In their own words: removing barriers for 'more able' disadvantaged students in secondary schools

Scoping Review

Institute for Social Justice
York St John University

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Executive summary

This scoping review highlights the need for change in addressing the systemic barriers faced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who demonstrate high potential in secondary education. By examining the support and identification of 'more able', disadvantaged students in secondary education, this report highlights the multifaceted challenges they face and the implications for educational practice and policy. The review synthesises existing materials to provide insights into the experiences of these students, emphasising the importance of understanding their unique needs and perspectives.

Our research questions for the review were:

1. What does the literature tell us about the evolution of language and research related to 'more able' and 'disadvantaged' secondary-school-aged students in the education systems in England and Wales over the last decade?
2. How do 'more able' disadvantaged students in secondary schools experience and perceive the barriers to their academic success?

Key findings indicate that 'more able' disadvantaged students often encounter barriers that hinder their academic success, including limited access to enrichment opportunities, teacher perspectives, and a lack of tailored support systems. The review underscores the necessity of prioritising student voices in the educational process, as their input can inform interventions and foster greater engagement in learning.

Education ought to be driven by the needs and potential of learners, not constrained by labels that often fail to capture the full scope of their abilities. While terminology like 'more able' is familiar to NACE member schools, its national usage is inconsistent and is sometimes used similarly to historic terms such as 'gifted and talented' which are often tied to prior attainment measures rather than recognising learners' full potential. This approach focuses too heavily on static labels, neglecting the need for teaching that fosters individualised educational journeys. It is critical to shift away from restrictive definitions of these terms and adopt a lexicon that empowers educators to create tailored, learner-focused pathways that reflect the unique strengths and challenges of each student. This report advocates for a reimagined educational landscape where the emphasis is on the learner, not the label.

The review identifies several critical implications for practice and policy:

1. **Rethinking Terminology and Identification**
   There is a need to continue to refine the language used to describe 'more able' students, moving towards inclusive terminology that reflects their potential. Whilst the term 'more able' is understood by organisations such as NACE to indicate broad, inclusive potential, elsewhere this term is sometimes understood as a static label. We must expand the understanding of the inclusive definition of these terms, focusing on individualised educational strategies that recognise the unique needs and abilities of all learners. Identification methods should incorporate socio-economic and cultural factors to ensure a more accurate understanding of each student's potential, going beyond conventional, quantitative measures that fail to account for a learner's context.

2. **Teacher Expectations and Professional Development**
   Teachers must be equipped with the skills to recognise, nurture, and support the potential of all learners, regardless of their background. Professional development should be prioritised to shift the focus from labels to learner-centric approaches that empower educators to foster engagement and high expectations for all students.

3. **Equitable Access to Support and Enrichment Opportunities**
   Schools must provide equitable access to support and enrichment activities, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Every student deserves access to challenging and engaging learning experiences. Tailored educational support must be designed to meet the diverse needs of these learners, ensuring that they are adequately challenged and supported in their educational journey.

4. **Valuing Student Voices**
   Future research and practice must prioritise the perspectives of 'more able' disadvantaged students, centring their experiences and needs in the development of educational strategies. Their voices provide critical insights into how best to support their learning and engagement. The educational process should reflect their needs, ensuring that interventions are informed by their lived experiences rather than imposed by top-down structures.

5. **Encouraging Parental/Carer and Community Involvement**
   Engaging parents/carers and local community organisations in the educational process substantially enhances support for learners by creating a network that extends beyond the classroom and fosters a collaborative approach to education. Engaging parents/carers and community organisations is essential for building a robust system that nurtures academic and personal development.

6. **Holistic Support for Emotional and Social Wellbeing**
   Addressing the emotional and social development of all learners, including those 'more able', must be a priority. This is not just about academic achievement but also fostering holistic well-being, which is essential for long-term success. Comprehensive programmes should be implemented to ensure that learners' emotional and social development needs are met alongside their academic development.

7. **Promoting Awareness of Educational Equity**
   There must be a fundamental shift towards understanding and addressing the structural inequities that disproportionately affect learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Educational equity must be a central concern for all educators, policymakers, and community members. Awareness and action are needed to dismantle the barriers that hinder these learners' success, as detailed in this report.

Call to action:
This review underscores the urgent need for a fundamental shift in how we approach education for 'more able' learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is imperative that we move away from outdated labels and focus on creating a learner-led system that champions personalised, equitable, and inclusive educational experiences. Every learner deserves the opportunity to thrive in an environment that challenges and nurtures them. We must act to remove systemic barriers, providing all learners with the support, enrichment, and recognition they need to succeed.

Introduction

The aim of this review is to synthesise the selected literature on the language and perceptions surrounding ‘more able’ and ‘disadvantaged’ students and examine how these students experience barriers to their academic success. By understanding these dynamics, the review aims to inform strategies and policies that can better support these students in secondary schools, helping to close achievement gaps and empower them to achieve their full potential.

Using Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) framework, this scoping review explores the academic and grey literature on ‘more able’ students and disadvantage in secondary education in England and Wales. It explores the barriers these learners face, the perceptions surrounding their potential, and the implications for educational practice and policy. In line with the growing commitment to educational equity, this review addresses two key research questions:

1. The evolution of language and research regarding ‘more able’ and ‘disadvantaged’ students in the last decade, and

2. The ways in which these students experience and perceive barriers to academic success.

Over the past decade, the terminology used to describe ‘more able’ and disadvantaged students has evolved. The shift from terms like ‘gifted and talented’ to ‘more able’, ‘exceptionally able’, and ‘higher attaining’ reflects efforts to create clearer identification criteria and more inclusive educational provision. Within organisations such as NACE, the term ‘more able’ is understood to indicate significant potential for high achievement and should create impetus for delivering high quality education to facilitate this potential. However, the term ‘more able’ is not universally well-understood. When used as a label, for example, ‘more able’ can ignore students’ potential ability and neglect the need for personalised, learner-centred approaches that focus on each student’s unique context and potential. This review highlights the need to move away from restrictive attainment-focused terminology and adopt language that promotes an education system where all students’ strengths and needs are recognised and nurtured.

The literature also highlights the unique barriers faced by ‘more able’ disadvantaged students. These students are often under-identified due to the reliance on standardised tests and prior attainment measures, which fail to account for socio-economic factors and barriers facing those learners from marginalised backgrounds. These students frequently encounter limited access to enrichment opportunities, lower teacher expectations, and socio-economic factors that influence both academic performance and overall life trajectories. ‘More able’ students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack access to resources and opportunities that could help foster their potential. Teacher biases and expectations, shaped by socio-economic status and ethnicity, can further hinder their progress. To support these learners, education must be reframed: it must be driven by their needs and potential, not by labels. Adaptive teaching practices, some forms of differentiated instruction, and equitable access to powerful knowledge within the curriculum, are essential for ensuring that all students have the resources they need to thrive, regardless of background.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by York St John University prior to commencement of the research. This scoping review is part of a collaborative project exploring education for ‘more able’ disadvantaged students undertaken by researchers at York St John University and partners at the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE), NextGenLeaders, and Penistone Grammar School.

Methods

This scoping review follows Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) well-established structured framework for scoping reviews (O’Flaherty and Phillips, 2015). Arksey and O’Malley (2005) develop five stages, which this project followed:

1. Identifying the research question(s)
2. Identifying relevant studies
3. Study selection
4. Charting the data
5. Collating, summarising, and reporting the results

Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) framework for scoping reviews primarily focuses on peer-reviewed academic literature. However, our approach is more expansive and incorporates grey literature, such as governmental reports, academic reports, and reports produced by reputable charities and third sector organisations. We have included this broader literature as this allows us to examine not only the academic knowledge, but also how the terms “‘more able’” and “disadvantage” are understood and applied in policy and practice within educational contexts. By engaging with both academic and grey literature, we aimed to capture a more comprehensive understanding of these terms, their implications, and how they influence educational strategies and outcomes. Accordingly, in this methods section we replace the term ‘study’ with ‘material’ to indicate our broader approach.

Identifying the research question(s)

Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) emphasise that identifying the research question is a critical initial step in conducting a scoping review as this guides the development of subsequent search strategies and the overall direction of the study. Accordingly, as a research group we carefully considered which aspects of the research question were most pertinent, ensuring we clearly identified defining parameters to balance breadth and manageability in the literature search. Our research questions were:

> What does the literature tell us about the evolution of language and research related to ‘more able’ and ‘disadvantaged’ secondary-school-aged students in the education systems in England and Wales over the last decade?
>
> How do ‘more able’ disadvantaged students in secondary schools experience and perceive the barriers to their academic success?

Identifying relevant material

Arksey and O’Malley (2005) develop a systematic approach to identifying relevant material for scoping reviews, including systematic searching of databases and reference lists to ensure the scoping review is as comprehensive as possible. This approach has been added to, reflecting evolving considerations including the increasing digitalisation of research (Micah, *et al.,* 2020), which we have adapted for this project. After consultation with a member of the academic librarian team at York St John University, we decided to use the British Education Index to search for academic studies which address the central research questions, supplementing this with the top 10 Google Scholar citations for each search. These databases were used to ensure breadth of material and that studies directly relevant to the context we were researching were identified. Our initial search terms included ‘more able’ + ’secondary education’, ‘gifted and talented’ + ‘secondary education’, ‘high achieving’ + ’secondary education’, ‘ability’ + ’secondary education’, ‘disadvantage’ + ‘more able’, ‘disadvantage’ + ’secondary education’, ‘disadvantage’ + ‘more able’ + ‘secondary education’, ‘disadvantage’ + ‘gifted and talented’, ‘disadvantage’ + ‘high achieving’, ‘disadvantage’ + ‘ability’, ‘socio-economic disadvantage’ + ’secondary education’, ‘immigration’ + ‘disadvantage’ + ’secondary education’, ‘intersectional disadvantage’ + ’secondary education’, ‘language’ + ‘disadvantage’ + ’secondary education’, ‘student perspectives’ + ‘more able’, ‘student perspectives’ + ‘gifted and talented’, ‘student perspectives’ + ‘high achieving’, and ‘student perspectives’ + ‘disadvantage’. These search terms were used to search the British Education Index and generated 271 potential studies. A further 83 potential studies were identified using the top 10 Google Scholar citations for each search.

We used Google search to identify relevant grey literature, searching with “.gov.uk” and “.ac.uk” to find governmental literature and reliable reports hosted on university websites. Our partners in NACE conducted initial research into relevant grey literature beyond this, and we built on this, searching through reference lists as recommended by Arksey and O’Malley (2005, p. 24), to find further relevant grey literature. By adopting this broad approach to our initial search for material, we aimed to ensure a comprehensive scoping review that allowed for a thorough mapping of the existing literature base. This resulted in 13 potential grey literature sources.

Material selection

The material selection process is a crucial step in the process of conducting a scoping review. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) emphasise the need for clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, which should be established based on the research question(s) and refined as the researchers become more familiar with the literature. Key aspects to focus on include the time period of research being used, the types of materials used, the focus of the materials used, and any other key characteristics identified by the research question(s). Following O'Flaherty and Phillips (2015) implementation of Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) method, we developed clear inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time period	2014 to 2024. To ensure we focused on up-to-date research we decided on a ten-year span as agreed with our NACE partners.	Material outside these dates.
Geographical location	Material focused on locations including/within England and Wales.	Material focused on other locations.
Types of materials	Peer-reviewed academic literature: • Articles published in peer reviewed journals. • Chapters in edited books. • Academic books. Grey literature: • Reports from reputable educational and social justice charities. • Reports from governmental bodies – such as the Department for Education and Ofsted. • Reports from experts, hosted on University websites.	All other types of materials.
Material focus	Materials clearly focused on "'more able'" and/or "disadvantage" in education for 11–18-year-olds in England and Wales, and young people's perspectives on this. This includes material focused on these themes but using alternative language, such as "gifted and talented" for "'more able'".	Materials that only make reference to these themes in passing.

Our selection processes closely followed that of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), with adaptations due to the size and nature of our research group. Having found 354 potential academic studies and 13 potential grey literature sources, one researcher then applied the established criteria to all materials identified during the search focusing on the titles, abstracts, and key words of the academic sources, and titles, abstracts, and executive summaries or introductions of the grey literature sources. This resulted in 39 potential academic sources (including one PhD thesis and one academic book) and 9 grey literature materials. For those materials where it was not clear as to whether they matched our search criteria, one researcher then applied the established criteria to the full text of these sources. This process resulted in 16 peer-reviewed academic sources, 1 PhD thesis, 1 academic book, and 7 grey literature sources that matched the established criteria. This process was subsequently reviewed by two other researchers on the team. This systematic approach, developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), ensured the consistency in our decision-making and helped to maintain the integrity of the scoping review process.

In addition to these materials, we undertook manual citation list searches for the academic materials and applied the same search criteria, resulting in a further 6 journal articles and edited book chapters, bringing the total to 23. After this process, we reviewed our set of materials with the whole research group, including our NACE partners, and discussed areas to search out additional materials in. This resulted in a further 5 academic articles and edited book chapters, one PhD thesis, and 4 grey literature sources being included. In total, we included 28 academic materials, 2 PhD theses, 1 academic book, and 11 grey literature materials.

Table 2. Chart of sifting process.

First search	• 354 academic studies and 13 grey literature sources identified as potentially relevant.
First filtering	• The established criteria were applied to all material focusing on the titles, abstracts, and key words of academic sources, and the title, abstracts, executive summaries or introduction of the grey literature sources. Any sources where relevance was not clear were kept in the pool of potential sources and sorted at the next stage. • This resulted in 39 academic sources and 9 grey literature materials that were potentially relevant.
Second filtering	• Where it was not clear if materials fit our search criteria from titles, abstracts, key words, executive summaries, or instruction sections, our criteria were then applied to the full text of these sources. • This process resulted in 16 peer-reviewed academic sources, 1 PhD thesis, 1 academic book, and 7 grey literature sources that matched the established criteria.
Manual citation list searches	• Manually searching the citation list for academic materials that matched the established criteria resulted in a further 6 journal articles and edited book chapters identified as matching our search criteria.
Research group consultation	• Review of the selected research materials with the wider research group resulted in a further 5 peer-reviewed academic sources, one PhD thesis, and 4 grey literature sources being identified.
Total	• In total, we identified 43 materials including 28 academic sources, 2 PhD theses, 1 academic book, and 11 grey literature materials as matching our criteria for inclusion.

Charting the data

This stage involved synthesising and interpreting the information gathered from the materials selected. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) explain that charting is akin to data extraction as used in systematic reviews, however it takes a broader narrative approach. They emphasise the importance of recording specific information from each study, which may include details such as author details, year of publication, location of study, methodology, significant findings or conclusions. Following this structured approach allowed for a comprehensive overview of the literature, facilitated comparison between different studies, and highlighted gaps in the literature. Based on this method, we charted our data in the table overleaf, presented according to year published, including a one-sentence summary, an overview of the methods used, and a narrative summary of the main findings and arguments including specific focus on our areas of interest ('more able', disadvantage, and student perspectives), for each source.

