

# Speech: Education Secretary challenges misconceptions of disadvantage

Thank you very much, Charlotte [Pickles]. Thank you very much to Reform for hosting this morning. Your organisation has a long track record taking on the big issues in public policy.

This isn't in the strictest sense a scripted speech. I think it's probably fair to say that makes my brilliant civil servants a little nervous this morning, but I'll still ask them and you to bear with me for the next... Well, we never know exactly how long, but don't worry, it won't be too long.

I wanted to take the opportunity to draw together some of what we know now that we didn't know a relatively short time ago, about the nature of disadvantage in education and attainment, and then of course in what happens in later life. Why does this matter? Well, I don't think you would ask that question, because I think to everybody in this room it is self-evident that in public policy, in government, in what all the organisations represented here do, we should be constantly redoubling efforts to equalise the odds.

Because no child's prospects in life should be limited by the circumstances of their birth or who they were born to. They should have no limits other than the talents and the application that they themselves will put in.

There's also of course a hard-nosed economic argument. Because if we're going to have an economy that's operating at its maximum potential, which, of course, in turn is what allows us to afford the excellent public services that we all rely on, we do need every child to be able to fulfil absolutely their full potential.

So, this sort of thing will be familiar, I think, to you all. We know that obviously people have innate ability, but how that is able to translate into attainment in school and then what happens later, can get significantly affected both by the background, the circumstances they're born into and the experiences that they go through.

It goes without saying, by the way, that obviously you also need to put the work in at school. But I'm just taking that for granted. This is about the factors that we as individuals perhaps can't control. We know that the gaps in attainment, in development, actually start to appear from very early on in life. So, even in the early years the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged is something like four months of development. But it keeps on growing as you go through school.

By the end of Key Stage 4, in other words GCSE time, that gap is the equivalent of 19 months. We also know that the effects of what happens back here [during school years] actually still has an effect much later on. In research that we released last year we showed that the effect of being a child who is eligible for free school meals still shows up in the data, in

the workforce. So, still at age 27, you're materially less likely to be in good, sustained employment if you've been on free school meals than somebody who was not.

We also know that it can become something of a cycle. Because there's a multigenerational impact that then means if you haven't managed to, break out of that cycle then another generation also experiences some disadvantage coming through.

Charlotte mentioned this, and this is worth reflecting on. The gap between the rich and the poor has narrowed in this country. And this isn't something that's happened all over the world. It's not something natural or inevitable.

When Michael Gove first instituted the reforms that started in 2010, he was very clear all the way through that we as a government should always be measured on two sets of criteria. First, that we're raising the attainment overall. But secondly, that with everything we are also narrowing the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

And this is something very much to be celebrated. But of course, you'll have spotted that if you reduce the gap by 9% or 13%, the gap is still very large. Some of the things that I think would have helped this progress are things like the Pupil Premium, the Education Endowment Foundation. It's great to see Kevan [Collins] here today who has produced some of the guidance that's been given to schools on how to use that.

Also the two-year-old offer, ensuring that more disadvantaged children have the benefit of high-quality early years education. Sponsored academies, and free schools, and the general school improvement drive that we've had consistently through that time. And of course most of all, teachers. It is the people who run, who operate education. Who inspire the next generation, who have made it happen.

The problem we have right now is that although we've seen this great progress, although the gap has been narrowing, the pace has started to slow. So, if we're going to sustain the progress on narrowing the gap, we need to figure out what else we need to do. We need to think about what we need to do differently.

And that's really what today is about. It's about recognising the face of disadvantage; understanding more about aspects of disadvantage. It's about recognising how disadvantage may have changed in certain respects, or for certain groups. And it's also about understanding more about the scale of particular types of factors, and how they may have changed.

And then ultimately, of course, whatever you know about disadvantage, the question is, what are you going to do about it? Both within the school system and also because schools cannot do everything. We cannot expect them to do everything. It's a wider societal question of how the rest of society operates.

So, today, I'm going to particularly cover five areas associated with

disadvantage: Ethnicity, language, place, or in other words part of the country, the home environment and adversity in childhood. Some of those things you can think of as being more about the background of the child, more about where they've come from, and some of them are more about the experiences, the things that happen to that child during the course of their childhood. But actually, each of them has some elements typically of both.

I'm not going to cover absolutely everything about disadvantage, otherwise we really would be here a very long time this morning. But in particular, I want to mention two very important areas.

