational outcomes might be shaped. Of her four key drivers, only one is directly related to home background (child development) and one indirectly, because access to high-quality Early Years' provision is strongly linked to where you live, with the most socially disadvantaged frequently having lesser access.

As noted earlier in this chapter, a dominant way of thinking about disadvantage is in terms of economic disadvantage, and it is very easy to understand how poverty might hamper progress in school. The increasing number of children living at or below the poverty line has risen since 2012, and about a third of all children in England are living in poverty (Social Mobility Commission [SMC], 2021, p. xvi). Living in poor housing, with limited resources, with insufficient food to eat and often also experiencing health inequalities may have a direct effect on a young learner's capacity to benefit from school (Connelly et al., 2014). To an extent, these are structural inequalities which are harder for schools to address, and yet many schools do attempt to do just that. Running breakfast clubs, organising uniform swap shops, hosting food banks and providing showering facilities are some examples of how schools try to help their students, making school a safe space to be. But poverty also directly affects learning in terms of access to books and other educational resources, digital access and additional support through extra tuition. More advantaged children come from homes better resourced to support learning, 'meaning pupils from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are less equipped for the school learning environment' (Early et al., 2020, p. 124).

The extent to which young children are equipped for the school learning environment is not only about financial resources, but crucially it is also about how the home environment and parenting prepare children for school. This includes both parenting practices in the home and the level of education of the parents, leading Field (2010, p. 38) to conclude that 'factors in the home environment, positive parenting, the home learning environment and parents' level of education' are most influential for later educational outcomes. However, Sylva et al.'s (2004) earlier research, involving more than 3,000 children, is important in cautioning against over-simplistic associations between home environment and school. They found that 'the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are' (p. 5). In particular, this issue of the home learning environment relates to language and literacy development and how this is fostered at home. From a synthesis of research, Hannon et al. (2020) identify four strands of literacy which are particularly important in the pre-school experience: the

exposure to print in the everyday social environment; experiences with books; oral language opportunities such as storytelling or rhymes, which develop phonological awareness; and talk about written language (p. 311). Siraj and Mayo (2014, p. 31) identify that practices, well aligned with Hannon's four strands, such as access to printed material, shared storybook reading, storytelling, mealtime talk and library visits, were more frequent and higher quality in higher SES families. The consequence of this is that young children arrive at pre-school or school settings differently prepared for the literacy demands of school.

What this highlights is that the relationship between the home environment and educational success is partly driven by economic disadvantage, but also by the nature of parenting and family life. This is important because many researchers emphasise that cultural and social differences between home and school explain why socially disadvantaged children have different educational outcomes from their more advantaged peers. Typically, this body of research refers to Bourdieu (1986) and his theory of social and cultural capital. Across society, different social groups have different forms of social and cultural capital, but those who have high SES and occupy positions of power, wealth and status have social and cultural capital which serves to reproduce and sustain that power and privilege. In other words, Bourdieu argued that an individual's social and cultural capital reproduces social inequalities, enabling those with powerful social and cultural capital to stay powerful and those without to remain less powerful. Precise definitions of social and cultural capital vary, but Table 1.2 offers a definition and some real educational examples of how some forms of capital might create educational advantage.

Table 1.2 Social and cultural capital

Term	Definition	Example
Social capital	This refers to the assets that an individual possesses, in terms of the social networks they can access to open doors and get things done; and the shared norms and values they share within a community.	• Having a friend who teaches Maths who can help your child's problems with Maths; • Knowing a lecturer at Oxford or Cambridge University who interviews students for entry, and can give your child a mock interview.
Cultural capital	This refers to the skills, knowledge, experiences and behaviours an individual possesses which enable them to access or belong to a particular group.	• Taking your children to the theatre; • Insisting on table manners; • Taking holidays which broaden cultural understanding; • Being able to help your child with their homework.