Table 3. Materials included.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
1. Cheng Yong Tan **Material title** Socioeconomic Status and Student Learning: Insights from an Umbrella Review **Year** 2024 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** An umbrella review focusing on comprehensively examining the complex relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and student learning outcomes. **Material design/ methods** Umbrella review methodology involving synthesising existing research, including 48 reviews that relate SES to student learning. Tan then undertook thematic analysis to elucidate different processes that mediate SES effects on learning outcomes, and a second-order meta-analysis to determine the effect size for the association between SES and students' learning outcomes, as well as moderating effects of variables.	Tan argues for an expanded conceptualization of SES, moving beyond a narrow focus on objective, individual attributes related to resource access. He advocates for a more comprehensive understanding that includes both objective and subjective evaluations, collective attributes, and emphasises the mobilisation of capital by students. This shift aims to adopt a more diverse and asset-based perspective of SES. Tan reports a mean SES effect size of r = 0.22, which is considered large in the context of educational benchmarks and expected achievement gains. This finding highlights the substantial impact of SES on student learning outcomes, although Tan also acknowledges the potential confounding effects of other demographic factors. Tan discusses the importance of identifying various mediating processes that influence how SES affects student learning. He also highlights the need to explore different variables that moderate the relationship between SES and learning outcomes, suggesting that an ecological perspective is necessary to fully understand these dynamics. For instance, the Family Stress Model suggests that low-SES families experiencing economic stress can negatively impact parenting practices, which can impact children's learning. Further, the Family Investment Model suggests that higher SES-families are more likely to invest resources (time, money, educational support) in their children's education (through e.g., access to educational materials, extracurricular activities, and enriched learning environments). Which can enhance learning outcomes for these children. Tan notes that SES effects may be confounded with other demographic factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, immigrant status, and neighbourhood characteristics, making it challenging to isolate the true impact of SES on learning outcomes. Tan highlights that the quality of the schools that students attend can moderate the effects of SES on learning outcomes. Schools in low-SES areas may have fewer resources, less experienced teachers, and lower overall academic performance, which can further disadvantage students from low-SES backgrounds. The findings imply that educational policies should comprehensively address multiple factors influencing low-SES students' learning outcomes. Tan emphasises the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach and instead focusing on enhancing access to educational opportunities, recognising the strengths of disadvantaged students, and addressing systemic inequalities related to poverty and classism.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
2. John Jerrim and Maria Palma Carvajal **Material title** What happens to bright 5-year-olds from poor backgrounds? Longitudinal evidence from the Millenium Cohort Study. **Year** 2024 (pre-print) **Material type** Research Report **Focus** Examining the developmental trajectories and challenges faced by high-achieving children from low-income backgrounds throughout childhood, particularly during the critical transition from primary to secondary school. **Material design/ methods** Longitudinal study using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) in the UK, which is a large-scale longitudinal study following a cohort of children born in the UK around the year 2000 and includes data on various aspects of children's development, such as cognitive skills, socio-emotional outcomes, and family background. Jerrim and Carvajal focused on those identified as bright 5-year-olds based on performance on standardised tests and tracked these children over time. They examined academic outcomes as well as broader measures on motivation, behaviour, mental health, and experiences of bullying.	Jerrim and Carvajal find that bright 5-year-olds from low-income families maintain their cognitive skills on par with their higher-income peers through the end of primary school, suggesting that early educational interventions may be effective in supporting these children in their formative years. A significant decline in attitudes towards school, behaviour, mental health, and academic achievement is found by Jerrim and Carvajal during the transition from primary to secondary school (ages 11 to 14) for those who were bright five-year-olds from low-income families. This period is identified as critical, where high achieving children from disadvantages backgrounds experience a sharp relative decline compared to their affluent peers. Jerrim and Carvajal explore various socio-emotional outcomes for high-achieving children from low-income backgrounds, recognising that academic success is not solely determined by cognitive skills but is also significantly influenced by emotional and social factors. They note that these children begin to lose motivation and can start to feel disillusioned with the education system, particularly if they perceive that their efforts are not recognised or rewarded in the same way as their more affluent peers. Jerrim and Carvajal also highlight that these children are more vulnerable to bullying and suggest this is due to their socio-economic status and academic success. They explore how bullying can impact self-esteem, social relationships, and overall school experience. Jerrim and Carvajal note that during primary school there are only modest differences in wellbeing outcomes for high-achieving children from low-income and high-income families, but that by the age of 14 there is a significant divergence (e.g. 0.3 standard deviations lower on the happiness scale, 0.45 standard deviations lower on the feelings scale, and 0.5 standard deviations lower on the self-esteem scale, p.17). Jerrim and Carvajal emphasise the limited evidence on effective interventions for disadvantaged high-attainers. They recommend that organisations conduct rapid evidence reviews to identify and evaluate policies and interventions that could support this group. Jerrim and Carvajal also call for further research to track how high-ability young people from both rich and poor backgrounds navigate the transition into adulthood, suggesting that more comprehensive data collection and analysis are needed to understand their long-term outcomes.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
3. Emma Simpson **Material title** Canary in the mine: what white working-class underachievement reveals about processes of marginalisation in English secondary education **Year** 2024 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** How systemic classism and racism within the English education system contributes to the marginalisation and underachievement of white working-class students, using their experience to highlight broader issues affecting all working class students. **Material design/ methods** Social constructivist design, with fieldwork conducted in three secondary schools, using focus groups of teachers and students, individual interviews with teachers, students and parents, and observations in lessons.	White working-class students, particularly those eligible for Free School Meals, experience a significant underachievement due to systemic classism and a lack of support within the education system. Academic pressures and financial cuts in schools lead to a narrow academic ethos that alienates working-class students and families. While white working-class students do not face racism, they still encounter unique challenges that can be understood in the broader context of class-based disadvantages. Simpson calls for changes at the policy level to reduce performance pressures on schools, enhance the social and emotional aspects of learning, and foster a more inclusive school environment. White working-class students quietly disengaged from their learning due to the pressures of the academic environment which prioritised exam results over engagement. Students expressed that teachers who built strong relationships with students enabled them to feel safe and engage actively in their learning.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
4. Derron Wallace **Material title** Academic profiling in Britain? Exploring Black youths' experiences of tracking in schools. **Year** 2024 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** The educational experiences of Black students in South London, highlighting how academic tracking based on perceived ability contributes to their segregation, stereotyping, and stigmatisation within the school system. **Material design/ methods** Qualitative approach with participant observation over eight months in a large state school, 24 focus group interviews with 120 Black students, 30 semi-structured individual interviews with Black students.	Wallace defines academic profiling as the persistent mischaracterisation of Black and other racially minoritised students based on past achievements and cultural stereotypes which significantly impacts their educational experiences. Practices like setting and streaming according to perceived ability leads to the concentration of Black students in lower-ranked classes, which stigmatises, stereotypes, and segregates them. Participants articulated that the regular placement of Black pupils in lower sets not only affected their education experiences but also influenced the perceptions of Black students in the middle and top sets, reinforcing a cycle of racialised and classed outcomes. Issues faced by Black students are not only the result of individual teacher biases but are embedded in the institutional arrangements and practices of the school which facilitate and legitimise academic profiling. Responses from students, teachers, and school leaders indicated a recognition of the racialised structural and cultural inequalities present in the school, emphasising a need to address this.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
5. Shaun D. Wilkinson and Dawn Penney **Material title** Students' preferences for setting and/or mixed- ability grouping in secondary school physical education in England. **Year** 2024 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** Exploring secondary school students' preferences for setting, mixed-ability grouping, or a combination of these approaches in physical education, while examining the implications of these preferences on their learning experiences and outcomes. **Material design/ methods** Online survey administered to secondary school students across England, using the Jisc Online Surveys platform – including multiple-choice and free-text questions. Demographic information, including gender, school year group, and self-identified ability level was also collected.	Wilkinson and Penney explain that while much of the existing research on ability grouping has concentrated on core subjects like mathematics, English, and science, this study aimed to highlight the importance of exploring grouping practices in PE. They emphasise the unique context of PE, where students' physical competencies and performances are publicly displayed, thus magnifying their experiences of success and failure. Wilkinson and Penney also sought to amplify student perspectives, which have been relatively underrepresented in the literature. By generating large-scale data on students' preferences for setting, mixed-ability grouping, or a combination of these approaches in PE, they aim to provide valuable insights into how students perceive and experience these grouping practices. A significant proportion of students expressed a preference for mixed-ability grouping in PE, valuing the opportunity to work with peers of varying skill levels. This preference was often linked to the benefits of collaboration, support, and social interaction that mixed-ability settings can provide. While many students preferred mixed-ability grouping, there was also a notable number who favoured setting, particularly those who felt that their physical abilities would be better matched with peers of similar skill levels. This preference was often associated with a desire for competitive environments where they could perform at their best. Wilkinson and Penney found that students' preferences were influenced by their experiences with current grouping practices in their schools. However, there was a recognition that students might not always be aware of the specific grouping practices used or may have different perceptions compared to teachers. Wilkinson and Penney's findings suggest that current grouping practices often reinforce a narrow definition of ability, primarily focused on physical skills and competitiveness. They advocate for a broader understanding of ability that includes cooperation, leadership, and social skills, which are often marginalised in PE pedagogy. They call for a critical examination of how ability is defined and assessed in educational settings. The study raises important questions about equity in educational practices, suggesting that mixed-ability grouping can promote a more inclusive environment by recognising a wider range of abilities. This perspective challenges traditional notions of ability grouping that may perpetuate inequities in learning opportunities. Wilkinson and Penney highlight the need for further research to explore the nuances of students' preferences and experiences with different grouping practices, including streaming and banding. This opens avenues for future studies to investigate how various grouping strategies can be implemented to better support diverse learners in PE and beyond.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
6. Carmel Conn, David Vittle Thomas, Cathryn Knight, Charlotte Greenway, and Lisa Formby **Material title** Learner experiences of low attainment groups in the context of a rights approach to education **Year** 2024 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** How a rights-based approach to education promotes inclusion, addresses ability hierarchies, and values the voices and well-being of all students. **Material design/ methods** Focus groups with learners in lower attaining groups, individual interviews with learners, and interviews with teachers and support staff.	Conn *et al.* highlight the ethical responsibility of researchers to engage with children as competent participants, ensuring their comfort and willingness to share their experiences. While learners in lower attaining groups expressed satisfaction with their group placements, the lack of movement between groups reinforced negative identities and ability hierarchies within schools. There was a lack of consensus among educators regarding the purpose and benefits of attainment grouping, with some viewing it as a means to address systemic issues, while others questioned its effectiveness. Some teachers felt this approach allows for focused instruction that can enhance learning outcomes for both higher and lower attaining students. However, there was significant scepticism among other educators with a concern that labelling practices involved in ascribing ability and setting can reinforce negative stereotypes and ability hierarchies, leading to a fixed mindset about learners' capabilities. Conn *et al.* emphasise the importance of a rights-based approach to education, advocating for the inclusion of learners' voices and experiences in discussions about educational practices and policies