Mental health – we are more attentive today than ever before and we know that mental health problems can affect all sorts of young people. Of course, those in the most difficult circumstances are most likely to face this adversity. We've been doing quite a lot on mental health, both in terms of the Mental Health Green Paper, making sure that support networks will be available around schools, and Designated Mental Health Leads in schools. But also crucially, from an early age, through the new health education curriculum, we'll be talking about mental health. Including talking at quite a young age about some of the strategies that you can put in place on self-regulation, on trying to help cope with the difficulties that come along in life.

And you'll also have heard the Prime Minister speaking this morning about the announcement today on mental health including enhancing the content in initial teacher training about spotting the early signs of mental health difficulties.

And then of course, there's the whole area of SEND. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, which is in itself a huge and varied area in terms of the effect on children. It's not something I'm going to cover today, but it is something that we will be coming back to in a similar vein.

But it's worth saying that all of these things can interact with each other. Clearly, everybody has an ethnicity and they live somewhere, and sometimes the danger is that we spot something, which we think is to do with one of those factors, when actually it's to do with another. And they can easily be conflated.

It is also true that things can operate one on top of another. So, you can have a cumulative effect of different disadvantages. They don't quite work in a purely mathematical additive way, but they do concentrate the effects of each other. So, for example, later on when we talk about Children in Need, that is to say children who have need of the services of a social worker, many also have Special Educational Needs and are eligible for free school meals. That number of children adds up to 120,000.

So, the Prime Minister instituted the Race Disparity Audit, to ask some of those difficult questions and face up to what can be difficult and deeply uncomfortable answers, when we look at the different experiences of people of different ethnicities in our society. And part of that is about education.

Now, what do we see when we look at the experiences of people from different

ethnic groups? Some ethnic groups experience a below average experience and attainment pretty much across the board. So, if we talk about black Caribbean children, for example, they are more likely than white British children to be eligible for free school meals, and they are likely to statistically attain a lower level when it comes to GCSEs.

But for other groups, it can be more complex. This chart here shows the experience of black African children on average. Again, it's important to stress, on average. Because of course, in every ethnic group you have a wide distribution. But among black African children, you'll see that at primary and secondary school, compared to [the national average which includes] white British, they actually perform slightly better. Although, that reverses when you take other factors into account. And there's actually a significantly higher rate of black African children going into university than [the national average which includes] the white British population. But when they get there, they are less likely to complete with a top degree, a first or a 2:1. Later on in life, they're more likely to be in work but they're less likely to experience good earnings growth.

So, as I say, a complicated picture. When we talk about social mobility, or disadvantage, how often do we just focus on GCSE attainment and assume that everything else will follow? Or historically, and I've been guilty of this myself, said that, the ability to go to university can be the most life-changing opportunity. That can be true. But not if you don't finish university. So, we need to think about every stage along the way.

There is another group of children who we often mention, but sometimes just in passing. Which is white British children. Among the disadvantaged population the lowest performing group is white British children. This isn't among the population as a whole, but just among those who are classed as disadvantaged. Within that, you separate out the ethnicities and white British children are [among] the least likely to reach the expected level at reading and writing and mathematics, and make progress at secondary school.

If we talk about ethnicity, we tend to talk about all other ethnicities and then sometimes say, well, of course we mustn't forget this group of white British children. But then you convert the charts by volume and you realise that almost two thirds of the cohort of disadvantaged children are white British. So, if we are to really, really narrow the gap when it comes to the disadvantaged kids versus the rest, it is important to think about the places where there is a heavy concentration of white British children, as well as about the places where there are heavy concentrations of other ethnicities and those that are more diverse.

So, let me move onto language, and you might think that having English as an additional language is a disadvantage at school. In fact, ladies and gentlemen, children with English as an additional language perform slightly better when it comes to GCSEs. Not a huge amount and not in every subject, but about half a grade better on average across eight subjects. It's a slightly counterintuitive result. Let me explain this graph. Those who have very recently arrived do worse. But the longer you're in the system, the better you do. And in fact most of the gap is gone within three years. If

you've been here longer, you actually perform on par with or even slightly outperform the average.

And it's sometimes also thought that it's not good for the rest of the class if you have a number of kids with English as an additional language. But actually, that's not true either. The evidence shows there is no, disadvantage for other children in the class. In fact, there can be a slight advantage. But again, it's important to stress that pupils with English as an Additional Language is a large group, which covers a number of different types of circumstance, and clearly, as this chart shows, there is a huge difference between being a newly arrived refugee and being a child growing up in a multilingual household.

Now, I said at the start there is often an overlap between a number of these different factors, and I'm now going to talk about an important overlap between language and place. In this city, London, there is an extraordinary number of children who have English as an additional language.