There is plenty of evidence of how the social and cultural capital of the privileged plays out into advantage for their children. Lareau's ethnographic study (2011) in the United States revealed how middle-class parents assertively intervened in their children's education, organising their children's time in activities of perceived educational value and being willing to challenge authority figures in school. In contrast, parents from lower SES backgrounds were much less interventionist and more likely to show dependency on the

school. Parents understand how to play the system to get their children to their school of choice; they pay for extra tuition for their children to ensure examination success; they actively help with homework and are confident advising on university choices (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). With the teacher assessment of GCSE and A level in 2021, 23% of parents with students in independent schools and 17% of parents in more affluent areas contacted schools about examination grades, compared with 11% in more disadvantaged areas (Coughlan, 2021b), with some concern that in some cases this constituted lobbying. This is not a uniquely British problem: Jæger and Møllegaard (2017) found that the effect of cultural capital on educational outcomes was stronger for students from high SES backgrounds, and they suggest this is because they are more likely to be in schools where they can convert their cultural capital into educational success. The capacity of middle-class parents to exercise cultural capital in their interactions with school is not mono-directional: Barg's study (2013) showed how teachers' decision-making and guidance to students is influenced by parental pressure. Indeed, Elliot Major and Machin (2018) argue that 'education has been commandeered by the middle classes to retain their advantage from one generation to the next' (p. 11), and it may be that social and cultural capital is one of the most powerful mechanisms explaining why more advantaged children achieve higher educational outcomes than others.

Sometimes, people talk about social and cultural capital as though it is something some students have and others do not, but everyone has their own social and cultural capital. Working-class learners, for example, do not *lack* capital, but they have *different* capital from other groups: the point is, however, that education is shaped by the interests and values of the more privileged groups in society and draws on their social and cultural capital, while at the same time, those with different social and cultural capital are marginalised. Reay (2017) suggests that classificatory indices such as social class, occupation and educational qualifications are only part of the story. What is most significant is understanding learners' experiences in school in terms of:

> *Confidence and entitlement in relation to education, the amount of knowledge and information about the school system that families have, the social networks that families have access to, wealth or lack of it; but also whether you come to school with a family history of educational success and recognition, or with a sense that education is not something you and your family are good at.*
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> (Reay, 2017, p. 180)

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCHOOL

Throughout this chapter so far, one reverberating message has been that although social disadvantage has its sources *outside* the school, what happens *inside* the school is critical in addressing inequalities in educational outcomes. This section of the chapter explores in more detail how schools make a difference. Gillborn and Mirza (2000) and Andrews et al. (2016), among others, draw attention to local variation where the achievements of socially disadvantaged groups exceed national results; and research on social and cultural capital explains how some parents play the school system to their advantage. In other words, coming from a socially disadvantaged background should not determine future educational success. Macleod et al. (2015) found that up to two-thirds of the variance between schools in terms of attainment of socially disadvantaged students is attributable to school-level characteristics, not home background. They conclude that although 'schools' intake and circumstance are influential … they do not totally determine pupils' outcomes. It therefore implies that schools have meaningful scope to make a difference'

(p. 6). From their data, they synthesised seven principles which embody successful professional practice for raising educational outcomes (Table 1.3):

Table 1.3 Macleod et al.'s principles of successful practice (2015, p. 4)

1. Promote an ethos of attainment for all pupils, rather than stereotyping disadvantaged pupils as a group with less potential to succeed.
2. Have an individualised approach to addressing barriers to learning and emotional support, at an early stage, rather than providing access to generic support and focusing on pupils nearing their end-of-key-stage assessments.
3. Focus on high-quality teaching first rather than on bolt-on strategies and activities outside school hours.
4. Focus on outcomes for individual pupils rather than on providing strategies.
5. Deploy the best staff to support disadvantaged pupils; develop skills and roles of teachers and teaching assistants rather than using additional staff who do not know the pupils well.
6. Make decisions based on data and respond to evidence, using frequent, rather than one-off assessment and decision points.
7. Have clear, responsive leadership: setting ever higher aspirations and devolving responsibility for raising attainment to all staff, rather than accepting low aspirations and variable performance.