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
7. Christine Farquharson, Sandra McNally and Imran Tahir **Material title** Education inequalities **Year** 2024 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** Examining the pervasive educational inequalities in England, their impact on life outcomes, and the role of the education system in both producing and potentially mitigating these disparities. **Material design/ methods** Mixed methods: statistical analysis of educational attainment and outcomes, literature reviews of existing studies on educational inequalities, and the examination of data from educational institutions and regulatory bodies to assess the distribution and effectiveness of teachers and the impact of educational policies on different demographic groups	Educational inequalities significantly affect life outcomes, including employment and health, making it crucial to understand and address these disparities. Socio-economic status, often measured by eligibility for free school meals, is a strong predictor of educational attainment, with substantial differences in outcomes based on family income. While free school meal eligibility is a useful indicator of disadvantage, Farquharson, McNally and Tahir argue that it does not capture the full spectrum of socio-economic inequalities, as there are significant differences in attainment among families within the same eligibility group. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, and geography also contribute to educational inequalities, but socio-economic status remains the most significant predictor. While girls have outperformed boys in educational attainment, particularly in recent years, this does not translate into equal outcomes in the labour market. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds often start with lower educational attainment compared to their white peers. However, these groups tend to make faster progress in education, leading to higher rates of A-levels and degrees among some ethnic minorities. Geographic location plays a significant role in educational outcomes, with disparities evident between urban and rural areas, as well as among different regions. There are notable differences in educational attainment between urban and rural areas. Urban areas often have a higher concentration of resources, including better-funded schools, more experienced teachers, and a wider range of extracurricular activities. In contrast, rural areas may face challenges such as limited school choices and fewer educational resources, which can hinder student performance. There are significant regional variations in educational attainment across different areas, particularly between London and other regions in England. One of the primary reasons for these regional disparities is the variation in funding allocated to schools. Schools in London often receive more funding, which can be used to enhance resources, hire qualified teachers, and provide additional support services for students. Effective school leadership is another critical factor. The level of community engagement and support can also influence educational outcomes. Areas with active parental involvement and community resources tend to create a more conducive environment for learning. In contrast, communities facing socio-economic challenges may have less capacity to support schools and students. These demographic factors do not operate in isolation. For instance, children from certain ethnic backgrounds may also belong to lower socio-economic groups, compounding their disadvantages. The intersectionality of these factors means that addressing educational inequalities requires a nuanced understanding of how they interact. Despite these influences, they conclude that socio-economic status remains the most significant predictor of educational attainment. Farquharson, McNally and Tahir call for targeted policy interventions to address these inequalities, particularly in light of the widening gaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
8. Philippa Elizabeth Buckingham **Material title** ‘More able’ pupils in non-selective secondary schools: a qualitative examination of teachers’ and pupils’ perceptions of progress. **Year** 2024 **Material type** PhD Thesis. **Focus** Critically examining the educational experiences and challenges faced by ‘more able’ pupils in non-selective secondary schools, exploring the implications pf policy, power dynamics, and the constructed nature of ability within the educational landscape. **Material design/ methods** Focus groups with pupils identified as ‘more able’ to centralise their voices and experiences, looking at the students’ perspectives on their educational journeys, challenges, and the support they receive. Semi-structured interviews with educational practitioners, including teachers and school leaders focusing on the educational provision for ‘more able’ learners. Focus groups and interviews were then analysed thematically.	Buckingham emphasises the necessity of centring the voices of ‘more able’ students in educational research. By engaging directly with their experiences, research should aim to uncover the nuances of their educational journeys and the challenges they face. Buckingham highlights that the identities and experiences of ‘more able’ students are shaped by their interactions within the educational environment, as well as by broader societal expectations. She underscores the importance of considering social context when discussing ability and educational outcomes. Buckingham advocates for more inclusive educational practices that genuinely consider the perspectives of both students and educators. She argues that a more nuanced understanding of ‘more able’ students can lead to better support and educational outcomes. Buckingham finds that despite their early academic promise, many ‘more able’ students do not reach their full potential in later educational stages. This underachievement is particularly pronounced among socio-economically disadvantaged groups, highlighting systemic inequalities in educational outcomes. Buckingham argues that educational policies often fail to provide the necessary support tailored to the needs of ‘more able’ students. This lack of personalised approaches can lead to disengagement and a failure to nurture their abilities effectively. Further, variations in teaching quality and curriculum delivery can affect the educational experiences of ‘more able’ students. Inconsistent approaches to teaching can hinder their ability to thrive academically. Buckingham highlights significant disparities in achievement based on socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity. ‘More able’ pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds face a “double disadvantage” (p. 18), grappling with both systemic challenges and the overall underperformance characteristic of their peers. The experiences of ‘more able’ pupils can also include social and emotional difficulties, such as feelings of isolation or pressure to perform. These challenges can impact their motivation and overall well-being. Buckingham points out that the metrics used to categorise ‘more able’ students may be flawed, potentially overlooking essential variables that contribute to their development. Current metrics and criteria used to identify ‘more able’ students often rely heavily on standardised assessments and test scores. These metrics may not capture the full range of abilities and potential that a student possesses. For instance, a student may excel in creative thinking or problem-solving but may not perform well on traditional tests, leading to their abilities being overlooked. This can lead to a narrow understanding of what it means to be ‘more able’ and how to support these students effectively. Further, the application of these metrics can vary widely between schools and educational systems, leading to inconsistencies in how ‘more able’ students are identified and supported. This inconsistency can create disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for students who may be equally capable but are assessed differently based on the context of their school. Buckingham emphasises that the metrics often do not account for contextual factors that influence a student’s performance, such as socio-economic background, access to resources, and emotional well-being. These factors can significantly impact a student’s ability to perform academically, yet they are frequently overlooked in traditional assessments. Buckingham acknowledges that the term ‘more able’ has evolved over time and is part of a broader discourse surrounding the identification of high-achieving students. She notes that different educational bodies, such as Ofsted, may use varying terms (e.g., ‘most able’), which can lead to confusion and inconsistency in how students are categorised and supported. Further, Buckingham highlights that the divergence in terminology signifies a larger issue within the educational system: the absence of a unified understanding and approach to identifying and supporting students who are considered ‘‘more able’.’ This inconsistency can complicate efforts to provide appropriate resources and interventions for these students.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
9. C. Owne Lo, Rachel C. Lin-Yang and Megan Chrostowski. **Material title** Giftedness as a framework of inclusive education. **Year** 2022 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** Re-examining practices in gifted education. **Material design/ methods** Conceptual framework and discussion.	Giftedness should not be seen as a static, person-based trait but rather a dynamic, process-based construct that applies to all students. This perspective emphasises that all learned can engage in a “gift-ed” process of personal growth. All individuals deserve opportunities to develop their personal strengths and achieve excellence, and so an egalitarian approach to education should be taken. There can be stigma attached to labels and so shifting to language such as “students with advanced learning needs” (p. 5) should be considered to promote a more inclusive discourse. They link the concept of giftedness to self-actualisation and suggest educational practices should encourage students to understand and realise their personal strengths and interests. The field of gifted education can contribute to general education by providing frameworks and strategies that support all learners.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
10. John Eaton **Material title** Moving from ‘differentiation’ to ‘adaptive teaching’ **Year** 2022 **Material type** Blog on the Education endowment Foundation website. **Focus** The transition from traditional differentiation methods in education to a more effective and responsive approach known as adaptive teaching, which better meets the diverse needs of students in the classroom. **Material design/ methods** Discussion based on personal reflections of the changes in educational approaches to adaptive teaching.	Adaptive teaching is an instructional approach that involves adjusting teaching methods, content, and strategies in response to the diverse needs and learning styles of students. It places emphasis on responsiveness, high expectations, formative assessment, and collaborative understanding. Eaton makes several criticisms of traditional differentiation methods, including: permanent in-class groupings, such as assigning students to a ‘bottom group’, can lead to a lowering of expectations for those students and that this approach may result in them receiving different tasks that do not challenge them appropriately, regardless of their specific needs or aptitude; overly complex differentiation strategies, such as providing multiple levels of tasks with different worksheets for every lesson, are not considered effective for the majority of pupils; and differentiated tasks that are not tailored to the actual learning needs of students can hinder progress. Adaptive teaching focuses on being responsive to real-time information about student learning and adjusting instruction accordingly, whereas traditional differentiation often involves pre-planned strategies that may not effectively address individual student needs. Adaptive teaching encourages ongoing adjustments to teaching methods and content based on formative assessments, promoting a dynamic learning environment. In contrast, differentiation can sometimes lead to fixed groupings and tasks that do not adapt to changing student needs. Adaptive teaching maintains high expectations for all students by ensuring that adaptations do not lower standards, while traditional differentiation may inadvertently lower expectations for certain groups of students by assigning them easier tasks. Adaptive teaching requires a collaborative approach among educators to develop a shared understanding of effective practices, whereas differentiation often relies on individual teacher interpretations and implementations of strategies.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
11. Patrick Yarker **Material title** Ability **Year** 2021 **Material type** Academic – edited book chapter. **Focus** The pervasive influence of fixed ability discourse in England's education system, highlighting how it shapes perceptions of learners and perpetuates social inequalities through deterministic thinking about student potential **Material design/ methods** Critical analysis of educational policies and practices related to ability labelling and grouping, drawing on historical context and contemporary examples to illustrate the persistence of fixed ability discourse.	Yarker argues that the discourse of "ability" (including "academically able", "high prior attainment" etc., p.107), in England's education system frames how learners are perceived, leading to a fixed mindset about student potential. This discourse promotes the idea that students have predetermined abilities that dictate their educational outcomes. This kind of terminology reinforces fixed ability thinking and contributes to a hierarchy among students, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion for those labelled as low ability or not fitting into these categories. This language perpetuates ableism by suggesting that certain students possess inherent, superior qualities while others do not, thereby marginalising those who are not classified as able. He critiques the deterministic nature of fixed ability thinking, arguing that it undermines the potential for growth and learning. Yarker emphasises that ability is not fixed and is influenced by various factors, including context and teaching practices. Yarker highlights how ability labelling and grouping contribute to social stratification within education, often mirroring existing social inequalities. He notes that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be placed in lower ability groups, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Yarker advocates for educational approaches that reject fixed ability labelling and instead view learners as capable of growth and development. He cites examples of teachers who challenge the fixed ability discourse and create more inclusive and empowering learning environments.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
12. Christabel Shepherd **Material title** 'More able' learners: key terminology and definitions **Year** 2021 **Material type** Blog post on NACE website **Focus** The need for clear, flexible, and shared definitions for identifying and supporting more and exceptionally able learners in schools to enhance educational provision and prevent misconceptions. **Material design/ methods** This blog references existing literature, such as governmental reports and Charity reports as well as other blogs.	Clear and shared definitions of terms related to 'more able' learners (such as "'more able'," "exceptionally able," and "higher attaining") are crucial for accurate identification and effective educational provision. The blog highlights the differences between terms like "gifted," "'more able'," and "exceptionally able," noting that "gifted" can be seen as elitist and is often replaced by "exceptionally able" for clarity. Schools should consider various criteria for identifying underachieving 'more able' learners, including prior attainment and learning behaviours that may not be reflected in formal assessments Providing unambiguous definitions helps prevent misconceptions and excessive labelling, ensuring that all stakeholders understand the terminology used. The blog suggests that schools limit the number of definitions used, avoid vague language, and ensure that definitions are clearly communicated in policies to support effective identification and provision for 'more able' learners. It warns against relying solely on outcome-driven definitions, using imprecise language, and including percentages in definitions, as these can lead to confusion and limit the identification of 'more able' learners. Engaging all stakeholders, including parents and staff, in the development and understanding of definitions is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment. A definition of "'more able'" learners should include potential for high attainment, relative ability, performance across curriculum areas, identification of exceptional abilities beyond standardised testing formats, consideration of underachievement due to various barriers.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
13. Sally Power, Nigel Newton and Chris Taylor **Material title** 'Successful futures' for all in Wales? The challenges of curriculum reform for addressing educational inequalities. **Year** 2020 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** Examining the implications of the transformative student-centred curriculum being developed in Wales for addressing educational inequalities and the challenges associated with its implementation. **Material design/ methods** Mixed methods – semi-structured interviews with 10 Pioneer Leads and 25 teachers from 10 schools serving economically disadvantaged communities, and 634 teachers across 81 Pioneer schools.	Successful implementation of the new curriculum in Wales hinges on teachers changing their pedagogical approaches with a significant majority of teachers indicating that extensive professional learning will be needed for this. The move towards greater flexibility in the curriculum may lead to differentiated educational provisions that, due to a less rigorous academic curriculum, could further limit access to powerful knowledge for disadvantaged students, exacerbating existing inequalities. The emphasis on areas like Health and Wellbeing, while beneficial in some respects, may lead to a de-emphasis on core academic subjects for disadvantaged students. This shift could result in these students missing out on essential academic content that is critical for their future pathways. There are concerns about the adequacy of resources needed to support the new curriculum, particularly in disadvantaged schools, which may struggle to implement the changes effectively. Without proper accountability measures and sufficient funding, the potential benefits of the new curriculum may not be realised, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
14. Daniel Mujis and Christian Bokhove **Material title** Metacognition and Self-Regulation: Evidence Review **Year** 2020 **Material type** Report for the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) **Focus** The importance of metacognition and self-regulation in education, examining their definitions, development, assessment, and the impact of interventions on student attainment, particularly among disadvantaged groups. **Material design/ methods** Literature review, synthesising findings from various studies, including cross-sectional studies that examine the relationship between metacognitive skills and academic performance. Notably, Mujis and Bokhove categorise the evidence used as moderate at best, indicating that while there is a significant relationship between metacognition/self-regulation and academic performance, the causal conclusions are difficult to establish due to the predominance of cross-sectional studies.	Mujis and Bokhove define metacognition as the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes, while self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in pursuit of goals. They suggest both are crucial for effective learning and academic success. The evidence base for metacognitive strategies is moderate, with many studies showing varying levels of effectiveness. Mujis and Bokhove note that traditional self-report measures, such as questionnaires, often lack reliability and validity, as they may not accurately reflect students' metacognitive behaviours during tasks. The report discusses various interventions aimed at enhancing metacognitive skills among students. For instance, the "Mind the Gap" project aimed to develop metacognitive strategies through workshops but showed no significant impact due to low parental participation. Other interventions, like ReflectED, provided extensive support and training for teachers, which was generally well-received but also faced challenges in implementation. The report emphasises that successful implementation of metacognitive strategies often requires a whole-school approach and adequate training for teachers. It notes that while some interventions showed positive effects, others struggled with poor implementation and teacher buy-in. Mujis and Bokhove argue that cognitive and metacognitive strategies are task-dependent and should be taught in concrete learning situations before being generalised to other contexts. This is particularly important for younger students. The report suggests that educators should focus on developing metacognitive skills through structured interventions, ongoing support, and practical applications in the classroom. It also emphasises the need for a balance between providing sufficient training and not overwhelming teachers with too much intensity. The report suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may exhibit lower levels of self-regulatory skills and metacognitive awareness compared to their more advantaged peers. This disparity could contribute to the achievement gap observed in educational outcomes. Mujis and Bokhove speculate that the lower attainment among disadvantaged students may stem from their deficiencies in using cognitive strategies, possibly due to a lack of knowledge on how to use these strategies, rather than a lack of cognitive strategies themselves. They argue that these students might not effectively apply the strategies they possess without additional guidance, which can hinder their academic performance. The report discusses the potential for metacognitive interventions to significantly aid underachieving students. By developing metacognitive skills, these students may improve their ability to regulate their learning processes, which could help close the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. While there is some evidence suggesting that disadvantaged groups benefit more from interventions aimed at improving self-regulatory skills, the research base on this topic is limited. The authors note that more robust studies are needed to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of such interventions for these groups

