

GUEST COLUMN – June 2024

Cavalcade

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A few months ago, as I was walking to a meeting in Westminster, I came across a police cordon blocking my route. As I contemplated how I would get to my destination, several police motorbikes came into view, headlights flashing. Close behind was a convoy of chauffeur-driven limousines, with more police escort bikes taking up the rear. The cavalcade swooshed past effortlessly and disappeared rapidly into the distance on the empty road.

The education journey of the advantaged is a bit like the passage of a VIP through London. They are provided with the equivalent of a cavalcade from the moment of their birth: love, warmth and milk; visual, physical and mental stimulation.

The parents of the well served seek out the best pre-school provider for their child. They read with their child at home and engage them in regular dialogic talk to extend their vocabulary. The knowledge and skills that the child has gained through this support ensure a smooth transition to school. They arrive in nursery toilet trained, able to dress themselves, do up buttons and tie their shoes laces, to recognise letters and words, to learn with and from others.

Through primary, the advantaged are helped at home with their reading fluency, spelling and times tables, supported with homework tasks, and given the resources to produce beautiful projects and artwork. If they experience friendship troubles or there are blips in the quality of education provided by their school, their parents have the confidence and articulacy to make representation to the head. They know how to secure a meeting with the SENDCO to discuss any emerging special educational needs. They take their child to museums, galleries, castles, the seaside and concerts. Weekends and holidays are filled with enriching experiences. And then, ahead of public tests, private tutors or tuition classes are arranged and practice papers sat.

Advantaged learners are highly likely to transition smoothly to secondary school, supported by key adults who ensure that they have a full set of uniform and equipment items and have been prepared thoroughly for the challenges ahead. They will have a quiet place to study at home, 24-hour-a-day access to the internet a device and a printer, an array of stationary items to help with organisation of their work and craft equipment for art assignments - the 'home advantage'.

As teenagers they will have access to field trips and enrichment activities. Showing sporting and/or musical skills after years of club membership, private lessons and coaching, they may well represent their school in sporting fixtures and/or play in the school orchestra. Often socially adept, articulate, self-assured and confident, they are likely to become leaders, councillors, prefects and school representatives.

The well-served are likely to benefit from informed parental advice and strong advocacy when it comes to GCSE options choices, exam tier entries, exam remarks and KS5 course decisions. Their family's network of connections will aid them in securing prestigious work experience placements which, in turn, will bolster their CVs and university applications.

I am not suggesting that every learner from a middle-class and affluent background has all of the advantages described in this illustration – and I recognise that there can be stresses and pressures experienced by children whose parents have high aspirations for them and who, on the surface, may seem to 'have it all'. However, many children have a lot of these privileges and travel through their educational journey smoothly as a result of the robust cavalcade around them.

Compare that with a learner whose parents cannot afford private tuition, music or sports lessons, a laptop, printer or Wi-Fi. Whose home is not stocked with a supply of coloured paper, highlighters, scissors, glue, and who does not have her own room or desk. Or whose home is a room in a bed-and-breakfast hotel, hostel or a caravan. Or a learner whose parents were underserved by school as learners themselves, who do not have the confidence to make representation on behalf of their child or the level of literacy/articulatory skills to put forward a persuasive case to the headteacher.

Or the learner whose parents have no time, or resource or capacity to help them at home with learning activities, to attend parent consultations or assemblies, to wash their uniform, to read and respond to communications from school, to provide money for trips and charity events, to assemble food ingredients and objects for show and tell.

Too many learners have absolutely no 'police escort' to surround them as they navigate their way through their 14-year education journey.

The cavalcade surrounding the advantaged allows them to perform at a high level in a range of disciplines at school and to catch the eye of teachers and leaders. This can result in them being labelled as 'highly able' or 'high aptitude'. But should it?

Would we describe the prime minister as gifted at moving around Central London at speed? Of course not. We appreciate that this is the work of the entourage around him.

When we watch a well-served pupil with an impressive top spin on the cricket pitch or a student perform a Chopin nocturne with technical flair, do we stop to ask 'What

would it take for my learners without that service at home to be supported so that they too shine?'

This is an extract from Chapter C in [*The A - Z of Diversity & Inclusion*](#) just published by John Catt.