One aspect of difference relates to school quality: it has long been observed that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend schools judged to be lower quality (Lupton, 2005; Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Jerrim and Sims, 2019). It is important not to accept this uncritically, however, as judgements of school quality are principally based on Ofsted inspection or school results, which may be insufficiently sensitive to the very real challenges for teachers and schools serving economically poor communities. At the same time, it may be all too easy to use a community environment of disadvantage as an excuse for what happens in school. The London Challenge was a government-funded initiative in the 2000s to raise educational outcomes through strengthening school leadership, making better use of data and focusing on teaching and learning through collaborative between-school support, and it was a significant success, raising educational outcomes for students of all backgrounds above the national average. The London Challenge is a pertinent reminder that background should not determine outcomes, and that schools can be significant in breaking the link between social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes. In an analysis of the characteristics of schools who were most effective in breaking this link, Ofsted found that these schools had 'a much wider definition of disadvantage' (2016, p. 10), aware not only of economic disadvantage but the broader issues which served to create disadvantage. This underlines the points made earlier in this chapter, noting that 'disadvantage' is not simply about financial poverty but includes social and cultural factors too.

Furthermore, a characteristic of our education system is that it is particularly segregated: Jenkins et al. (2006) point that we have 'a relatively high degree of social segregation in schools compared to other countries'. This plays out not only in terms of private and state schools but also in terms of local

variations, such as the presence of grammar schools or the way one school in an area attracts the more privileged families. Grammar schools are often thought to enhance social mobility, but in fact they are often strongly populated by more socio-economically advantaged students. Jerrim and Sims (2019) found that disadvantaged students had more limited access to grammar schools, and that family income, parental school preferences and private tuition were key factors in securing a grammar school place. While the issues of school quality and school segregation are complex, nonetheless, there is little doubt that schools can make a real difference, which buck national trends of attainment and enable socially disadvantaged students to achieve highly (Hutchings et al., 2014).

To an extent, however, the questions of school quality and school segregation are between-school differences. But there are important within-school segregation choices which can exacerbate the effects of disadvantage, the most salient of which is the use of 'ability' grouping, the setting of students in classes by attainment. This has always been a contested subject but, perhaps surprisingly given the prevalence of 'ability' grouping in practice, there has never been any clear evidence that setting provides any educational benefit: indeed 'the evidence suggests that overall these practices are not of significant benefit to attainment, with a negative impact for lower sets and streams – those wherein pupils from lower socio-economic groups are over-represented' (Francis et al., 2017, p. 3). From their systematic review of research on setting, Francis et al. identify seven reasons why the practice of setting leads to a negative impact on students designated to lower sets:

- misallocation to groups;
- lack of fluidity of groups;
- quality of teaching for different groups;
- teacher expectations of pupils;
- pedagogy, curriculum and assessment applied to different groups;
- pupil perception and experiences of 'ability' grouping, and impact on their learner identities;
- these different factors working together to cause a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Francis et al. (2017, p. 4).

It is important not to underestimate the relationship between setting, social disadvantage and educational outcomes. A doctoral study by Travers (2016) adopted a qualitative approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of a group of white working-class males who had 'succeeded against the odds' and were studying at elite universities. This group repeatedly referred to the negative impact of being placed in a low set, believing that their teachers did not expect them to succeed academically, and that white working-class boys were positioned as subordinate to more advantaged students. In a more recent study, Francis et al. (2020) examining the effects of setting on learner confidence found that the gap in self-confidence widened between students in the top and bottom sets for maths after being placed in attainment groups, and in English, self-confidence in the top set increased significantly. In summary, as Elliot Major and Higgins (2019) point out, socially disadvantaged students are more likely to be placed into lower sets, frequently missing out on the most effective teaching; and the more rigid the setting, the more divisive it is.