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
15. Philip Loft and Shadi Danechi **Material title** Support for ‘more able’ and talented children in schools (UK) **Year** 2020 **Material type** Briefing paper – House of Commons **Focus** Evaluating the support and provision for ‘more able’ and talented children in UK schools, highlighting the challenges, attainment gaps, and recommendations for improvement in educational practices. **Material design/ methods** Review of data from various evaluations, including Ofsted reports, on the effectiveness of support for ‘more able’ and talented children in schools. Comparisons of performance and recommendations based on findings from surveys and evaluations conducted by educational organisations and governmental bodies.	The report defines disadvantage primarily in terms of socio-economic factors, particularly free school meal eligibility. Disadvantaged high-achieving students often have lower ambitions compared to their more advantaged peers, even when they have similar academic achievements. Teaching at Key Stage 3 is often not adequately tailored to the needs of the most able students, leading to underachievement in over two-fifths of schools visited by Ofsted. There are significant disparities in the attainment of the most able students, particularly among those eligible for free school meals, with the most able disadvantaged students lagging significantly behind their more advantaged peers. Many schools do not effectively engage with families to help overcome cultural and financial barriers that hinder the most able students from pursuing higher education, especially at universities outside of their local area. Evaluations indicate that schools generally prioritise support for ‘more able’ pupils over ‘talented’ pupils, which may contribute to gaps in achievement. A combination of academic extension, cultural enrichment, personal development, and collaboration with parents and external organisations positively impacts the attainment of the most able disadvantaged students. The report recognises the complexity in identifying the “most able”, with underachievement often overlooked during primary education, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, indicating a need for netter identification methods.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
16. Becky Taylor, Becky Francis, Nicole Craig, Louise Archer, Jeremy Hodgen, Anna Mazenod, Antonia Tereshchenko and David Pepper **Material title** Why is it difficult for schools to establish equitable practices in allocating students to attainment ‘sets’? **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** The factors influencing and constraining equitable practices in the identification of ‘more able’ learners and the allocation of students to attainment sets in school. **Material design/ methods** Large-scale mixed-methods study including student and teacher surveys, teacher interviews, and student focus groups.	Participation in the “Best Practice in Setting” intervention led to some improvements in equitable practices, such as a reduction in the use of non-attainment factors for student allocation. However, many schools continued to rely on subjective and potentially biased information. Identifying ‘more able’ students is inconsistent due to the varied use of data among teachers for setting students, with some relying solely on KS2 test results while others incorporated multiple sources of information. Improvements in equitable practices are hindered by operational factors (like timetabling and finance) and teachers’ beliefs about student ability and progression, which can perpetuate inequitable practices.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
17. Antonina Tereshchenko, Becky Francis, Louise Archer, Jeremy Hodgen, Anna Mazenod, Becky Taylor, David Pepper and Mary-Claire Travers. **Material title** Learners' attitudes to mixed-attainment grouping: examining the views of students of high, middle and low attainment. **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The attitudes of students with varying levels of ability and attainment – high, middle, and low – towards mixed-attainment grouping in educational settings. **Material design/ methods** Group discussion and individual interviews with 89 students aged 11/12 (Year 7) from eight secondary schools practicing mixed-attainment grouping in mathematics and English.	Student's attitudes towards mixed-attainment grouping varied significantly based on their prior attainment levels. Higher-attaining students had a mix of positive and negative sentiments, middle-attaining students were also divided, and lower-attaining students were more positive about mixed-attainment grouping. Many high-attaining students appreciated mixed-attainment for promoting fairness and equality of opportunity for their lower-attaining peers. There were social benefits of mixed-attainment classes where students felt less isolated and more engaged in collaborative learning. Some high-attaining pupils were concerned about the potential for lower expectations and the challenges of working with peers who may not share the same level of academic motivation or ability. Some high-attaining students felt mixed-attainment classes could hinder their own learning progress due to the varying levels of engagement and capability and having to consequently work at a slower pace. Some high-attaining students felt they were entitled to have specialist treatment.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
18. Annemieke E. Smale-Jacobse, Anna Meijer, Michelle Helms-Lorenz and Ridwan Mualana. **Material title** Differentiated Instruction in Secondary Education: A Systematic Review of Research Evidence. **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** A systematic review of the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in enhancing academic achievement among secondary education students, highlighting its varied implementation and the need for further research to understand its impact across different student abilities and contexts. **Material design/ methods** A systematic review including the following steps: 1. Literature search for studies published 2006-2016 related to differentiated instruction in secondary education. 2. Selection criteria and screening – initially based on titles, key words, and abstracts, and then if potentially relevant the whole text was screened. The studies were analysed narratively to summarise their findings regarding the effects of differentiated instruction on student achievement, with attention to various operationalisations of the approach.	Smale-Jacobse *et al.* identified a scarcity of high-quality studies on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in secondary education, with only 12 studies from 14 papers meeting the inclusion criteria. The overall effect of differentiated instruction on student achievement was found to be moderate, comparable to findings from previous reviews. Smale-Jacobse *et al.* noted that the studies included various operationalisations of differentiated instruction, such as homogenous grouping, peer learning, and individualisation. In terms of homogenous grouping, whereby students are grouped based on similar ability levels, Smale-Jacobse *et al.* note that findings on effectiveness are not definitive. Some studies indicate benefits for all learners, whilst some studies suggest negative effects for low-achieving students. When this type of grouping is implemented flexibly and with appropriate instructional adjustments, homogenous grouping has the potential to positively influence student achievement (students must be able to move between groups based on their progress and needs). Smale-Jabose *et al.* suggest tiering as an operationalisation of differentiated instruction can be particularly effective in supporting low-achievement students. Tiering involves designing tasks that vary in complexity, allowing students to engage with the same content at different levels of difficulty. They note this operationalisation requires further research to understand its impact across different contexts and student populations. Smale-Jacobse *et al.* suggest that individualised instruction can be effective in enhancing student outcomes, however this varies depending on implementation and context. Individualised instruction focuses on tailoring learning experiences to meet the unique needs, interests, and readiness levels of each student. This can involve personalised learning plans, differentiated assignments, or varying the pace of instruction based on individual progress. This can be challenging to implement within a single classroom and requires extensive planning and resources. Smale-Jacobse *et al.* highlight the necessity for more research to explore how differentiated instruction can be effectively implemented, particularly in relation to the specific need of different student populations, such as academically gifted students. While differentiated instruction is intended to cater to diverse learning needs, there is limited empirical evidence regarding its specific effectiveness for high-ability or academically gifted students. Smale-Jacobse *et al.* noted an increase in literature regarding ICT applications for differentiated instruction, suggesting a growing interest in integrating technology into these educational practices.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
19. Paul Connolly, Becky Taylor, Becky Francis, Louise Archer, Jeremy Hodgen, Anna Mazenod and Antonina Tereshchenko **Material title** The misallocation of students to academic sets in maths: A study of secondary schools in England **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** Examining the misallocation of secondary school students to academic sets in mathematics, highlighting how factors such a prior attainment, gender, and ethnicity influence these placement decisions and contribute to educational inequalities. **Material design/ methods** Comparison of Key Stage 2 maths scores with set allocations in maths for 9,301 Year 7 students across 46 secondary schools in England. They also collected data on student characteristics including gender, ethnicity, and eligibility for free school meals, and then cross compared this data.	The study found that prior KS2 attainment significantly influenced set allocations. However, the extent to which schools exacerbate existing inequalities through their allocation practices was also a key focus, suggesting that schools play a role in reinforcing these disparities. Indeed, there is clear evidence of misallocation of students to maths sets based on social class, ethnicity, and gender. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds and certain ethnic groups were more likely to be placed in lower sets, despite their prior attainment levels. The findings indicated that boys were slightly more likely than girls to be allocated to top sets in maths, reflecting broader trends in educational attainment by gender. The research highlighted complex patterns regarding ethnicity, with certain groups (e.g., Black students) generally achieving lower scores in maths and being underrepresented in higher sets, while students of Chinese and Indian heritage tended to perform better. The paper argues for the need to address these misallocations through better practices in set allocation, emphasising the importance of considering students' prior attainment without allowing social class and ethnicity to unduly influence decisions.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
20. Sally Power, Mirain Rhys, Chris Taylor and Sam Waldron **Material title** How child-centred education favours some learners more than others **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** The implementation and effects of child-centred education in Wales, including improvements in wellbeing and attainment and the unequal nature of these benefits for disadvantaged students. **Material design/ methods** Mixed methods: surveys with principals, teachers, parents, and children. Analysis of existing administrative data. Interviews with policy-makers and teachers. Observations in classrooms in 51 schools, pre-schools and nursery schools.	Power *et al.* understand disadvantage primarily in socio-economic terms. Settings adhering closely to the principles of the Foundation Phase generally saw improvements in student progress and wellbeing. Despite overall positive outcomes, progress is not uniform; certain groups of children – particularly boys and those from disadvantaged backgrounds – appear to benefit less from the child-centred approach. Boys and disadvantaged students were found to make substantially less progress than their peers – up to 30% in English (p. 583). This new approach requires significant resources and schools in less advantaged areas often lack these resources, and as a result the educational experiences of disadvantaged children can be less enriching and supportive. There may be a cultural mismatch between child-centred learning and the cultural and social backgrounds of working-class children which may lead to disengagement and lower achievement if not carefully managed. To ensure the benefits of child-centred education ate equitably distributed, it is essential to address the factors that lead to uneven progress among different groups of pupils.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
21. Kaspar Burger **Material title** The socio-spatial dimension of educational inequality: A comparative European analysis **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The impact of social segregation within education systems on socioeconomic disparities in student achievement across European countries, using standardised international assessment data **Material design/ methods** Cross-national comparative approach using data from the Program for International Student Assessment. Used multilevel regression models to assess the relationship between social segregation within education systems and socio-economic disparities in educational achievement.	Burger understands social segregation in education systems as the uneven distribution of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds across schools. This segregation leads to disparities in the resources available to students, such as social, economic, and cultural capital, which are crucial for educational success. Burger emphasises that when students are highly segregated by socioeconomic origin, the resources that contribute to educational achievement become more unequally distributed, resulting in significant disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes. Burger notes that social segregation can be influenced by residential segregation, where schools in affluent areas attract more advantaged students, while those in less affluent areas serve more disadvantaged populations. This reciprocal relationship between school and housing markets exacerbates the clustering of students along social lines, ultimately strengthening the link between social origin and educational achievement. There is a relationship between the degree of social segregation in education systems and the extent of social inequality in student achievement. In more socially segregated systems, the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on student achievement are stronger, suggesting that segregation exacerbates disparities between disadvantaged and advantaged students. While Burger does not focus exclusively on the UK, he implies that the patterns observed in the UK reflect broader trends seen across Europe. The UK education system exhibits significant social segregation, which may contribute to persistent educational inequalities, similar to findings in other countries.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
22. Natasha Codiroli Mcmaster and Rose Cook **Material title** The contribution of intersectionality to quantitative research into educational inequalities **Year** 2019 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** The application of intersectionality in quantitative research to better understand and address educational inequalities by highlighting the complex interactions between various social identities and their impact on educational outcomes. **Material design/ methods** Mcmaster and Cook reference specific studies and datasets (e.g., the Millennium Cohort Study, Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England) to illustrate how intersectional analysis can be applied and the insights it can provide.	Despite historical perceptions of incompatibility between intersectionality and quantitative methods, there is a close fit between the two. The core aspects of intersectionality—multi-dimensionality and contextuality—can be effectively addressed through quantitative research approaches. This includes recognising how various social identities interact to influence educational outcomes. Mcmaster and Cook call for innovations in data collection to include more detailed aspects of social location and identity, which are crucial for intersectional analysis. They discuss several challenges associated with applying an intersectional approach in quantitative research, such as the limitations of predefined categories and the need for careful presentation and interpretation of results. Mcmaster and Cook provide several recommendations, including the need for researchers to engage deeply with intersectionality theory, develop empirically verifiable hypotheses, and pay attention to comparative and longitudinal aspects of intersectional inequalities. They stress the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance the richness of data available for analysis.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
23. David Egan, Dan Davies, Kieran Hodgkin and Susan Davis. **Material title** Transition from Primary to Secondary School and 'more able' and Talented (MAT) Disadvantaged Pupils: Evidence from South-east Wales. **Year** 2018 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The challenges and needs of 'more able' and talented (MAT) disadvantaged pupils during the transition from primary to secondary school in South-East Wales, highlighting the inadequacies of the education system in supporting these learners. **Material design/ methods** Mixed-method evaluation, including a three-phase data collection process: a quantitative online survey of schools, interviews with staff responsible for transition, and focus group interviews with MAT pupils in years 4, 6, and 7.	While schools recognised the importance of supporting 'more able' and Talented (MAT) disadvantaged pupils during the transition from primary to secondary school, there were significant gaps in the identification and communication of these pupils' needs. Clusters of schools tended to focus on either MAT or vulnerable learners, often overlooking those who fall into both categories. Effective information sharing between primary and secondary teachers was deemed essential for addressing individual strengths and needs, yet inconsistencies in practices were noted in identification of MAT learners and support during transition. Schools are increasingly recognising the importance of addressing social and emotional well-being alongside cognitive development to support all learners, including MAT students. A more integrated and comprehensive approach is necessary to ensure that MAT disadvantaged pupils receive the tailored support they require to thrive during this critical transition period. Effective strategies included: MAT transition activities such as STEM says to engage them in year 6 and early engagement programmes where MAT learners were introduced to the secondary school early as part of enhancement programmes. Individualised approaches can obscure the need for targeted support for MAT disadvantaged pupils. They focused on socio-economic disadvantage, family structure disadvantage, and eligibility for free school meals as proxies for disadvantages, but acknowledges the concept of disadvantage is complex and there may be a need to expand this.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
24. Louise Archer, Becky Francis, Sarah Miller, Becky Taylor, Antonina Tereshchenko, Anna Mazenod, David Pepper and Mary-Claire Travers **Material title** The symbolic violence of setting: A Bourdieusian analysis of mixed methods data on secondary students' views about setting. **Year** 2018 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article. **Focus** Examining the symbolic violence of setting in education, analysing student views on how ability grouping practices impact their experiences and perpetuate social inequalities. **Material design/ methods** Mixed methods approach, using survey data from 12,178 Year 7 students, conducting discussion groups and individual interviews with 33 students. Part of a larger project focusing on setting for socially disadvantaged young people.	The practice of setting in schools is shown to reinforce social inequalities, with privileged students (typically White, middle-class) more likely to be placed in top sets while working-class and Black students are often found in lower sets, leading to negative self-perceptions among those in bottom groups. Students in lower sets expressed significant negativity toward setting, questioning its legitimacy and fairness, while those in higher sets tended to defend the practice as 'natural' and 'deserved'. They advocate for a shift towards mixed-attainment teaching as a more equitable approach. They emphasise the need to amplify the voices of students, especially those adversely affected by setting, arguing that their experiences should be central to discussions about educational practices.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
25. Valsa Koshy, Carole Portman Smith and Ronald Casey **Material title** England Policy in Gifted Education: Current Problems and Promising Directions **Year** 2018 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** Analysing the current problems and promising directions of gifted education policies in England, highlighting the challenges in implementation and the need for a coherent national policy to support gifted and talented students effectively. **Material design/ methods** Mixed methods: two national questionnaires and follow-up interviews with teachers.	The gifted and talented education policy in England was initiated under the Excellence in Cities agenda, focusing on the underachievement of able students in urban secondary schools. Schools were required to identify a percentage of pupils as gifted and talented, appoint coordinators, and implement specific teaching programs. The policy was evaluated within ten years, leading to its eventual elimination due to limited evidence of sustained impact on student attainment and concerns about the adequacy of identification methods. Many schools did not adhere to the policy's requirement to select a specific percentage of gifted and talented pupils. Instead, they focused on recording individual strengths for curriculum planning, reflecting philosophical objections to labelling students. Teachers expressed discomfort with the identification process and the emphasis on labelling, feeling that it detracted from focusing on effective provisions for gifted students. Many reported inadequate training and support for addressing the needs of these pupils. There was a significant concern regarding the lack of challenging work for gifted students, with additional tasks often being merely more work rather than more challenging. Many teachers felt unprepared to provide differentiated instruction. The paper highlights ongoing concerns about the progress of 'more able' students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the need for policies that address these disparities, including the introduction of the pupil premium to support such students. 'More able' students from disadvantaged backgrounds, often identified through their eligibility for free school meals, continue to lag behind their peers in terms of academic achievement. To address these disparities, the government introduced the pupil premium, which allocates additional funding to schools for each disadvantaged student. The introduction of a new Ofsted inspection framework required schools to report on the quality of teaching and curriculum provided to 'more able' students, along with data on their attainment and progress, though this has since changed. Despite these initiatives, the Koshy, Smith, and Casey. note that there is often complacency in schools regarding the needs of 'more able' students. They suggest that many head teachers do not prioritise these students early enough, which can hinder their progress.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
26. Carl Parsons **Material title** Social justice, race and class in education in England: competing perspectives. **Year** 2018 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The connections between poverty, ethnicity, and gender in educational attainment in England. **Material design/ methods** Quantitative comparison between data from First Statistical Releases from the Department of Education, which provide attainment results for all key stages, and two longitudinal national datasets comprising around 500,000 pupils who reached ages 16 in 2012 and 2015 from the Department of Education's National Pupil Database.	Parsons emphasises the complex relationships between poverty, ethnicity, and gender in influencing educational attainment, arguing that these factors are interrelated and cannot be understood in isolation. Specific findings, such as the mean attainment scores for different groups, illustrate the extent of the achievement gaps, for example, Parsons notes that the adjusted means indicate a greater advantage for non-FSM pupils compared to those from disadvantaged backgrounds with the average Attainment 8 score for the 69,000 FSM-entitled pupils, who represent 13.1% of the total student population, being very low. He critiques existing social and educational policies, such as Education Priority Areas, Excellence in Cities, and the pupil premium grant, for their failure to effectively address inequalities in educational achievement, suggesting that these policies often overlook the structural arrangements that benefit more affluent groups. Parsons calls for the development of more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that integrate class, race, and other discriminatory factors to better analyse the causal relationships affecting educational outcomes. Parsons argues for the integration of educational policies with broader social policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. This means that educational reforms should not be isolated from initiatives in health, housing, and welfare, as these areas also affect children's ability to succeed in school. Alongside this holistic approach, Parsons highlights the importance of providing targeted support for disadvantaged students, including those from low-income families and minority ethnic backgrounds. This could involve additional resources, mentoring programs, and tailored educational strategies that recognise the unique challenges faced by these groups.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
27. Stephen M. Cullen, Mairi-Ann Cullen, Siobhan Dytham, Nikita Hayden	The report primarily focused on socio-economic disadvantage. Schools employ various methods to identify the most academically able disadvantaged pupils, with significant variability in criteria used. This includes using Key Stage 2 assessment data, cognitive ability tests, and teacher assessments. The report emphasises the importance of a nuanced approach to identification to ensure that potentially high-achieving disadvantaged pupils are not overlooked. Some schools have adopted a positively discriminating approach, where they prioritise disadvantaged pupils who have overcome significant barriers to reach similar academic levels as their peers. This approach aims to ensure that these pupils receive the support they need to thrive academically. Strategies that schools can implement to support academically able disadvantaged pupils include; tailored support programs (such as advanced coursework, enrichment programmes, and opportunities for independent study), mentoring and tutoring, high-quality teaching, targeted interventions in specific subjects, extracurricular activities that broaden cultural experiences and foster a love of learning, partnerships with cultural institutions (such as museums and universities to expose students to cultural and academic resources they may not otherwise access), educational field trips and visits, good-quality career guidance and counselling to help these students effectively plan their futures, building confidence (for example through public speaking), providing financial assistance for resources such as textbooks and extracurricular activities, providing access to recourses such as libraries and study space outside of regular hours, providing information about support available to families that may be struggling, and consistent assessment and feedback for students. A strong school culture that promotes high aspirations for all students, regardless of their background, is crucial for the success of disadvantaged pupils. Schools that foster an inclusive environment tend to have better outcomes for their academically able disadvantaged students. The report highlights various barriers that academically able disadvantaged pupils face, including socio-economic challenges, lack of access to resources, and potential underachievement due to systemic issues in education. Addressing these barriers is essential for improving academic outcomes. Successful support for these pupils often involves collaboration with external organisations and partnerships that can provide additional resources and opportunities, further enhancing the educational experience.
Material title Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.	
Year 2018	
Material type Report – Department for Education	
Focus Identifying successful approaches and interventions that secondary schools in England can implement to support the academic achievement of the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.	
Material design/ methods Three-phase data collection: Phase 1: a scoping survey was used to identify current school practices related to supporting disadvantaged high-attaining pupils from Key Stage 2-4. Phase 2: in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews with 21 diverse schools with successful practices in supporting academically able disadvantaged students. Phase 3: further in-depth interviews with three key staff members from selected schools based on Phase 2 to provide case studies.	

