

Briefing: Tackling the disadvantage gap during the Covid-19 crisis

April 2020

The problem

There is a well-documented attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children. A pupil is classed as disadvantaged by the Government if they have been eligible for free school meals within the five years before sitting GCSE exams or if they have been in care or adopted from care. In 2019, 26.5% (144,000) of pupils in state-funded schools at the end of key stage 4 were disadvantaged. Of these pupils, just a quarter achieved English and Maths at grades 9-5, compared to half of non-disadvantaged pupils. The disadvantage gap (as measured by the disadvantage gap index¹) was 3.70 in 2019 – 9% lower than in 2011, when it was 4.07. But it has risen slightly for the second year in a row, from 3.66 to 3.68 in 2017-18 and from 3.68 to 3.70 in 2018-19.

Without intervention, school closures are likely to widen the disadvantage gap further still. The annual “learning loss” experienced by pupils each summer is evidence for this. The vast majority of children decline academically over the long summer break, but for disadvantaged children the effect is particularly pronounced: evidence suggests that the summer holidays might account for almost two thirds of the attainment gap between rich and poor children at age 14.² Research from the Sutton Trust has already shown that by the start of this month, 34% of pupils had taken part in live or recorded online lessons, and that pupils from middle class homes are much more likely to have taken part (30% doing so at least once a day compared to 16% of working class pupils). At private schools, 51% of primary and 57% of secondary students have accessed online lessons every day, more than twice as likely as their counterparts in state schools.³

If schools re-open in May and shut as normal for the summer, children will have spent 16 weeks out of school since the start of the Covid-19 crisis by the time they go back in the autumn. If schools only return in September, it will have been 6 months. In his press conference at the weekend, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson shared his concerns about the impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds:

“I will do everything I can to make sure that no child, whatever their background, falls behind in their education as a result of coronavirus.”

This briefing sets out how this can be achieved – how schools can be supported to adapt to the “new normal” and improve access to meaningful educational opportunities for disadvantaged children in the weeks and months to come.

¹ The disadvantage gap index summarises the relative attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils. A gap of zero would indicate that disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils perform equally well.

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0907568218779130>

³ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

Which children could fall behind?

In the current crisis, disadvantaged children are at particular risk of falling behind their wealthier peers as they are more likely to:

- > Live in overcrowded and/or noisy homes, without a quiet space to learn. Before Coronavirus there were over 125,000 children living in temporary accommodation and around 90,000 families who are sofa-surfing in England.⁴
- > Be without adequate access to the internet. An estimated 60,000 children in the UK lack any internet connectivity at home, while 700,000 are in homes lacking any laptop, desktop or tablet.⁵ Many more children are living in homes where a device is shared, perhaps between parents who are trying to work from home or several siblings who need to do their homework as well as connect with friends online.
- > Have parents/carers who are less able to support their children to learn – they might be too busy working or caring for other children or family members, have low levels of literacy and numeracy themselves, be less confident helping their children or less motivated to do so. Wealthier parents might pay for private tuition over Skype or Zoom which low-income families won't be able to afford. Independent schools may have the capacity and facilities to offer a wider and more extensive curriculum online.

Although the Government's definition of disadvantage will capture many of the children affected by these issues, it will not capture them all – e.g. low-income families above the Universal Credit threshold, and therefore not in receipt of free school meals. Young carers, who may come under particular strain in the context of Covid-19, do not always qualify for free school meals either. None of these children – those classified by the Government as disadvantaged and these additional groups – necessarily fall under the Government's definition of vulnerable children, which includes children with social workers and children with EHCPs. The Government's focus so far has been on vulnerable children, which is good as some of these might be at risk of falling behind. But the wider group of children who are at risk of educational disadvantage during this time are being ignored.

Furthermore, school isn't just about providing children with an education. Some children will be disadvantaged in non-educational ways by school closures. For example, school provides a critical line of sight to vulnerable children, including those with social workers and children with SEND. It gives children opportunities to socialise and to access nutritious food, as well as physical activity, which is important for children without a park nearby.

⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cco-bleak-houses-report-august-2019.pdf>

⁵ https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/CDI-2019-report-11-18yrs.pdf

What needs to happen in the short-medium term

i. Reimagining school for children at risk of falling behind

Currently children of key workers and vulnerable children are able to attend school to enable their parents to work and to protect their welfare. The Government had expected for school attendance to be 20% - in reality, many fewer than expected are turning up. On Friday 17 April, while 60% of schools were open, only 0.9% of all pupils came to school. Only 1 in 20 vulnerable children – defined by the government as those with a social worker or an Education, Health and Care plan – went to school on that day. It should be noted that for many children Friday 17 April fell within the Easter holidays. However, for all children, including vulnerable children, there was a significant drop in attendance during the first week of lockdown.⁶

There needs to be a drive to increase attendance among vulnerable children to ensure that these children are properly safeguarded. This should involve much clearer messaging for children, parents/carers, social workers and teachers about the need for this and assurances about safety. Some schools have been very active in reaching out to parents of vulnerable children and encouraging them to send their children in, but others are doing very little of this.

But in addition to this drive, there is capacity for schools to serve a greater range of pupils than they currently are. Providing access for pupils who are at the greatest risk of falling behind educationally under current conditions will help minimise the impact of Covid-19 on the disadvantage gap.

One way of doing this would be to ask schools to invite the 20% of children in each year group whom they judge to be most at risk of falling behind back into school for one day a week (e.g., in a secondary school for example, 20% of Year 7s attend on Monday, 20% of Year 8s on Tuesday) etc. This would result in daily school attendance of around 4% in secondary schools - so still significantly lower than the numbers of children initially expected to be in school at this point.

Children invited back in should receive intensive tutoring designed to prevent them falling behind. So far it seems that schools are not struggling to maintain an adequate workforce, but if problems emerge as the situation evolves, staffing could be supplemented by inviting undergraduate students and retired teachers in to volunteer, as proposed by Scotland's Independent Commission on School Reform.⁷ Although it would be perhaps inadvisable to make attendance compulsory for this group, there should be a strong expectation that children attend. The scheme could be marketed to parents as something aspirational, giving their children access to something which is normally the preserve of wealthier families.

Schools would need to use their individual judgement about which children are most at risk of falling behind and should therefore be invited to attend school, with guidance from the Department for Education setting out groups to be considered,. It cannot simply be children on free school meals or children in care, as per the Government's definition of disadvantage, as in some parts of the country and in some schools this is the majority of children. Equally, it might not simply be those children who were in the bottom 20% academically prior to the lockdown, as some of these might have far better home working environments than others who were performing slightly better – for example, schools might worry more about a child who wasn't quite in the bottom 20% but who is living in a hostel without internet access, compared to a child who was in the bottom 20% but has their own room in a

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings>

⁷ <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/politics/scottish-politics/1220290/coronavirus-army-of-retired-teachers-and-students-could-prevent-disadvantaged-pupils-falling-further-behind-during-lockdown-think-tank-says/>

comfortable home. Schools should make decisions based on discussions with pupils and assessments of how far they have engaged with home learning so far (e.g. whether they have submitted any work). It might include children who were previously at risk of being excluded or who had high levels of absence.

As lockdown restrictions are lifted, the proportion of each year group invited back into school could increase from 20%, to 30%, to 40% and so on until schools are fully re-opened.

ii. Put social isolation measures into place

Although achieving a fully socially distanced school is most likely unachievable, particularly in primary schools, there are sensible precautions that can and should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission. These might include:

- > Keeping students in consistent classrooms.
- > Increasing spacing between students in classes as far as possible.
- > Staggering start and break times for children in different classrooms.
- > Staggering drop off and pick up times to avoid adults meeting at the school gates

Teachers and children would need to be provided with adequate PPE, particularly in settings where children are more vulnerable, such as special schools.

iii. An enhanced digital offer

Providing internet access

The internet is a critical means for children not in school to access education – not to mention a way of combatting boredom, physical inactivity, mental ill health and enabling children to keep in touch with friends and family members. But although we talk about today’s generation of children being the most connected ever, there are still significant numbers of kids with inadequate internet access at home. This is problematic enough in normal circumstances, but in the context of Covid-19 a good internet connection and a device is the difference between a child being able to continue in their education or not.

- > An estimated 60,000 children in the UK aged 11-18 do not have any form of internet connectivity at home.
- > A further 700,000 lack a desktop, laptop or tablet at home. Their only device might be a mobile phone. While some connectivity is better than none, these children are still very limited in what they can do online. Many websites and services cannot be properly accessed on a mobile, and downloading or uploading content can be extremely slow.
- > Even children with broadband and a laptop at home can be disadvantaged. This is particularly the case when devices are shared rather than personal to the child, giving them less time to study than their peers might have. Arguments about access to devices can cause tensions within the home.

