

GUEST COLUMN – July/August 2025

Addressing Disadvantage Marc Rowland

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SCHOOLS WHERE DISADVANTAGED PUPILS ARE THRIVING?

I have had the privilege of visiting and working with leaders, teachers and pupils in schools where pupils facing disadvantage are thriving. The following themes seem to stand out:

- Commit to the principle that working with disadvantaged pupils is a privilege, not a problem to resolve.
- Coalesce a culture and belief that all pupils, irrespective of background or starting point, can attain well and thrive in wider school life.
- Understand low family income and its impact on opportunity, child development and health. Understand the impact of low family income on children inside school and out.
- Agree, as a school, that low family income should never be a barrier to opportunity in the classroom and wider school life. Family income should never be an obstacle to accessing all that school has to offer. Curriculum trips should never be inaccessible for these whose families cannot (or do not want to) pay. The impact is not just lost academic learning, but social exclusion.
- Never lower expectations based on a family's ability or capacity to support learning. Family capacity to support a child's education should not impact on our ambitions for pupils. If a parent is struggling to support the literacy development of a child at home (for lots of complex reasons), that pupil needs time, expertise and support in school.
- Pupils cannot be held accountable for parental decisions, and low family income may well mean that some families are just trying to get through every day, rather than thinking long term. (It is important that there is colour and joy within difficult lives. Joyful moments should not be the preserve of the better off.)
- Labels should not determine activity. Adopt a more nuanced, learning-led approach. We should focus activity on the learning needs of pupils, rather than their Pupil Premium (PP) eligibility or otherwise. This puts the ownership on the teacher. Furthermore, it avoids inadvertently isolating pupils, and there are lots of pupils in our education system growing up in low-income families that are not eligible for the PP. Nuance is key. Teacher agency is key.

FOCUS ON THE LEARNER, NOT THE LABEL

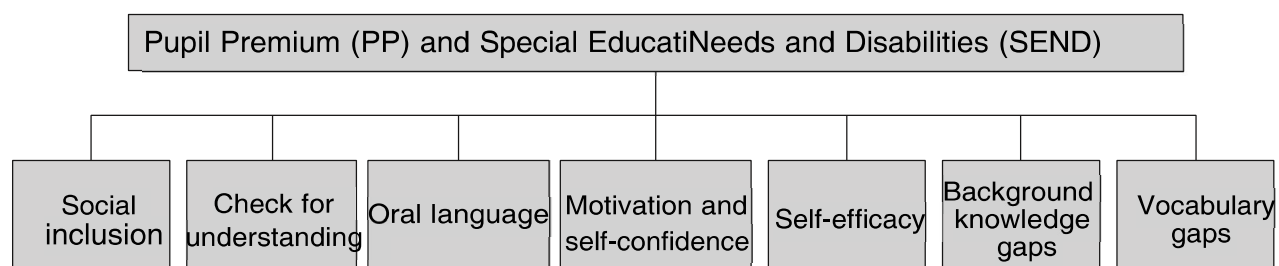
The models below set out how we can focus on the learner, rather than more performative, label-led approaches:

By focusing on pupils as individuals, we:

- empower teachers
- socially include pupils
- promote teacher agency
- are driven by needs first
- intervene to address underlying causes.

Overly focusing on labels such as PP means we:

- anonymise pupils
- create social isolation
- try to intervene to labels or symptoms
- remove teacher agency
- prioritise compliance.



The above is an extract from the newly published: [*The A-Z of Addressing Disadvantage*](#)