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Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
29. Derron Wallace **Material title** Reading 'Race' in Bourdieu? Examining Black Cultural Capital Among Black Caribbean Youth in South London **Year** 2017 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The interplay of race and class in shaping the educational experiences and cultural capital of middle-class Black Caribbean youth in South London, challenging deficit narratives and highlighting the dynamic nature of Black cultural capital. **Material design/ methods** 7-month ethnographic study, including focus groups, in-depth interviews with young and with parents.	Wallace extends and adapts Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to specifically address the experiences of Black Caribbean youth. Bourdieu uses the concept of cultural capital to describe the non-financial, social assets that individuals possess, which can contribute to their social mobility and success within society. It encompasses a range of cultural knowledge, skills, education, and any advantages a person may have that can help them navigate social environments. Three forms of cultural capital are embodied (e.g., language skills, manners, and cultural knowledge that individuals acquire through socialisation), objectified (physical objects and media that convey cultural value, e.g., books, art, and other cultural goods that individuals can own and use to signal their cultural status), and institutionalised (e.g. academic qualifications and credentials that provide formal recognition of an individual's cultural capital, such as degrees and certifications). Cultural capital plays a significant role in the reproduction of social inequality. Individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds often have greater access to cultural capital, which can lead to advantages in education, employment, and social networks. Bourdieu argued that the value of cultural capital is context-dependent; it can vary across different social settings and fields. Cultural capital interacts with other forms of capital, such as economic capital (financial resources) and social capital (networks and relationships). Together, these forms of capital influence an individual's ability to achieve social mobility and navigate societal structures. Black cultural capital challenges the implicit assumption that cultural capital is synonymous with whiteness. Wallace acknowledges the existence of valuable cultural practices and knowledge within black communities that can be leveraged for social mobility and academic success. Cultural capital is context-specific, and its value can vary across different social fields. This means that the meanings and implications of Black cultural capital shift depending on the environment and the social dynamics at play. Wallace highlights how Black Caribbean middle-class students leverage their cultural capital to navigate the educational landscape. These strategies include: strategic relationship building whereby students actively engage with teachers to build positive relationships. They understand that teachers are "gatekeepers to success" and work to establish rapport by getting to know them, seeking advice, and demonstrating professionalism, which can influence teachers' perceptions and support their academic advancement; using knowledge and skills whereby students draw on their knowledge of black history and cultural practices to engage with the curriculum and challenge low expectations from teachers. They use their understanding of black cultural capital to assert their identities and improve their social standing within the school environment; using parental guidance as the influence of parents is significant, as they provide training on how to express black taste and style in the classroom. This guidance helps students navigate the educational system while maintaining their cultural identity; awareness of racialised dynamics, where students are conscious of the racialised class distinctions in their schools and use this awareness to navigate the educational landscape effectively. They employ embodied practices that signal both their black Caribbean heritage and their middle-class status, allowing them to access advantages while also questioning the broader societal codes that marginalise their working-class peers; challenging stereotypes, by actively participating in discussions about their culture and sharing their experiences, these students work to counteract the homogenisation and stigmatisation of black identities in educational settings. They aim to reshape the narrative around black students and assert their individuality and achievements. Wallace discusses the intersection of race and class, arguing that while Black cultural capital can provide advantages, it also leads to the marginalisation of black working-class peers. Their ability to leverage cultural capital is influenced by their social positioning, which is a product of both their racial and class identities. Teachers often make comparisons among Black students that overlook class differences, which can exacerbate intra-racial tensions and class conflict. Participants express a critical awareness of the limitations imposed by racialised class distinctions. They recognise the need for cross-class advocacy and show sensitivity to the challenges faced by their working-class counterparts, indicating a complex understanding of their own social positioning. Wallace challenges often-prevailing narratives that label Black Caribbean youth as 'underachievers.' Instead, the paper emphasises their agency and strategic use of cultural capital to navigate educational challenges, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
30. Dawn Mannay, Rhiannon Evans, Eleanor Staples, Sophie Hallett, Louise Roberts, Alyson Rees and Darren Andrews. **Material title** The consequences of being labelled 'looked-after': Exploring the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people in Wales. **Year** 2017 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** Mannay *et al.* explore the educational experiences and aspirations of looked-after children and young people (LACYP) in Wales, highlighting the negative impact of labelling and low expectations on their academic success while emphasising their desire for challenge and support. **Material design/ methods** One-to-one interviews with integrated creative methods and focus groups. 67 care-experienced children and young people in Wales, aged 6–27 years, participated.	Educational policies often categorise looked-after children and young people as needing special support, which inadvertently positions them outside the mainstream discourse of academic success. This 'supported' subject position implies that LACYP are not expected to perform at the same level as their peers, leading to a stigma that can alienate them from their educational environment. Mannay et al. argue that this labelling can reinforce negative stereotypes and diminish the motivation of LACYP, as they may internalise the belief that they are less capable of achieving academic success due to their challenging home circumstances. This alienation is compounded by the high visibility of their 'looked-after' status within schools, which can further isolate them from their peers and disrupt their educational experiences. Despite the systemic low expectations placed upon them, many LACYP express a strong desire to be challenged academically and to achieve their potential. Mannay et al. illustrate that these young people often feel misunderstood and want educators to recognise their aspirations rather than define them solely by their circumstances. This disconnect between the aspirations of LACYP and the perceptions held by educators suggests that many teachers may underestimate the capabilities of these students, leading to a lack of appropriate academic challenges. The participants in the study articulated a need for encouragement and high expectations, indicating that they are not passive recipients of their educational experiences but rather active agents who wish to succeed. Mannay et al. call for a more nuanced understanding of LACYP's individual aspirations and capabilities, arguing that educational practices should be tailored to meet their unique needs. This involves recognising the diverse backgrounds and experiences of LACYP and integrating their voices into the development of educational policies and practices. They call for the establishment of effective support systems that not only address the challenges faced by LACYP but also empower them to pursue their academic goals. By fostering an environment that values their input and aspirations, schools can help bridge the gap between the expectations of educators and the ambitions of LACYP, ultimately leading to more positive educational outcomes

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
31. John Jerrim **Material title** Global Gaps: Comparing socio-economic gaps in the performance of highly able UK pupils internationally. **Year** 2017 **Material type** Report – academic, supported by the Sutton Trust. **Focus** Analysing the academic performance of the UK's most able pupils, particularly those from lower socio-economic background, using Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 data to identify achievement gaps and recommend strategies for improvement. **Material design/ methods** Comparative analysis of highest achieving pupils across OECD countries using PISA 2015 data, focusing on 15-year-olds achievement in science, reading, and mathematics. Analysed changes in performance over time by dividing the population into socio-economic quartiles.	There is a significant gap in mathematics performance between high-achieving pupils from advantaged backgrounds in the UK, with high achievers from advantaged backgrounds being approximately 2 years and 8 months ahead of their disadvantage peers. The performance of the highest achieving pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds in the UK is compared unfavourably to their counterparts in other OECD countries. The role of socio-economic background is critical in educational outcomes for high-achieving students. Targeted interventions and policies are necessary to address the educational disparities faced by disadvantaged pupils, especially those who are more high achieving. The socio-economic gap is particularly pronounced for girls, with high-achieving girls from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds lagging three years behind their better-off counterparts in science. The report suggests promoting participation in advanced academic programmes and extracurricular activities that can enhance learning and provide enrichment experiences for high-achieving students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
32. Kieth S. Taber and Fran Riga **Material title** From each according to her capabilities; to each according to her needs: fully including the gifted in school science education **Year** 2016 **Material type** Academic book chapter. **Focus** The need for inclusive and challenging science education that needs the developmental needs of gifted learners. **Material design/ methods** Review of existing literature and conceptual discussion.	Many gifted students are not adequately challenged in the classroom, leading to a lack of meaningful engagement and progress in their learning. A pragmatic and nuanced understanding of giftedness is suggested, viewing it as relative to specific learning contexts, open to degrees, and subject to change over time. Effective science education for gifted learners requires differentiated teaching strategies that provide appropriate levels of challenge and support, not just increased volume of work or knowledge acquisition. Peer tutoring roles can enhance gifted learners experience and foster collaborative classroom environments. Failing to provide gifted learners with a genuinely educative experience is not only detrimental to the individuals but also unacceptable on moral grounds as all students deserve an education that can maximise their potential. There is a need for further research in science education to better understand how to identify and meet the needs of gifted learners.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
33. Laura Tan, Claire Hughes and Juliet Foster **Material title** Abilities, disabilities and possibilities: a qualitative study exploring the academic and social experiences of gifted and talented students who have co-occurring learning disabilities **Year** 2016 **Material type** Report – Department for Education **Focus** Exploring the academic and social experiences of gifted and talented students with co-occurring learning disabilities, highlighting their unique challenges, support systems, and coping strategies. **Material design/ methods** Semi-structured interviews conducted with gifted and talented students who have co-occurring learning disabilities	The importance of student voice: involving students in the conversation about their learning disabilities and giftedness empowers them to take ownership of their educational journey – by expressing their thoughts and feelings, students can advocate for their needs and preferences, which is crucial for their personal development. Students themselves can provide valuable insights into their learning disabilities and the strategies that work for them. Encouraging open dialogue between students and educators fosters a collaborative environment where students feel valued and understood. This relationship can enhance trust and communication, making it easier for students to seek help when needed. The paper calls for more qualitative research that prioritises student voice, suggesting that current studies often overlook the perspectives of the students themselves. By focusing on their experiences, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by gifted students with learning disabilities and develop more effective interventions. Gifted students with learning disabilities face distinct academic and social challenges that differ from their peers, necessitating tailored support and understanding from educators and peers. Tan, Hughes and Foster highlight issues related to social support, including friendships and experiences of bullying, indicating that these students often struggle to connect with peers and may face social isolation or negative interactions. They emphasise the importance of support from teachers, mentors, and family, noting that many students feel a lack of understanding and awareness from educational staff regarding their needs. The combination of high abilities and learning disabilities influences students' future aspirations, with many expressing concerns about their potential and the impact of their disabilities on achieving their goals. They call for more qualitative research to better understand the experiences of this unique group, suggesting that current literature is limited and lacks comprehensive insights into their emotional and behavioural issues. Practical recommendations and coping strategies aimed at supporting gifted and talented students with co-occurring learning disabilities, including: that students should be taught general strategies to manage their academic and personal challenges (time management skills, organisational techniques, and study strategies tailored to their unique learning needs); developing personalised coping mechanisms that cater to each student's specific abilities and disabilities is important, engaging in extra-curricular activities, such as masterclasses or clubs, which can provide opportunities for students to explore their interests, build confidence, and fill gaps in knowledge outside the standard curriculum; the use of technology, such as laptops, software, and handheld devices, is recommended to assist students in their learning processes, though many students felt they received more technological support than they could use effectively, indicating a need for guidance on how to leverage these tools; increased awareness among teachers and support staff regarding the unique needs of gifted students with learning disabilities; peer support and mentoring relationships can help foster a sense of belonging and community among students.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
34. Pallavi Amitava Banerjee **Material title** A systematic review of factors linked to poor academic performance of disadvantaged students in science and maths in schools **Year** 2016 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal review article **Focus** Banerjee systematically reviews the factors linked to poor academic performance in science and mathematics among disadvantaged students, highlighting the influence of individual, family, neighbourhood, and school-level indicators. **Material design/ methods** Systematic review methodology, following the PRISMA protocol, to identify and synthesise findings from relevant studies. Focusing on studies that measure disadvantage (such as lower socio-economic status, language barriers, and ethnic minority status) and academic outcomes (like attainment in standardised national tests), 34 studies were synthesised.	Banerjee identifies key factors linked to the underachievement of disadvantaged students in science and mathematics, categorising them into individual, family, neighbourhood, and school-level indicators. Major deprivation measures such as lower socio-economic status, ethnic minority status, and language barriers are highlighted as common features leading to a lack of positive attitudes towards school and learning. Banerjee emphasises that socio-economic hardships place children in disadvantaged positions, which adversely affects their academic performance. It argues that addressing these hardships is crucial for improving educational attainment and reducing the STEM achievement gap. Banerjee discusses several evidence-based recommendations and effective programs that have been identified in the literature as successful in raising academic achievement among disadvantaged pupils in science and mathematics. Recommendations include: targeted interventions (those focussed focus on providing additional support to disadvantaged students, such as tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programs, as these have shown positive effects on academic performance); parental engagement (encouraging parental involvement in their children's education has been linked to improved academic outcomes. Programs that facilitate communication between schools and families, and that educate parents on how to support their children's learning at home, can be beneficial); positive learning environments (creating supportive and inclusive school environments that foster positive attitudes towards learning is crucial. This includes training teachers to be culturally responsive and to recognise the unique challenges faced by disadvantaged students); STEM enrichment activities (engaging students in STEM enrichment programs, such as science fairs, workshops, and hands-on learning experiences, can enhance interest and performance in these subjects); professional development for educators (providing teachers with professional development opportunities focused on effective teaching strategies for disadvantaged students can lead to improved instructional practices and better student outcomes); policy support (policies that address systemic inequalities and provide resources for disadvantaged schools can help create a more equitable educational landscape. This includes funding for programs specifically designed to support underprivileged students).