The issue of teacher expectations, mentioned by both Francis and Travers, has itself been a focus for research. The views of the men in Travers' study concerning low expectations in lower sets are confirmed more widely. For example, teachers demonstrate high expectations of top sets by giving them challenging, fast-paced work (Boaler et al., 2000) and more homework (Ireson and Hallam, 2001): in contrast, students in lower sets covered less of the curriculum and at a slower pace. The everyday argument in favour of setting is that teachers are better able to differentiate their teaching to meet learners' needs, yet Boaler et al. (2000) found teachers were more likely to differentiate effectively when teaching mixed-ability groups than when teaching setted groups. More generally, Barbarin and Aikens (2015) highlight that, in their study, teachers were more likely to have low expectations of low-SES children than others. There is also evidence of teacher unconscious bias in assessing students from different social groups. Burgess and Greaves (2013) found that teachers systematically under-graded some ethnic groups, while over-grading others, and suggest this is attributable to stereotyping of particular groups. Similarly, Malouff and Thorsteinsson (2016) revealed grading bias when teachers were given information about the students' backgrounds or prior attainment. As a consequence of these low expectations and biases, Barbarin and Aikens argue that schools 'may replicate the effects of economic disadvantage in the family' (2015, p. 103) rather than challenging it.

What this tells us is that what happens in our classrooms is important. Successive studies have shown that within-school variation in student outcomes is greater than between-school variation (Reynolds, 2007; Husbands and Pearce, 2012), and that although this is an international phenomenon (McGaw, 2008), England has greater variation than most countries. In other words, the differences between teachers in a school are greater than the differences between schools. There is some evidence that teaching quality is poorer in schools in disadvantaged areas (Malouff et al., 2016; Allen and Sims, 2018), but if this observation is at school level this may be less about teacher competence than the challenging circumstances those teachers face (Gore et al., 2021). However, within-school variation is harder to argue away on these grounds: if teachers working with the same students in the same school are achieving different educational outcomes, then as Hattie argues 'what teachers do matters' (Hattie, 2009, p. 23). And teachers may matter even more for socially disadvantaged students. The Sutton Trust (2011) observe that 'the effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds' (p. 2) – their data reveal that these learners can gain 1.5 years' worth of learning with an effective teacher compared with 0.5 with a less effective teacher, and they conclude 'for poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning' (p. 2). Of course, data like these need to be taken with a pinch of salt as they described generalised patterns, not the individual outcomes of students in your classroom. They may also be over-reliant on test data to determine teacher effectiveness.

So if the quality of teaching is crucial, and teachers can really make a difference to the inequality of educational outcomes for learners from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, the sixty-four-dollar question is – what makes some teachers more effective than others? Teacher effectiveness is a substantial research area and has been for some time, though not surprisingly given its inevitable complexity, there has been no definitive answer to this mega-question. In Table 1.4, the findings from three studies seeking to identify the characteristics of high-quality teaching have been summarised. All three drew principally on statistical data collated from across multiple studies, frequently linked to test results, but the Sharples et al. (2011) study also looked at the findings of some qualitative data and was focused explicitly on raising educational outcomes for socially disadvantaged students.

Table 1.4 Characteristics of effective teaching (summarised)

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Effective pedagogies:
• give serious consideration to pupil voice.
• depend on behaviour (what teachers do), knowledge and understanding (what teachers know) and beliefs (why teachers act as they do).
• involve clear thinking about longer term learning outcomes as well as short-term goals.
• build on pupils' prior learning and experience.
• involve scaffolding pupil learning.
• involve a range of techniques, including whole-class and structured group work, guided learning and individual activity.
• focus on developing higher order thinking and metacognition, and make good use of dialogue and questioning in order to do so.
• embed assessment for learning.
• are inclusive and take the diverse needs of a range of learners, as well as matters of student equity, into account.
(Husbands and Pearce, 2012, p. 3)</td></tr>
<tr><td>• the adoption of proven classroom management strategies (e.g. rapid pace of instruction, using all-pupil responses, developing a common language around discipline).
• the use of teaching strategies such as co-operative learning (structured group work), frequent assessment and meta-cognitive ('learning to learn') strategies.
• the use of interactive whiteboards and embedded multimedia with whole classes.
• the use of well-specified, well-supported and well-implemented programmes, incorporating extensive professional development.
(Sharples et al., 2011, p. 14)</td><td>• the importance of clear learning intentions
• a classroom environment that welcomes errors
• the challenge of the task
• effective feedback
• encouraging a sense of satisfaction, engagement and perseverance to succeed
(Hattie, 2009, p. 199)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2"><u>Conclusions from Qualitative Research</u>:
• rigorous monitoring and use of data
• raising pupil aspirations using engagement/aspiration programmes
• engaging parents (particularly hard-to-reach parents) and raising parental aspirations
• developing social and emotional competencies
• supporting school transitions
(Sharples et al., 2011, p. 14)</td></tr>
</table>

