GUEST COLUMN - February 2021

Culture: Marc Rowland

An extract from 'Addressing Educational Disadvantage in Schools and Colleges: The Essex Way', published February 2021 by John Catt Educational

Pupil needs, not labels, should drive strategy.

Assessment, not assumptions, should drive activity.

The impact of disadvantage on learning is not static. It is a long-term process, not a moment or an event. Socioeconomic disadvantage may mean pupils:

- Feel like they are on the margins of discussions.

- Do not have the background knowledge to make connections with learning. Background knowledge binds learning together.

- Do not have the self-regulation skills (knowledge of self, knowledge of task, knowledge of strategies) to plan, monitor and evaluate their work.

- Have lower levels of oral language (a limiting factor on future attainment).

- Have a more limited vocabulary, or difficulties with language comprehension, making it difficult for them to access lessons and sequences of lessons across the curriculum.

- Have a negative perception of themselves as learners.

- Experience lower expectations through labelling (e.g. 'low ability' or 'Pupil Premium').

All of these things can impact on motivation, the beating heart of self-regulated learning. So, disadvantage in the classroom becomes self-fulfilling. It can also lead to a lowering of expectations from teachers: differentiating down or focusing on task completion, rather than planning for learning and participation through strong explanations and scaffolding up through modelling and worked examples.

These issues exist in pupils across the socioeconomic spectrum, but they are more likely to impact on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. They do not occur because of any label, but they may present to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds more often. It is important to focus relentlessly on the impact of disadvantage on learning. Some issues pupils face may be beyond the school's power to change. But it is possible to address the impact these issues have on learning, as well as pupils' sense of belonging at school and in the classroom.

For all of our pupils, but particularly those who are disadvantaged, the most effective approaches to tackling disadvantage are not about big interventions but countless small interactions, discussions and individual moments that create a sense of belonging for all. Self-esteem and pastoral approaches are about what happens inside and outside of the classroom.

Everyone in school should take responsibility for better outcomes for disadvantaged learners. It is vital that all staff understand:

- the issues being addressed
- how the school is addressing them
- the evidence to support that approach
- their role within that
- what success looks like.

The most effective strategies give teachers and other staff the capacity, expertise, knowledge and development to meet the needs of their pupils and improve them as learners. Teacher agency and buy-in are fundamental to success. They all complement one another, working together to support the development of a culture of inclusivity where pupils' needs are understood and assessment drives action.

Developing culture is a continuous process, not an event. It should not be thought of as something 'to be achieved'.

Addressing Educational Disadvantage in Schools and Colleges: The Essex Way Edited by Marc Rowland