Efforts to identify and connect children in the early stages of the crisis have been ad hoc and disorganised. Some LAs took matters into their own hands – e.g. Westminster children’s services

identified over 100 vulnerable families without computers and 28 without broadband. The council provided refurbished council laptops, modems and SIM cards to the families free of charge (they acquired discounted SIM cards from 3 Mobile and the council committed to meeting the cost).

This weekend, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced a centralised package of support for some children currently without internet access. Children with social workers, children leaving in care and disadvantaged pupils in year 10 will be equipped with a laptop or tablet where they currently lack a device. Children in these groups who do not have a mobile or broadband connection will be given a free 4G router to get them online.

While this is very welcome, excluding disadvantaged children in year groups other than year 10 risks creating a delayed increase in the disadvantage gap later on, when these children come to take their exams. All families with children should be connected to broadband and be given a suitable device (where they don't currently have these) during the pandemic, with priority given to families with secondary school aged children. Furthermore, these plans do not help families who only have mobile broadband, who share a single device, or whose device is old and poor quality.

The timeline for children receiving devices and internet connectivity under the Government's plans is unclear.

Schools to create a well-structured digital offer

It is not enough to give children access to the internet. They also need the right input from teachers if it is to become an effective educational tool.

Some real progress has been made on this front, with the launch of the National Oak Academy and BBC Bitesize Daily. The National Oak Academy is providing 180 filmed video lessons a week across a broad range of subjects for every year group from Reception through to Year 10. Bitesize Daily is offering daily broadcasts of 20 minute lessons, covering a different year group from age 5-14, delivered by personalities from across TV, sport and more. Additional content for children up to age 15, such as podcasts, practice tests and educational games, will be available through the Bitesize website and app.

But more will be needed to make sure that all children can make the most of these resources and that they are helping. Every child at risk of educational disadvantage who is not in school is going to need a structured plan for learning. This should include a lead teacher responsible for their education while they are not in school, a timetable, regular conversations with parents and carers, and mandatory work to be submitted and marked.

Parent support is also a vital component of supporting children's education, and some will need more help and encouragement than others. The EEF have highlighted evidence-based programmes which can make a difference – e.g. regular text messages which can prompt conversations about learning at home and provide parents with tips or information about their children's learning.⁸ The Government has issued its own guidance for parents on supporting children's learning from home.

Increasing awareness of online harms

It would be irresponsible to provide internet access to families without also giving them advice and support related to online harms. This is particularly important in families which have not previously had

⁸ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/chief-executives-letter-school-closures-the-disadvantage-gap-may-widen-but-there-are-practical-steps-we-can-take-to-minimise-it/>

internet access and where parents might be very limited in their knowledge of how to support and protect their children. When they are given a device or connection, families should also be given a booklet of resources of where to go for advice – for example, the Children’s Commissioner has produced digital safety and wellbeing kits for parents and children⁹ and organisations such as Parent Zone and Internet Matters provide support. Advice should also be given about the need to balance time online with time offline – the Children’s Commissioner’s Digital 5 A Day tool is a useful starting point for thinking about this.¹⁰

iv. Preparing children in years 6 and 11 for transitions

Children in years 6 and 11 would, if it wasn’t for the pandemic, currently be receiving important support preparing them for the next steps in their education.

For year 6s this would involve visits to their new school, meeting their future classmates and saying goodbye to their old ones. Planning needs to happen now for what can be done to replicate this experience if schools cannot fully re-open before the summer holidays. An important component might be for secondary school form tutors to arrange phone or video calls with children in their future form group to introduce themselves and answer any questions the child has about the school. Year 6 teachers should consider opportunities for children to celebrate their time at primary school and to say goodbye, virtually and to come back for an event after the lockdown is over, as well hear from children from their future school.