In fact, of last year's Year 6, so in other words the kids who just started secondary school, in London 49% of them were classed as having English as an Additional Language. And that may be one of the reasons, but only one – and I'm going to say a number of times in the next few minutes that there are many, many reasons why performance in London is different – but that may be one of the reasons why London children do so much better than children elsewhere in the country.

This table charts the different stages of school: early years, infants, juniors, secondary and higher education, for those who go. It shows separately, for all children and for those eligible for free school meals, what the performance is for children in London compared to elsewhere.

You'll see that among pupils as a whole, actually in the early years and the infants there's not much difference really at all. They're performing on par. Then they start performing a bit better, and a bit better, and by the time you talk about entry to a selective university as opposed to a recruiting university, you're 1.5 times, 50% more likely to go if you're a child in London.

But it's among the disadvantaged, among those eligible for free school meals, where the really striking difference is. The gap's actually already there in nursery school and in infant school. And then it carries on growing as well, but the multiplicative effect is that by the time you talk about whether or not you're going to a selective university, a free school meals eligible child in London is twice as likely as a free school meals eligible child elsewhere.

What is different about London? I've said I was going to say this a number of times. Almost everything, actually. And that's one of the reasons why it's so difficult to ascribe exact causes to the effects that we see of these strong results. Families are different. Places are different. The work environment is different. What children walk past to go to school is different. Pretty much everything is different.

Some things aren't different, it's worth saying, and sometimes they are the things that people most naturally look to as being likely drivers of difference in performance. But let me give you an example of a couple of these things, which are different and might surprise people that have an effect.

First of all, tutoring. There's a very high proportion of children in London who have tutors, and by the way, before anyone says it, this didn't start in 2010. This is a long-standing phenomenon. Both that there are high levels of tutor usage in London and a gap between that level in London and the rest of the country.

Shorter distances. It may seem like a trite and obvious point. But in a city, which is much more concentrated than most of our country, it means that from a school choice perspective, for example, you've got that many more schools within a reasonable travel distance. Even if you compare, say, Lambeth with Manchester, there are twice as many schools within a one-mile radius in Lambeth, as there are in Manchester, and of course that ends up being important also later on in life.

There are also many more universities. The average travel to university is 59 miles. There are many, many more universities within 59 miles in this city than there are in most parts of the country. And in terms of work opportunities, the opportunities are that much greater. So, there are many, many possible explanations of why London outperforms the rest of the country. The one that is most often cited I'm going to suggest is not likely to be the biggest factor. The thing which is most often cited is a thing called the London Challenge, and for those of you in this room who worked on the London Challenge, let me be clear, I'm not dismissing the London Challenge. It was a very good thing to do and actually elements of it we have, shamelessly, borrowed for use elsewhere, for example in what we're now doing in the north east.

But the year that London started outperforming the rest of the country on GCSEs was the same year that the London Challenge started. So, in other words those kids had just been alive for 16 years, not under the London Challenge.

And, in fact we see, as I've shown on the previous slide, that the outperformance of London was also in primary school and indeed in early years, whereas as the London Challenge initially was only focussed on secondary.

There is some good news for the rest of the country of course as well on this, which is that the city effect doesn't seem to occur only in London. So, some of the things I was talking about, like distance for example, of course are also relevant elsewhere.

And, we find that if we look at cities, and this is new research that we're releasing today, disadvantaged kids in our bigger cities do better than in school settings elsewhere.

If we take Birmingham, for example: disadvantaged children in Birmingham will

have a stronger performance than, say, neighbouring boroughs, Solihull, Dudley and so on, as well as performing above the national average.

The performance of disadvantaged children in our biggest cities overall exceeds that in other types of areas. The north-south divide, ladies and gentlemen, I think there is still some truth to there being some differences on average in the north and south, but actually it's far too simplistic a concept, if we're to understand the complex makeup of the United Kingdom today.

There's another type of location, which we've had more focus on of late, and we now understand in greater detail: coastal areas, where people have long had a sort of suspicion that there is something endemic, which means that performance is lower on average. Again, there's a big spread that will be lower, among disadvantaged children in coastal areas and elsewhere.

And the new research that we've got demonstrates that that is indeed true. It's no coincidence that our Opportunity Areas Programme includes many coastal towns, like Blackpool and Hastings and Scarborough and the north coast.

One other area I want to touch on is the North East. This is relevant to the discussion about opportunity areas, because we've had some criticism that we didn't have any opportunity areas initially in the North East.

The reason for that is that nowhere in the North East fits the normal criteria that there isn't a sufficient proportion of very strongly performing schools, because actually there are loads of really, really strongly performing schools in the North East.