One thing that is missing from these syntheses of research findings on high-quality teaching is any reference to building constructive teacher–student relationships: this may be because they draw mainly on statistical datasets which may not naturally flag up relationships. Yet my own experience of teaching in an urban school with a high number of FSM students, principally white working-class, was that building a relationship with each student as an individual was a critical factor in creating a classroom climate where learning could flourish. There is a substantial body of research which confirms my own experience, signalling a link between positive teacher–student relationships and academic outcomes (e.g. Roorda et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2012; Hughes and Cao, 2017; Scales et al., 2020). The positive relationships in these studies revolve around caring attitudes with clear boundaries, warmth, avoidance of conflict, fostering 'can do' attitudes and knowing the student as an individual. Some of the research links the constructive teacher–student relationships with culturally responsive pedagogies which recognise and understand students' cultures and experiences outside of school and which bridge ethnic and cultural differences (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Phillippo, 2012). There is a consensus in this research that positive teacher–student relationships can build students' motivation and engagement, leading to better outcomes. Curiously, almost all these studies are from the United States, suggesting a need to explore this area in more depth in England.

REFLECTION POINT

Look closely at Table 1.4 and reflect on these questions:

- Are there any common characteristics being flagged in all three reports?
- What are the differences in the findings from the qualitative studies, and why might they be so different from the statistical studies?
- Reflect on yourself as a teacher – are there aspects of effective teaching which you feel are already part of your professional practice; and are there aspects which you might need to develop further?

CONCLUSION

In summary, then, the research demonstrates an unquestionable link between social disadvantage and educational outcomes: this link is evident in most countries around the world but is particularly strong in England. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a particular spotlight on social and health inequalities and how they affect students' educational outcomes and on educational inequalities. COVID has not caused these – they were already firmly rooted pre-pandemic, but COVID has brought them into sharp relief. The research also explains unequal educational outcomes in terms of the home environment, particularly economic poverty and social and cultural misalignments; and in terms of the school environment, how schools can replicate and sustain the inequalities or challenge them to change educational trajectories. It underlines the risks of treating different social groups as homogeneous, be they ethnic groups, gender or class, thus failing to recognise the multi-dimensional nature of advantage and disadvantage and the

uniqueness of individuals. Sociological research, in particular, also emphasises that the solution to this long-standing problem is not about making all students like 'successful' middle-class students, but to recognise and draw on the broader range of experiences, attitudes and perspectives of all students (Gewirtz, 2001; Elliot Major and Machin, 2018).

Following the success of the London Challenge initiative, Ofsted (2013) observed that 'material poverty is not in itself an insurmountable barrier to educational success. The significant improvements to London's schools and the outcomes for its pupils are evidence that disadvantaged pupils can achieve consistently well' (p. 16). If we, as teachers, are to tackle the pernicious connection between social disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes, we cannot simply locate the problem as outside the school, adopting 'deficit models where perceived shortcomings of the poor, rather than structural inequalities, are used to explain why children who live in economic disadvantage more often than not have poor educational outcomes. Negative stereotypes about impoverished children based on deficit assumptions can perpetuate inequality' (Ivinson et al., 2017, p. 9). At the same time, we cannot create a discourse which 'blames' teachers and gives them all the responsibility for challenging these structural inequalities. There are no quick fixes to this problem, or they would have been implemented years ago; there are no research studies which can tell you what steps to take to solve the problem; there are no super-teachers who have the problem cracked. But there are many individual teachers whose work building relationships supports learning and whose understanding of the learning and emotional needs of their students is indeed helping students to succeed against the odds. This is founded, not on a sense of teacher inadequacy, but on a sense of what is possible and why it matters, or as Dylan Wiliam put it: 'if we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they are not good enough but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve' (2019).