Year 11s are also a group at particular risk of falling behind at this time, without the structure they would usually be given at this point in the year. At this point normally, year 11s would have had multiple contacts to go to for advice, open days, access to careers guidance etc as they move into college. This is less of a problem for those going into school sixth form, or those with an idea of what they want to do, but those without a plan already in place could slip through the gaps – especially children in Alternative Provision, who may risk falling out of education or training. Careers guidance and support for this group needs to be provided. Headteachers say that some year 11s are already looking for work in supermarkets or in the gig economy, while in other schools (e.g. where they are going on to sixth form) they are being prepared for A-level classes.¹¹ Some of the key online resources that have been developed are only targeted at children up to year 10, missing out year 11s – such as the new Oak National Academy.

⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/coronavirus/digital-safety-and-wellbeing-kit/>

¹⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/our-work/digital/5-a-day/>

¹¹ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/coronavirus-concerns-as-school-pupils-seek-supermarket-jobs/>

What needs to happen in the medium-long term

i. Exam results for year 10s and 12s

GCSE and A Level results days are still set for August, as planned pre-Covid-19. This year's results will be based on teachers' recommendations. Teachers will recommend what grades students should be awarded, and also rank students within the grades – the ones most likely to achieve that grade at the top, and the weakest at the bottom. This will allow for a process of statistical moderation which may result in some pupils' grades changing. For example, if a pupil is predicted a D grade but was hoping to bump it up to a C in the exam, they might still be awarded a C grade if statistics show that half the pupils from the school got a C last year and the school thinks the pupil is in the top half of their class.

There are a number of concerns around the system:

- > Evidence had shown that the poorest students and black students receive lower A-level predictions than their more privileged peers, and often perform better than their predicted grades.¹²
- > Wealthier parents may be more likely to use sharp elbows to pressure schools into raising their children's assessment grades.
- > Fast-improving schools could miss out if their grades are mapped to those awarded before. Ofqual is still consulting on its model of standardisation that could take such circumstances into account.

There needs to be careful scrutiny of this system as it is developed. Furthermore, all children should have access to some form of appeal if they disagree with the grades they are given, with priority given to A Level students with university offers at stake.

ii. A strategy for the summer holidays

Children will need all the help they can get to catch up with their schooling and prepare for the next school year. This is likely to mean some additional work over the summer period which would require schools to be open in some form over the summer holidays. This could be thought of as an extension of the idea outlined above, with the 20% of children most at risk of falling behind continuing to attend for one day per week. As with the Easter holidays, a rota system for school staff could be put in place. As many teachers move jobs over the summer, thought would need to be given to how their contracts are amended.

In addition, children should be given a flexible, digital-based programme to help them learn over the summer, with a few dates set aside where children will be expected to submit some work. This programme would be specifically designed to help children catch up from the effects of full lockdown.

There is also potential for schools to make use of their space without increasing numbers of students in classrooms. All schools will have sports facilities and many have outdoor spaces such as sports pitches which are not being used but could be, to put on activities for children who don't have access to this type of stimulation at home. Activities could be run by external organisations which already run holiday clubs in schools. An adapted version of these programmes would guarantee that more children are

¹²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32412/11-1043-investigating-accuracy-predicted-a-level-grades.pdf

being fed each day and having some level of engagement with adults and other children, even if it isn't a full day of learning.

iii. Continual assessment to identify children who are falling behind, and providing support to enable them to catch up

The above outlines a strategy by which schools anticipate those at risk of falling behind and provide intensive support to prevent this in the short term. But even with the best of intentions, schools might not be able to accurately predict the children who are worst affected (as set out above, it is not necessarily the children who fall under the government's definition who will fare worst). Furthermore, the Covid-19 crisis will continue to be a situation that evolves, with the lifting and imposing of various restrictions over time. In this changing context, it is more important than ever that teachers are effective in regularly monitoring the attainment of their pupils and stepping in to provide support where necessary.

Monitoring attainment should not involve an increase in the number of exam-condition tests children are expected to complete, but can be based on classroom assessment. We know that children in the UK are already among the most stressed and examined in all of Europe. September will be a critically important time for schools to be identifying those children who fell behind in the complete lockdown.

Children who have fallen behind need to be provided with intensive support to address this – whether online or in the classroom. Government will need to make additional funding available for this – e.g. by increasing pupil premium funding or introducing a new Catch Up Premium,¹³ and requiring schools to demonstrate their systems for identifying which children most need help. This funding will need to be in place by the start of September, when schools will be dealing with the consequences of the full lockdown.

¹³<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/04/20/army-helpers-can-save-futures-vulnerable-children/>