What's different about the North East is that at primary and indeed early years, there's a very, very heavy preponderance of very strongly performing schools, but at secondary, whilst there are a number of brilliant schools, as there are everywhere, it's a much, much lower preponderance.

What that means is that the outcomes for kids, by the time they get to 16, are lower than they are elsewhere. And then the progression on to college or on to university is lower as well. And so we introduced Opportunity North East specifically to look at that disparity between primary and secondary, to work on the transition from primary, secondary and to work with a number of secondary schools on school improvement.

There are great schools everywhere, as I've just said, this is a map of outstanding schools. In every single part of the country there are outstanding schools.

And it is worth just repeating, as everybody in this room knows well, that whatever we say about people's background, whatever is true about people's experiences, school can make a massive, massive difference, specifically the teachers within that school can make a massive, massive difference, but you do have to be there.

We completed an extended project looking at exclusions, and you'll be

familiar with the very important findings from Edward Timpson's report, and I want to thank him again for the extensive work he did.

But actually I think one of the most important findings, from my perspective, to come out of that was about all the children who were not in school, who have not been excluded. And actually it turns out that there are a lot more children not in school, than those who have been permanently excluded.

Now, that could be for many different reasons, but quite a few of them are unauthorised persistent absence, or what I call hyper-persistent absence. Hyper-persistent absence is when you're missing half of school.

Now the full amount includes others as well, including people who are away for medical reasons, for good reasons, but a significant proportion of that number are out of school unauthorised.

And I said, although we've got a lot of focus on the permanently excluded, we need to worry as much actually about these children, those who are on unauthorised absence, and particularly the vulnerabilities that they may then experience.

Okay, so we talked about place, there is another place that probably doesn't get quite enough attention, and that is the home. I mentioned right at the start that there could be a lot of overlap between different factors, and actually most factors, if we talk about ethnicity, most of the factors, in different performance, different attainment of groups of kids with different ethnicities, actually could be explained by other things, including the home.

And we know that the home learning environment, what parents do, is actually far more important than who the parents are. And we know that in the very earliest years, gaps appear in development, at even at age two and three, and about a fifth of the difference in development of cognitive ability, about a fifth, is to do with, parental engagement. This really matters, because, as I said at the start, you know, we know that gaps appear early, but we also know that they grow. And if we're serious about social mobility, if we're serious about narrowing that gap, then actually we have to pay attention to what happens in the very earliest years and we have the knowledge that what happens in the very earliest years actually happens mostly at home.

I had a conversation with Alan Milburn a few years ago, and I can't remember if I said it to him and he agreed or he said it to me and I agreed. I'm happy to credit Alan with the phrase, that home is the last taboo in public policy.

Because none of want to go there, nobody wants to be the politician that starts talking about 'you should do this and do that' or make it sound like they think they know better than a family. I don't want to be that person either.

But if we are serious about social mobility, we have to go there; we have to care about the home learning environment, because it is going to determine the futures of a lot of those children. And that is why we're putting in place a new programme, which isn't going to be patronising and lecturing, but

a new programme to help support parents.

And we know that overwhelmingly parents do want support. Nobody's born with a manual of how to bring up children. Parents want the hints and tips. And so we're introducing a new programme, which will come out next month to support parents.

We also know the effect the home environment has. We tend to talk about it for the very earliest years but actually it carries all the way through school and indeed beyond. If you take a child who has a combination of a lot of strife at home and parents being disengaged from their education, so not going to parents evening, not reading reports, these children's attainment is the equivalent of nine grades lower across eight GCSE subjects. And just to put that in perspective, that – the strife at home and disengaged parenting – is a bigger difference, than either being born into a low income household or being at a school rated less than good or outstanding.

So, the most, concentrated form of strife that children may experience when young is this one, Children in Need. It's not a phrase which is particularly well understood out there. Most people in this room will understand it, but let me just explain what in public policy terms Children in Need means.

These are children who are not children in care, they're living at home, but they do need the services of a social worker and they either have a Child Protection Plan or a Children in Need plan. And there are five times as many of them as there are Children in Care. Now, this is a group that is not that well understood. I don't get asked about them when I do media interviews, I don't answer Parliamentary questions about Children in Need. It is I'm afraid a cohort of children who in general public discourse are just not as well understood as, Children in Care or indeed children overall.

We understand Children in Care, or Looked after Children, have very poor outcomes, very poor attainment at school, compared to other children. Actually the truth is that this group, Children in Need, have outcomes which are almost as bad, I mean, very, very nearly as bad, but there are five times as many of them.