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
35. Martin Stephen and Ian Warwick **Material title** Educating the ‘more able’ Student: What works and why. **Year** 2015 **Material type** Academic book. **Focus** Practical strategies for supporting ‘more able’ students. **Material design/ methods** Review of best-practice and literature.	Stephen and Warwick argue that the debate on identifying the most able students has received attention to the detriment of work on supporting these students. Education of the most able suffers from being called “elitist” (p.10), funding is deprioritised as schemes are seen as luxury, and there is an ongoing bias that those with ability will succeed regardless of education. Commonly used techniques for teaching the most able: acceleration, enrichment, compaction, pull-out schemes, projects, the internet. The most effective scheme is Renzulli’s “Whole School Enrichment Programme” (p.35). We need more teachers trained to identify and teach the ‘more able’. Accelerated courses are effective; children do not suffer emotionally or fail to understand material, children should have a say in their course, support of and for families is vital, teachers are the most important factor. Specific to the UK: There is a clear link between disadvantaged socio-economic and family backgrounds and underachievement for the most able students. The debate about gifted children is unhelpfully dominated by debates about academic selection. A lack of challenge in class- and home-work is a key factor for underachievement for the most able students. The UK has an anti-intellectual culture, which is reflected in cuts to funding for the ‘more able’. UK testing regime encourages teaching to the middle grade, which damages the most able.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
36. Margaret Brady **Material title** An exploration of the impact of gifted and talented policies on inner city schools in England: a case study **Year** 2015 **Material type** PhD Thesis. **Focus** Examining the impact of ‘gifted and talented’ education policies on inner-city schools in England, focusing on the challenges and effectiveness of these initiatives within a specific case study school. **Material design/ methods** Semi-structured interviews with members of the school community (including teachers, teaching assistants, pupils, parents, and senior managers), observation of lessons, and review of relevant documents related to gifted education in the school (including policies and Ofsted inspection reports).	Many staff members were largely unfamiliar with the school’s ‘gifted and talented’ policy, relying instead on their general experience and training, which affects their ability to effectively support gifted students. Teachers faced many challenges in identifying and providing for gifted students including; feeling unprepared and lacking sufficient knowledge about ‘gifted education’ and the specific requirements of national policies, initial teacher training programmes often did not adequately address ‘gifted and talented’ education which leaves new teachers without the necessary knowledge to support these students effectively, the national policies only provided vague and non-prescriptive guidance on how to support gifted students which leaves teachers unsure about best practices, teachers were worried about lesson observations and thus were not willing to take risks in their instructional approaches and explore new ways to support gifted students, some teachers were concerned that focussing on identifying and nurturing gifted students would come at the expense of other students, teachers often relied on their own experiences and self-developed theories for teaching gifted students rather than evidenced-based methods or best-practice. The term ‘gifted and talented’ was seen by some educators to be problematic, feeling it implied levels of ability not accurately reflected in the students they taught. Generally, educators preferred the term ‘more able’, and this was also seen more in the research this thesis drew on. ‘More able’ was seen to more accurately describe the students’ capabilities without the connotations associated with ‘giftedness’ that can apply innate abilities or personality traits.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
37. Pam Sammons, Katalin Toth and Kathy Sylva **Material title** Subject to Background: What promotes better achievement for bright but disadvantaged students? **Year** 2015 **Material type** Report – academic, supported by the Sutton Trust. **Focus** Identifying the factors that predict long-term academic success for bright but disadvantaged students from pre-school through to A-levels, aiming to address the equity gap in educational achievement. **Material design/ methods** Large-scale longitudinal study, the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE3+-16), that tracked the progress and development of over 3,000 children, using assessments at key educational points and merging this data with the Department for Education's National Pupil Database for further analysis of A-level outcomes and factors predicting success.	The report defines disadvantage in primarily socio-economic terms, looking at Free School Meal status, Family Socio-Economic Status (based on parents' occupations, salaries, and employment status), Multiple Disadvantage Index (a composite measure that includes low parental income, lack of earned income, and other socio-economic factors), and cross-references this with various demographic factors, including ethnicity and gender. High-quality pre-school and primary school experiences significantly boost the academic attainment of disadvantaged children, helping to mitigate the adverse impacts of socio-economic disadvantage. The report tracks bright pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieved high levels at the end of primary school, examining their academic performance in GCSEs and A-levels, and finds early academic success is a positive predictor if continued achievement. Notable differences in academic outcomes were observed based on gender and ethnicity, with disadvantaged girls generally outperforming boys, and certain marginalised ethnic groups (e.g. Indian and Pakistani students) achieving significantly higher scores than their white UK peers. Engagement in academic enrichment activities during Key Stage 3, such as reading and educational visits, was linked to improved GCSE outcomes, highlighting the importance of extracurricular support for disadvantaged students. There is a need for policy change to increase targeted support and resources for disadvantaged students to enhance their opportunities for higher education. This targeted support should include enrichment activities, support for homework completion, guidance on subject choice to maximise future options, providing high-quality teacher-feedback, and specific encouragement for underrepresented groups.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
38. Ofsted **Material title** The most able students: An update on progress since June 2013 **Year** 2015 **Material type** Report – Ofsted. **Focus** Evaluating the progress and effectiveness of support for the most able students in non-selective secondary schools since 2013, highlighting ongoing challenges, particularly for disadvantaged students, and the need for urgent improvements in teaching and transition practices. **Material design/ methods** Comparative analysis of specific visits to 40 non-selective secondary schools and 10 primary schools. Further analysis of insights from 130 routine inspections and discussions with school leaders, staff, and students, as well as analysis of samples of student work.	Many most able students in non-selective secondary schools fail to achieve their potential, particularly in comparison to their peers in selective and independent schools. Further, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to succeed compared to their peers and often do not receive the necessary support to fulfil their potential. Schools where the proportion of previously high-attaining students is small show particularly significant achievement gaps for disadvantaged most able students. Transition from primary to secondary school is often poorly managed, with many schools not using transition information effectively to challenge most able students adequately at Key Stage 3. There are substantial regional disparities, with some areas serving disadvantaged most able students particularly poorly, as evidenced by low rates of progression to top universities for those students. A significant number of secondary schools set targets for their most able students that are only slightly above national expectations, which do not reflect the students' full potential. This results in insufficient challenge and ambition for these students, particularly in Key Stage 3. The quality of teaching for most able students varies widely, with many teachers lacking high expectations and failing to provide sufficiently challenging work, especially in foundational subjects. The quality of information, advice, and guidance regarding university applications and course selection is inadequate, particularly for disadvantaged students and those applying to prestigious universities. The report calls for school leaders to take urgent action to improve the educational experience and outcomes for most able students, emphasising the importance of effective teaching, high expectations, and robust transition practices.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
39. Steve Strand, Lars Malmberg, James Hall **Material title** English as an Additional Language (EAL) and educational achievement in England: An analysis of the National Pupil Database **Year** 2015 **Material type** Report – University of Oxford, Education Endowment Fund, Unbound Philanthropy, The Bell Foundation. **Focus** The report by Strand, Malmberg, and Hall analyses the educational achievement of students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in England, examining the factors influencing their attainment and identifying at-risk groups to inform effective interventions. **Material design/ methods** Strand, Malmberg and Hall use descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses, and contextual models to explore the associations between EAL status and student attainment. They use data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) and control for a wide range of student and school-level variables through both Contextualised and Contextual Value Added (CVA) models to assess the impact of various factors on educational outcomes at Key Stage 2 (age 11) and Key Stage 4 (age 16).	The report identifies significant gaps in educational attainment between EAL students and their peers, emphasising the need to understand the factors contributing to these disparities. Stand, Malmberg and Hall highlight various risk factors affecting EAL students, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and the age of arrival in the UK, while also noting resilience factors that can support their progress. Certain ethnic groups, such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani students, are more likely to be recorded as EAL and may face additional challenges related to cultural and linguistic barriers. EAL students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at a higher risk of low attainment, as economic disadvantage often correlates with limited access to educational resources and support. The age at which students arrive in the UK significantly affects their language acquisition and integration into the educational system. Younger arrivals tend to adapt more quickly than those who arrive at an older age. Families that prioritise education and provide a supportive learning environment can enhance their children's academic success. Schools that offer tailored support for EAL students, including language assistance and culturally responsive teaching, can help mitigate the risks associated with EAL status. They explore how school composition, including the concentration of EAL students and other demographic factors, influences student attainment and progress. Schools with a high concentration of EAL students may face unique challenges, such as resource allocation and the need for specialised teaching strategies. The report suggests that these schools may require additional support to effectively address the diverse needs of their students. The composition of the student body, including the presence of students from various ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic statuses, can influence the overall learning environment. A diverse school population can foster inclusivity and cultural exchange, which may benefit EAL students. The availability of resources, such as trained staff and language support programs, plays a crucial role in determining how well EAL students perform. Schools that invest in these resources tend to see better outcomes for their EAL learners. Strand, Malmberg and Hall note that students with identified SEN are at a significantly higher risk of low attainment compared to their peers without SEN. The report provides specific data indicating that EAL students at different levels of SEN (School Action, School Action Plus, and those with statements) are behind their peers by substantial margins, with those with statements being approximately 40 National Curriculum months behind. This finding underscores the importance of addressing the needs of EAL students who also have disabilities, as they face compounded challenges that can hinder their educational progress. The report emphasises that understanding the intersection of EAL status and disability is crucial for developing effective support strategies. The report advocates for the use of Contextual Value Added (CVA) models to better understand the impact of EAL status alongside other background variables on educational outcomes. Strand, Malmberg and Hall call for targeted funding and interventions to support EAL students, particularly in schools with high concentrations of EAL learners, to ensure they receive the necessary resources to succeed. The report notes that EAL students who have attended English schools for longer periods tend to make greater progress, suggesting that sustained support and funding are crucial for their continued success.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
40. Elizabeth Rata and Brian Barrett **Material title** Introduction: Knowledge and the Future of the Curriculum. **Year** 2014 **Material type** Academic – edited book chapter. **Focus** The significance of knowledge in shaping educational curricula and the implications of social realism for understanding and improving educational practices, particularly for disadvantaged students. **Material design/ methods** Conceptual analysis of social realism and its implications for curriculum development, drawing on theoretical frameworks and international studies to explore the relationship between knowledge and educational practices. Comparative exploration of the role of powerful knowledge in various contexts.	Rata and Barrett take a some-what broad view of disadvantage as systemic, including socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, and geographic/regional location. A curriculum grounded in social realism must provide all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, access to "powerful knowledge" that equips them with the tools to engage critically with the world and improve their life chances. Unequal access to knowledge has historically marginalised certain groups, and that addressing these disparities is crucial for achieving educational equity. They highlight the need for a curriculum that is not only inclusive but also rigorous, ensuring that disadvantaged students are not left with a diluted or irrelevant educational experience. They discuss the concept of curricular justice, asserting that all students should have the opportunity to engage with a well-defined body of knowledge that transcends their immediate experiences, thereby fostering critical thinking and agency. The social context in which students learn significantly affects their educational outcomes. They advocate for a curriculum that acknowledges and addresses these contextual factors, ensuring that it is relevant and accessible to all students, especially those from marginalised communities. They argue for a curriculum that not only recognise the challenges faced by disadvantaged students but actively works to empower them through access to valuable knowledge and skills.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
41. Roland S. Persson **Material title** The Needs of the Highly Able and the Needs of Society: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of Talent Differentiation and Its Significance to Gifted Education and Issues of Societal Inequality. **Year** 2014 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The impact of recognising and nurturing the needs of highly able individuals in education, with an emphasis on how talent differentiation can address both individual potential and societal demands for creativity and innovation.	How talent is understood and used differently in societal and academic contexts, highlighting the need for a differentiated understanding of high ability that goes beyond traditional definitions. Societal inequality can suppress and distort the development of high ability, suggesting that gifted education must address these inequalities to be effective. Gifted education should prioritise the individual needs of highly able students rather than merely serving societal production demands, thus Persson advocates for a more personalised approach to education. The importance of ongoing support for gifted education, asserting that highly able individuals contribute significantly to society and should be nurtured to reach their full potential. Neoliberal policies often emphasise efficiency and productivity, which can marginalise the importance of fostering creativity and individual potential in gifted education. This focus on economic outcomes can result in educational practices that do not adequately support the diverse needs of highly able students. The fast-paced demands of global business and finance can clash with the slower, more deliberate processes of academic research and educational reform. Policymakers may prioritise quick fixes and immediate results over long-term strategies that support the development of gifted individuals. High ability does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is influenced by the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which individuals operate. This framework helps to explain how societal norms and values can dictate what is considered valuable or acceptable in terms of talent and ability.

Material number. Author details	Findings and/or arguments
42. Steve Strand **Material title** Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: intersectionality and 'getting it' for the white working class. **Year** 2014 **Material type** Peer-reviewed journal article **Focus** The intersection of ethnicity, gender, and social class in relation to achievement gaps at age 16, specifically highlighting the educational experiences and challenges faced by the white working class in England. **Material design/ methods** Analysed data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England with a focus on various background variables collected during the study to assess educational achievement and the interactions between ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status.	Strand highlights the intricate relationships between ethnicity, gender, social class, and educational achievement, arguing that simplistic explanations based solely on one of these factors fail to capture the full picture of educational outcomes. He identifies significant achievement gaps at age 16, particularly among different ethnic groups and socio-economic statuses, emphasising that these gaps are influenced by a combination of factors rather than a single cause. Minority ethnic groups often report higher educational aspirations and receive more support at home, which may contribute to their academic success compared to their white working-class peers, who may experience a decline in aspirations and attitudes towards school. Strand argues for an intersectional approach to understanding educational success and failure, suggesting that research should move beyond additive models to consider how different identities and social positions interact to shape educational experiences. There is a need for targeted interventions that address the specific challenges faced by underperforming groups, particularly within the white working class.

Themes and presentation of analysis

Our analysis was guided by our two research questions which led us to explore the concept of ‘more able’ learners in conjunction with various types of disadvantage, focusing particularly on how the intersection of these factors shapes educational experiences. Given this dual focus, we adopted a critical perspective on ability, challenging traditional notions of ‘ability’ as a fixed, inherent trait. We approached ability as a social construct, shaped by educational systems, policies, and socio-cultural contexts. This perspective encouraged us to critically examine the language used to describe ability and to consider the implications of labelling students as ‘gifted’, ‘exceptionally able’, or ‘high attaining’.

In line with this critical stance, our analysis was shaped by the understanding that language plays a powerful role in both framing and limiting perceptions of ability. As we reviewed the literature, we were particularly interested in how the evolution of terminology reflected changing attitudes toward inclusion, ability, and disadvantage. This approach allowed us to problematise the use of language around ‘ability’ and question the extent to which such labels can reinforce or challenge educational inequalities. These reflections emerged strongly in several key themes, including the evolution of terminology, challenges in identification methods, and barriers to academic success.

Once we had charted the data, we then moved on to Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) fifth step in their systematic framework for scoping reviews – collating, summarising, and reporting the results. This process involved multiple team meetings where the researchers discussed the emerging themes from the literature. The iterative nature of this process allowed for the co-construction of findings, ensuring that the themes were not only accurately summarised but also developed through critical dialogue among the research team. These discussions helped us refine our understanding of the key issues and gave us the opportunity to continuously question our assumptions, particularly around the conceptualisation of ‘more able’ learners within a disadvantaged context.

Through this rigorous process of theme development, we arrived at a set of key findings that are presented below. These themes reflect both the evolving discourse around ability in education and the lived experiences of disadvantaged, ‘more able’ students. They provide insight into the challenges faced by these learners, as well as the structural and pedagogical changes needed to support them more effectively.

‘More able’

Developing effective support and provision for ‘more able’ learners is essential in ensuring that students with high future potential can thrive academically and emotionally. Whilst the terminology of ‘more able’ is familiar to NACE member schools, the national understanding and usage of this term varies. For NACE-affiliated organisations, terms such as ‘more able’ and ‘exceptionally able’ are understood as fluid, inclusive terms, linked to students’ future potential that highlight the importance of developing plans to nurture their growth. In contrast, terms such as ‘high attaining’ or ‘high prior attaining’ are more closely associated with assessment-based reporting and grouping, reflecting performance outcomes rather than hidden capabilities. This review highlights a need to continue to develop an inclusive lexicon, which appreciates future potential, and which incorporates the perspectives of ‘more able’ learners.