And, if you talk about children who've ever been in those circumstances, so they have needed a social worker at some point, that's 1.6 million children, or to put it in perspective, one in 10.

Now, in our Children in Need Review, we are looking at, or we have been looking at what more can be done to help and support those children, and I'll come onto that in a minute. As well as knowing that the attainment and the outcomes for Children in Need are very poor, we also know that those effects sustain.

So, even if you are not classed as a Child in Need at the time when you're doing your qualifications, you can still see that effect coming through. Overall if you've needed contact with a social worker at any time, since Year 5 in school, on average you score 20 grades lower across eight GCSEs.

It's quite an astonishing, gap. And as I say we've known, and it's widely understood, that for Children in Care, so the Looked after Children, there's a wide gap, but this doesn't get talked about nearly as much.

So, I said in our Children in Need Review, we're considering and putting forward, what more we need to do. The first thing we need to do is improve the visibility of this group of children. And that's true, both for individual schools and for the system as a whole.

In fact, schools in general will know about this group of children, those who are in need of a social worker, because of safeguarding arrangements. But we need to make sure that is true in every case, so that information is passed on when a child moves a school, for example. We also need to make sure that at a system wide level we are tracking the outcomes of these children overall. So, that as we carry on developing policy, we always have this group of children high in our minds. We also need them to be in school.

Now, I mentioned the absence persistence a moment ago, it probably isn't a great surprise to you to hear that Children in Need are considerably more likely to be persistently absent from school than other children.

And being in school is a key protective factor. It is not just about what you're learning, but the very fact of being there in school and being around other trusted adults, is very, very important for these children. And helping to reduce the likelihood that they fall prey to criminal or sexual exploitation.

So, we're going to do a couple of these, including changing the admissions code, so that when a Child in Need has to move schools, so for example in the case of domestic abuse, we're going to change the admissions code to help accelerate that process. And if one of these children is excluded from school, and we would hope that that is reduced, but if they do have to be excluded from school, we will make sure that their social worker is informed. We also need to continue to improve our knowledge of what works to help and support these children.

We mustn't lower our expectations to only expect so much, but actually, for these children, it's more important than anything that they, can do their very, very best, make the very, very most of their talents when they are at school.

And so, we need to learn what works with Looked after Children, Children in Care, for example the virtual school heads' approach, and see what learning we can derive from that, for this group as well.

To sum up, for the different groups that we have talked about ( ethnicity, English as an additional language, where you're growing up, the home environment and for some children the adverse experiences that happen in childhood), our understanding of what constitutes, what drives disadvantage is greater than it used to be. And we need to make sure we use that greater knowledge to best effect.

And there of course those many, many different levers, many different things that we can do to help minimise disadvantage, to help to continue to sustain the narrowing of that gap. One of them that I wanted to talk about very briefly just now is the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Pupil Premium.

And I think this has been a very, very important structural change that we made in education, not only the Pupil Premium but crucially the guidance that goes with it.

And today I thank EEF for publishing the new guidance on effective use of the Pupil Premium, which recommends a tiered approach. It starts with hiring brilliant teachers, because we know that, great teachers make the biggest difference to all children, but an even bigger difference to the most disadvantaged children.

And the second tier is about targeted interventions with particular children, groups of children, and third making sure they have access to the goods and extra curriculum opportunities as other children.

But there are many other things, as I say, that we have done, starting with the institution of the EEF, the increased entitlement to early years' education and particularly for disadvantaged two-year olds.

The Opportunity Areas, the virtual school heads for children in care, the changing accountability of the performance measures from the cliff edge, five or more GCSEs to the progress measure, which means that the progress and development of every child is counted.

And overall, what we have been doing, and many people actually who I see in this room have been in the forefront of, is school improvement, and making sure that we are impatient for there to be a brilliant education, not just for some kids in our country, but for all kids in our country, and the School Improvement Programme, along with free schools and academies, particularly sponsored academies, has been at the forefront of that.

There are a number of things which we're at a relatively early stage development, like Opportunity North East, that I mentioned, the careers strategy to make sure that all children have a broad view and a stretching view of what they can achieve in life.

Access and participation – whenever I hear that phrase, access and participation, I always want to insert another word, which is successful, there's no point in widening access, if people aren't finishing university, so access and successful participation of higher education. And the home learning environment, where actually it all starts, from that grounding that you get in the very earliest years at home and then that actually gets sustained through life as well. And there will be more to come in the future.

This set of levers may not end up being a fully comprehensive set, there may need to be other things that we do as well. Because until we have closed that gap, until we have ensured that every child can make the absolute fullest use

of their talents, there will always be more to do. Thank you.