Recent research highlights the importance of tailored educational strategies that foster both academic excellence and personal development for ‘more able’ students. It underscores the significance of adaptive teaching practices and well-designed, challenging curricula that cater to the diverse needs of ‘more able’ learners. Studies suggest that a flexible and challenging curriculum, alongside extracurricular enrichment opportunities, can enhance the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of ‘more able’ students.

Teacher perceptions and attitudes are crucial in shaping the learning experiences of these students. High expectations and an inclusive approach can positively influence students’ motivation, self-esteem, and achievement. However, negative or biased teacher attitudes – often shaped by socio-economic and cultural factors – can hinder progress and limit opportunities for learners with high potential. Research also emphasises the importance of professional development, with a need for targeted training programmes designed to equip educators with the knowledge and strategies necessary to support ‘more able’ students effectively.

Fostering an environment that nurtures the potential of ‘more able’ students requires a collaborative effort across individualised education, inclusive teaching practices, curriculum design, equitable access to extracurricular opportunities, and specialised teacher development.

Evolving terminology for student ability: shifting from labels to inclusive, growth-oriented language.

Over the past decade, the terminology of ‘more able’ learners has gained prominence as ‘gifted and talented’ has become increasingly viewed as problematic. Shepherd (2021) argues that the shift towards using clearer and more inclusive terms, such as “’more able’,” “exceptionally able,” and “higher attaining,” is essential for accurate identification and effective educational provision. The term “gifted,” in particular, has been critiqued for its elitist connotations, leading many schools to prefer “exceptionally able” for clarity. Shepherd’s blog advocates for a precise definition of “’more able’” learners, which should consider not only prior attainment but also learning behaviours not captured by traditional assessments. By limiting the number of definitions and avoiding outcome-driven or percentage-based measures, schools can foster a more inclusive environment, ensuring that all stakeholders, including parents/carers and staff, understand the criteria used. However, language is continuing to evolve and the term “’more able’” is beginning to face similar critiques to ‘gifted and talented’, especially as students increasingly call for a shift in focus from past performance to future potential. As Conn *et al.* (2024) highlight, young people express a strong desire to be recognised for their ability to grow and improve, rather than being constrained by fixed labels tied to past assessments. This shift reflects a broader trend towards fostering a growth mindset and emphasising students’ potential for development, rather than reinforcing stereotypes or fixed views of ability. In this context, the continued evolution of language in educational settings is crucial to creating more empowering and dynamic narratives about students’ capabilities. What emerges and is explored in terms of the development of the lexicon used when referring to student ability is the importance of dynamic terminology that eschews static and limiting ideas of intelligence as ‘fixed’. Instead, the language needs to draw on a vocabulary which conveys a clear sense of capabilities and future potential, and which is antithetical to the imposition of restrictive labels. Evidence from this review suggests a need to develop nuanced ways of talking about ability that are cognizant of the interactions of contextual influences, and which support the development of effective and equitable educational practices. The lack of a shared lexicon may impede understanding of tailored approaches and support.

Identification of ‘more able’ learners

Research on the identification of ‘more able’ learners has highlighted the challenges and limitations of identifying ‘gifted and talented’ students, particularly in relation to underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. This includes critiques of traditional identification methods, including standardised testing and prior attainment data, and explorations of how these approaches can overlook socio-economic factors and hinder effective support. Some research has also called for more inclusive and dynamic definitions of ability.

Identification methods and challenges in identifying underrepresented groups

Research in England and Wales indicates that many secondary schools continue to rely heavily on standardised testing, teacher assessments, and prior attainment data, to identify ‘more able’ students. However, this reliance has been critiqued due to the limitations of these measures, particularly considering socio-economic disparities that can affect prior achievement. For instance, Egan *et al.* (2018) highlight the challenges faced by disadvantaged pupils during the transition from primary to secondary education, emphasising that the identification of ‘more able’ students often fails to account for socio-economic factors that influence academic performance. Similarly, Persson (2014) explores the concept of talent differentiation in education. Persson critiques traditional definitions of high ability, arguing that societal inequality can suppress and distort the development of high ability. Additionally, Ofsted’s (2015) report on the most able students highlights that many schools do not effectively identify the most able students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It notes that underachievement is often overlooked during primary education, which can lead to a failure to recognise the potential of these students as they transition to secondary school.

Brady (2015) further critiques the traditional methods of identification, particularly those that focus predominantly on academic performance. She argues that these measures fail to capture the full range of abilities, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Brady advocates for a broader definition of ‘giftedness’ that includes a wider spectrum of talents, such as creativity, leadership, and practical skills, reflecting a growing recognition that ability manifests in various forms beyond academic achievement. Koshy, Smith, and Casey (2018) also address the challenges schools face in adhering to policies that require a set percentage of students to be categorised as ‘gifted’ or ‘talented.’ They note that many educators expressed discomfort with the labelling process, viewing it as reductive and counterproductive. This concern is compounded by a philosophical reluctance to label students, as some educators argue that such practices narrow the understanding of student potential and detract from efforts to provide effective and more equitable provisions for diverse learners.

Finally, Tan, Hughes, and Foster (2020) address the complex issue of identifying gifted students who also have co-occurring learning disabilities. They argue that traditional binary classifications of ability and disability can obscure the unique strengths and challenges faced by these students. Their work advocates for a more nuanced approach to identifying ‘more able’ students, one that recognises the interplay of various factors, including learning differences, and fosters a more inclusive and accurate understanding of student potential. Collectively, these sources highlight the need for more comprehensive, flexible, and inclusive identification methods that account for a broader range of abilities and the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence students’ educational experiences.

Problems with classification

Some research has examined the problematic effects of fixed-ability classifications in the identification of ‘more able’ or high-achieving students, highlighting how such labels can perpetuate stigma, inequality, and negative self-concepts. One key concern is that the language used to classify ability, such as terms like “academically able” or “high prior attainment,” can foster a deterministic, fixed mindset. Yarker (2021) critically analyses the influence of this language in England’s education system, arguing that it reinforces hierarchical structures within schools, marginalising those labelled as low ability. This fixed view of ability, according to Yarker, overlooks the dynamic nature of student potential, which is shaped by factors such as teaching practices and contextual influences. Such labels can entrench social inequalities and limit students’ aspirations by constraining their understanding of their own potential.

Lo et al. (2022) discuss similar concerns, focusing on the implications of labelling students as ‘gifted’ or ‘talented.’ They argue that these labels create stigma and advocate for language that better reflects students’ needs for support, such as “students with advanced learning needs.” This shift, they suggest, may promote a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of student potential, framing giftedness as a process of growth that applies to all learners. Lo et al. further emphasise that all students can engage in a “gift-ed” process of personal development, which challenges the rigidity of ability classifications and promotes the view that all students have the potential for advancement, irrespective of their starting point.

Conn et al. (2024) also address the consequences of labelling practices, particularly in the context of ability grouping. They note that categorising students into ability groups can reinforce negative identities and exacerbate ability hierarchies within schools. Such practices may limit students’ self-perception and aspirations, as they internalise the labels imposed on them. While some educators argue that ability grouping enhances instructional focus, Conn et al. suggest that it can perpetuate stereotypes and hinder the educational experiences of students, particularly those placed in lower ability groups. Buckingham (2024) adds that traditional metrics for identifying ‘more able’ students, such as academic performance alone, fail to account for critical factors like creativity, socio-emotional skills, and the broader context in which students learn. She calls for a more inclusive definition of ability that recognises the diverse talents and contextual influences that shape academic success.

Together, these studies highlight the need for a more flexible and inclusive understanding of student ability, one that moves beyond fixed labels and recognises the dynamic, multifaceted nature of potential. They argue for a shift away from traditional classification systems towards approaches that focus on supporting individual growth and fostering a growth mindset among all learners.

Over-focus on identification within academic research

Academic research on ‘more able’ learners has been critiqued for its overemphasis on identification, with concerns that this focus on labelling may overshadow the more pressing need for effective support and resources. Montacute (2018) argues that while identifying highly able students is important, attention should also be directed towards ensuring that these students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to the necessary support and enrichment opportunities to reach their full potential. Montacute highlights that many highly able students from disadvantaged backgrounds often fall behind their more affluent peers due to a lack of such opportunities.

Koshy, Smith, and Casey (2018) further critique research over-focus on the identification process, noting that it often detracts from the critical focus needed on providing appropriately challenging instruction. They report that many teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of gifted students, and that tasks designed for these students often fail to offer the necessary level of challenge, which can result in underachievement despite identification. This concern is echoed by Stephen and Warwick (2015), who argue that the emphasis on identifying ‘more able’ students has diverted attention from how to best support these learners. They stress that future research should pivot from identification to examining the most effective ways to support and engage high-achieving students in their educational journeys.

These critiques collectively suggest that more emphasis on the provision of tailored support is required, urging a shift in research priorities towards addressing the broader needs of ‘more able’ learners

Support and provision for ‘more able’ learners

Research on supporting ‘more able’ students has focused on adaptive teaching, curriculum design, extracurricular activities, and supporting emotional development in relation to effective strategies for ‘more able’ learners. It highlights the need for tailored educational practices that nurture academic, social, and personal development, ensuring these students receive the appropriate support to thrive both academically and emotionally.

Adaptive teaching and challenge in the classroom

Research has consistently highlighted the role of adaptive teaching strategies, forms of differentiated instruction, and tailored challenges to effectively support ‘more able’ students. Though some research continues to use the term ‘differentiation’ to describe flexible practices for supporting ‘more able’ students, it should be noted that the term ‘adaptive teaching’ has largely replaced ‘differentiation’ in education research. This is due to the way problematic differentiation practices have historically created fixed mindsets about ability, both for teachers and pupils.

Stephen and Warwick (2015) argue that effective forms of differentiation are essential for supporting ‘more able’ students. They stress the importance of offering challenging tasks and independent study opportunities, while also creating an inclusive classroom environment that nurtures the potential of all students, particularly those with advanced abilities. In line with this, Taber and Riga (2016) advocate for individualised differentiated teaching strategies in science education that provide appropriate levels of challenge and support, rather than simply increasing the volume of work. They emphasise the need for tailored approaches to engage gifted students meaningfully, ensuring that differentiation is both developmentally appropriate and intellectually stimulating. Tan, Hughes, and Foster (2016) expand on this, exploring how individualised differentiated instruction can meet the needs of gifted students with learning disabilities. Their research calls for inclusive practices that not only present suitable challenges but also accommodate the individual learning needs of these students, thus fostering an environment where both strengths and difficulties are acknowledged and supported.

While many studies stress the crucial role of some forms of differentiation, other research questions specific differentiation practices, such as ability grouping. Wilkinson and Penney (2024) challenge traditional ability-based grouping practices, particularly in physical education (PE), where success is often publicly displayed. They argue that such methods reinforce a narrow, skill-based definition of ability and overlook broader qualities like cooperation and leadership. They advocate for mixed-ability groupings that foster inclusivity and provide a more holistic learning environment. Similarly, Tereshchenko et al. (2019) examine students’ attitudes toward mixed-attainment groupings, noting that while higher-attaining students often appreciate the fairness of such arrangements, they also express concerns about lower expectations and slower-paced learning. They suggest that mixed-attainment groupings offer social benefits, such as reduced isolation and enhanced collaboration, but caution that these benefits may not be universally perceived.

Smale-Jacobse et al. (2020) provide a meta-analysis of differentiated instruction in secondary education, noting that while the overall effect on student achievement is moderate, the effectiveness of different approaches varies. They find that rigid ability-based grouping yields inconclusive results, with some studies showing benefits for all learners while others suggest negative effects for low-achieving students. They argue that flexible and dynamic groupings, where students can move between groups based on progress, are more effective in supporting diverse learning needs. Additionally, tiering—varying task complexity according to student ability—has been identified as particularly beneficial for lower-achieving students, though the complexity of its implementation warrants further research.

Further, Taylor et al. (2019) underscore the challenges schools face in implementing equitable practices for high-achieving students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their research highlights the systemic barriers to effective differentiation, noting that practices such as setting and streaming can exacerbate inequalities by limiting opportunities for high-achieving students in underfunded schools. Taylor et al. argue for differentiated approaches that ensure all students, including high achievers from disadvantaged backgrounds, receive the necessary support to thrive academically. Similarly, Strand (2014) examines achievement gaps among various demographic groups, including high-achieving students, and argues for differentiated approaches that support underrepresented groups, ensuring equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities. Strand emphasises that tailored differentiation is essential to close achievement gaps and provide all students with the tools they need to succeed.

Eaton (2022) introduces adaptive teaching as a more dynamic approach to providing challenge than differentiation, critiquing the traditional methods of differentiation that often rely on fixed groupings. Adaptive teaching involves ongoing adjustments based on formative assessments, allowing educators to modify teaching methods and strategies in real time to better meet students’ needs. Eaton critiques static differentiation methods that assign pre-set tasks, arguing they often fail to challenge students appropriately and lower expectations. Instead, adaptive teaching ensures that instruction continuously aligns with student progress and aptitude, promoting a more responsive and inclusive learning environment.

In summary, the literature emphasises that adaptative teaching and some forms of differentiated learning are effective for providing challenge to and supporting ‘more able’ learners. While traditional grouping methods and static differentiation have limitations, dynamic, inclusive, and flexible approaches have the potential to provide more equitable opportunities for all students, particularly those with advanced abilities or learning challenges.

Curriculum design

Research has highlighted the critical role of curriculum design in supporting ‘more able’ or, previously, ‘gifted’ students, underscoring the need for curricula that are flexible, challenging, and enriching. A common thread in the literature is the importance of providing powerful knowledge that not only stimulates critical thinking but also promotes equity, ensuring that ‘more able’ students can engage deeply with the content.

A central focus in research is the necessity of a curriculum that accommodates the diverse needs of gifted learners. Taber and Riga (2016) argue for a curriculum that is both flexible and capable of differentiation, allowing gifted students to engage with material at a deeper level. They emphasise that such a curriculum should offer challenging and enriching experiences, catering to the capabilities of ‘more able’ students and providing them with opportunities to explore topics beyond the standard curriculum. Montacute (2018) similarly stresses that curriculum design is a pivotal factor in supporting highly able students. The report highlights the need for a curriculum that is not only challenging but also relevant and engaging, offering depth and breadth. Montacute suggests that schools implement strategies that allow for independent research and exploration, thus fostering an environment where students can extend their learning beyond the confines of the standard curriculum. Supporting these perspectives, Ofsted’s (2015) report also identifies curriculum design as a key component in challenging the most able students. It emphasises that high-achieving learners require curricula that encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills, providing them with the intellectual stimulation necessary to fulfil their potential.

Another critical element of effective curriculum design for ‘more able’ students is access to powerful knowledge—content that is not only academically rigorous but also relevant and transformative. Archer et al. (2018) explore how students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, perceive the value of powerful knowledge. They argue that access to such knowledge is essential for fostering critical thinking and agency, and that providing this knowledge to all students, including the ‘more able’, is crucial for enhancing their educational experiences and outcomes. Building on this, Persson (2014) advocates for a curriculum that recognises the talents of highly able students by offering challenging and transformative knowledge. Persson’s work underscores the idea that such a curriculum can address societal inequalities by providing opportunities for gifted students to engage with content that pushes them beyond conventional academic expectations. This approach, according to Persson, helps not only in academic development but also in the personal growth of students, equipping them with the tools to address complex real-world problems.

In summary, the literature underscores that curriculum design for ‘more able’ students should be flexible, challenging, and enriching. By prioritising powerful knowledge and providing opportunities for critical thinking, independent exploration, and personal growth, curriculum design can play a crucial role in supporting gifted students. As discussed by Taber and Riga (2016), Montacute (2018), Ofsted (2015), Archer et al. (2018), and Persson (2014), it is essential for curriculum planners to recognise the needs of gifted learners and design educational experiences that foster both academic excellence and personal development.

Extracurricular Enrichment

Some research has emphasised that extracurricular activities can significantly enhance the skills and talents of ‘more able’ students. Montacute (2018) underscores the importance of enrichment programs, such as clubs, competitions, and workshops, in providing highly able students with the chance to deepen their skills and explore their interests outside the formal curriculum. These activities allow students to challenge themselves in new contexts, developing both academic and personal strengths. In a similar vein, Persson (2014) stresses that extracurricular activities are key in fostering talents beyond the classroom. Persson suggests that such activities allow gifted students to gain essential experiences that enrich their social skills and enhance their critical thinking abilities. These opportunities are particularly important in ensuring that students can apply their intellectual abilities in a range of contexts, thereby supporting their holistic development.

Extracurricular activities also play a vital role in social development, fostering important relationships and networking opportunities for gifted students. Brady (2015) explores how schools that offer a broad array of extracurricular programs are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of gifted students. According to Brady, these activities not only provide an outlet for pursuing personal interests but also enable students to form social connections with like-minded peers. This social engagement is essential for building self-esteem and leadership skills, which are crucial for gifted students as they mature. Additionally, Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir (2024) emphasise how extracurricular activities can help mitigate challenges faced by ‘more able’ students, particularly those arising from educational disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These activities allow gifted students to engage in meaningful and structured experiences that promote resilience, foster leadership, and support peer interactions. The opportunity to interact with peers who share similar interests and abilities is especially beneficial for students who may feel isolated in traditional academic settings, enabling them to build social connections and collaborative skills.

In summary, research consistently underscores the importance of extracurricular activities in supporting the development of ‘more able’ students. These activities not only enhance skills and talents but also provide vital social and developmental opportunities. As highlighted by Montacute (2018), Persson (2014), Brady (2015), and Farquharson et al. (2024), extracurricular programs offer an invaluable complement to academic learning by fostering leadership, critical thinking, and social connections that are crucial for the holistic growth of highly able students.

Academic rigour and personal development

Some research has highlighted the social and emotional challenges faced by ‘more able’ students due to the pressures of academic rigour, and has emphasised a need to focus on personal and emotional development of these students to address stress and isolation. For example, Montacute (2018) discusses the emotional and social challenges faced by gifted students. The report notes that these students often experience pressure to perform, which can lead to stress and anxiety. Additionally, the lack of social connections with peers who share similar abilities can contribute to feelings of isolation and emotional difficulties. Additionally, Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir (2024) note that high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds may face unique emotional and social challenges. These students often feel the weight of expectations from teachers and parents, which can lead to stress and impact their overall well-being. Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir emphasise the need for supportive environments that address these emotional challenges.

Teacher perceptions and professional development

Teacher attitudes

Research has shown that teacher attitudes towards ‘more able’ education and ability grouping play a critical role in shaping the educational experiences of gifted students. Archer et al. (2018) explore how teachers’ beliefs about ability grouping, or setting, can influence students’ perceptions of their own abilities. They emphasise that when teachers hold high expectations for ‘more able’ learners, it can positively affect students’ academic self-concept and motivation. In contrast, low expectations or a lack of support may hinder these students’ academic progress and self-esteem. This aligns with findings from Stephen and Warwick (2015), who also argue that teacher attitudes are crucial in fostering an environment that encourages high achievement among ‘more able’ students. They discuss how positive teacher perceptions can create conditions that enhance motivation and academic success, while negative perceptions may limit opportunities for these students to excel. Similarly, Persson (2014) highlights the significant role of teacher attitudes in the identification and support of ‘more able’ learners. The study suggests that teachers who recognise and value the potential of gifted students are more likely to employ effective educational strategies tailored to these students’ needs. In this context, the alignment between teachers’ attitudes and their practices becomes vital for ensuring that ‘more able’ students receive the support necessary for their academic growth. When teachers acknowledge students’ capabilities, they are more likely to advocate for their inclusion in enrichment opportunities and provide them with the challenge required to reach their full potential.

While the importance of positive teacher attitudes is widely acknowledged, various factors can influence how educators perceive and support ‘more able’ students. Parsons (2018) addresses how socio-economic and cultural factors shape teacher expectations and attitudes. The study reveals that teachers’ biases regarding students from different socio-economic backgrounds can impact their attitudes towards ‘more able’ learners. In particular, teachers may hold different expectations for students based on their perceived socio-economic status, which can lead to inequitable educational experiences. This suggests that teachers’ perceptions of ‘more able’ students may not always be based solely on their academic potential but may also be shaped by external factors such as cultural stereotypes or assumptions about a student’s background.

Taken together, the research emphasises that teacher attitudes are pivotal in shaping the educational experiences of ‘more able’ learners. Positive attitudes contribute to greater motivation, achievement, and inclusion, while negative or biased attitudes can hinder these students’ progress. The need for professional development and awareness of the influences that shape teacher perceptions is essential in creating equitable and supportive educational environments for ‘more able’ students.

Professional development

Research has consistently highlighted the critical role of professional development in equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively meet the needs of ‘more able’ students. Power, Newton, and Taylor (2020) examine curriculum reforms in Wales and emphasise the importance of ongoing professional development, particularly within the context of new educational frameworks aimed at addressing inequalities. They argue that such professional development is essential not only for enhancing teachers’ understanding of how to support ‘more able’ students, but also for enabling them to implement strategies that foster an equitable learning environment. This is especially important as schools navigate the complexities of these reforms and strive to provide more inclusive educational experiences. Similarly, Archer et al. (2018) stress the need for targeted teacher training to recognise and nurture the potential of gifted students. They suggest that professional development initiatives should focus on equipping teachers with strategies to identify, engage, and challenge ‘more able’ learners effectively. By ensuring that educators are well-prepared to meet the needs of these students, professional development can significantly improve educational outcomes for ‘more able’ learners, ensuring that their potential is fully realised.

Despite the recognition of the importance of supporting ‘more able’ learners, many teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to effectively challenge and nurture the potential of ‘more able’ students. Persson (2014) explores this gap, noting that although teachers generally acknowledge the importance of supporting gifted learners, many feel they lack the necessary tools, strategies, and resources to do so effectively. Persson argues that this lack of preparedness highlights the need for structured professional development programs that not only offer theoretical knowledge but also provide practical, actionable strategies for engaging and challenging ‘more able’ students in the classroom. Moreover, Loft and Danechi (2020) discuss how teachers frequently express a need for further professional development opportunities and resources to better identify and nurture the potential of ‘more able’, or ‘gifted and talented’, students. Their study highlights that educators often seek additional support and training to enhance their ability to recognise the unique needs of ‘more able’ learners and to apply effective teaching strategies tailored to those students. The desire for targeted professional development is thus a recurring theme in the literature, underscoring the importance of providing ongoing opportunities for teachers to build their expertise in this area.

Together, these studies underscore the vital role of teacher professional development in supporting the education of ‘more able’ learners. Effective training equips teachers with the tools and strategies necessary to identify, engage, and challenge students of all abilities, including ‘more able’ students, ultimately fostering an environment where all students can thrive. Despite the recognition of its importance, there remains a clear need for more structured, targeted professional development programs that address the specific needs of gifted learners and provide teachers with practical support. The emphasis on continuous professional development is key to improving the educational experience of ‘more able’ students, ensuring that they are provided with the opportunities and challenges required for their academic growth.

Intersections of ‘more able’ and disadvantage

Socio-economic disadvantage

Research has consistently shown that socio-economic disadvantage is a critical factor influencing educational outcomes, with substantial achievement gaps observed between students from low-income backgrounds and their more affluent peers. Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir (2024) provide an in-depth analysis of educational inequalities in England, focusing on the effects of socio-economic status (SES) on attainment. They demonstrate that SES, often measured by eligibility for free school meals (FSM), is a significant predictor of academic success. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to achieve lower educational outcomes, which can have lasting effects on their life trajectories, including employment and health outcomes. However, Farquharson et al. note that FSM eligibility, while a useful indicator, does not fully capture the diversity of socio-economic disadvantage, as other factors—such as parental education and support—also play a critical role in shaping educational achievement. Further exploring the role of socio-economic disadvantage, Montacute (2018) highlights that disadvantaged highly able students often underperform relative to their more advantaged peers despite showing similar academic potential. This phenomenon, known as the achievement gap, underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the unique challenges faced by these learners and to provide the support necessary to help them meet their potential.

Several studies have explored how systemic and socio-cultural barriers further hinder the academic progress of disadvantaged students. Simpson (2024) specifically addresses the underachievement of white working-class students, particularly those eligible for FSM. Simpson argues that systemic classism, coupled with the pressures of an under-resourced education system, contributes to the marginalisation of working-class students. These students are often alienated by a combination of academic pressures, financial cuts to schools, and a lack of support, which exacerbate their struggles and hinder their academic success. Simpson advocates for policies that cater to the specific needs of working-class students, including reducing academic pressure and focusing on the social and emotional aspects of learning to foster a more supportive environment. Additionally, Archer et al. (2018) explore how socio-economic background intersects with educational structures and settings to affect outcomes. Their research highlights that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face systemic barriers—such as low expectations, limited resources, and structural inequalities—that significantly impact their academic achievement. These barriers contribute to the disparities in outcomes for these students, reinforcing the importance of systemic reform and targeted support. Loft and Danechi (2020) contribute to this discussion by examining the challenges faced by disadvantaged high-achieving students. Their research reveals that these students frequently have lower aspirations and ambitions compared to their more advantaged peers, which contributes to the persistence of attainment gaps. Loft and Danechi recommend strategies to enhance support for these learners, particularly in terms of guidance and enrichment opportunities, which can help them develop the aspirations and skills needed to overcome socio-economic barriers.

The socio-emotional factors associated with socio-economic disadvantage also significantly influence academic outcomes. Jerrim and Carvajal (2024) examine the educational trajectories of bright 5-year-olds from low-income families and find that, while these children perform similarly to their higher-income peers in primary school, there is a marked decline in various outcomes—such as academic achievement, well-being, and behaviour—during the transition from primary to secondary school. This period, particularly between the ages of 11 and 14, represents a critical point of vulnerability for high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Jerrim and Carvajal suggest that the decline in achievement during this transition is not purely cognitive but is heavily influenced by socio-emotional factors such as bullying, lack of recognition, and low self-esteem. They call for targeted interventions that address the emotional and psychological needs of these students and ensure their continued engagement and success. Sammon, Toth, and Sylva (2015) also address the equity gap in educational achievement, highlighting how socio-economic disparities affect academic progress across the entire educational system. They argue that although some students may have high potential, their socio-economic status can hinder their academic progress, contributing to the persistent achievement gap.

The quality of the school environment plays a significant role in mitigating the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage. Tan (2024) emphasises that school quality can either exacerbate or alleviate the effects of SES on academic achievement. Schools in low-SES areas often face resource limitations, which can undermine the ability to provide high-quality education. Tan further highlights the role of ecological factors—such as neighbourhood characteristics, family stress, and available resources—in shaping educational outcomes. His research underscores the importance of educational policies that recognise these complexities and address systemic inequalities by improving resources and support in disadvantaged schools. Moreover, Power et al. (2019) examine the challenges of implementing child-centred education policies in Wales and find that schools in disadvantaged areas often struggle with effectively applying these approaches due to resource limitations and a cultural mismatch between the pedagogical model and the social backgrounds of working-class children. This mismatch can lead to disengagement and lower achievement, demonstrating the need for contextualised educational strategies that meet the needs of disadvantaged students. Ofsted (2015) similarly highlight that many high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not achieve their full potential. Despite their academic abilities, these students often lag behind their more affluent peers, indicating a significant achievement gap that persists throughout their education. The report calls for targeted efforts to address these disparities and ensure that high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are adequately supported.

Metacognitive skills—the ability to reflect on one’s own learning processes—and self-regulation, which involves managing emotions, thoughts, and behaviours, are crucial for academic success. Mujis and Bokhove (2020) highlight that while these skills are essential for all learners, there is a notable disparity in self-regulation among socio-economically disadvantaged students. They argue that disadvantaged students may struggle to effectively apply cognitive strategies, potentially due to a lack of guidance and support. The authors suggest that targeted interventions aimed at developing metacognitive skills could help to close the attainment gap, although they acknowledge that further research is needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of such interventions.

The research reviewed demonstrates that socio-economic disadvantage is a significant determinant of educational outcomes, with achievement gaps persisting across different student groups. The key factors contributing to these disparities include systemic barriers, socio-emotional challenges, school quality, and access to resources. Furthermore, while bright students from disadvantaged backgrounds often demonstrate potential, they face unique challenges that hinder their academic success. Targeted interventions, improvements in school resources, and contextualised educational strategies are essential to mitigating these challenges and closing the achievement gap. Addressing socio-economic disadvantage requires a multifaceted approach that includes systemic reform, tailored support, and greater recognition of the socio-emotional factors influencing learning.

Intersectionality of disadvantage

Despite socio-economic factors playing a leading role in disadvantaging students, research into educational disadvantage has also focused on the intersection of multiple factors, including ethnicity, geography, gender, disability, language, and looked-after status. These intersecting factors are found to compound challenges, creating disparities in academic achievement and life outcomes. Students from marginalised groups require specific, tailored support and interventions to address these intersecting disadvantages. McMaster and Cook (2019) argue that integrating intersectionality with quantitative methods can provide deeper insights into how these overlapping identities shape educational trajectories, advocating for more detailed data collection to enable comprehensive analysis. Moreover, Connolly et al. (2019) demonstrate how schools can inadvertently exacerbate inequalities through practices like biased set allocation, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and certain ethnic groups more likely to be placed in lower sets despite similar prior attainment. The study also highlights gender disparities, as boys were more likely than girls to be assigned to higher sets, reflecting broader educational achievement gaps. This underscores the importance of ensuring that set decisions are grounded in academic merit rather than influenced by socio-economic, gender, or ethnicity-based factors. These intersecting disadvantages require targeted, tailored interventions. Connolly et al. (2019) call for a more equitable approach to educational practices, emphasising that set decisions should be based on prior attainment and potential rather than social or ethnic biases. Gender also plays a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes, as reflected in the disparities in set placements, further demonstrating the complex nature of educational disadvantage.

Disadvantage and ethnicity

Research on educational disadvantage highlights the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status as crucial factors shaping academic achievement. Strand (2014) investigates the complex relationship between these factors, particularly at age 16 in England. Strand finds significant achievement gaps, notably among different ethnic groups and socio-economic statuses. Strand argues that an intersectional approach is essential to understanding these disparities, as simplistic explanations based on one factor—such as ethnicity or gender—fail to capture the complexities of educational outcomes. For example, while white working-class students often experience unique challenges, including lower aspirations and attitudes towards education, students from certain minority ethnic groups tend to have higher educational aspirations and more parental support, which can contribute to better academic outcomes. Strand emphasises that addressing educational inequalities requires an understanding of how ethnicity, gender, and social class interact.

Ethnicity and socio-economic status also intersect in the educational experiences of specific minority groups. Wallace (2017) examines the challenges faced by Black Caribbean youth in England, using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to explore how these students navigate the educational system. Black Caribbean youth, Wallace argues, face systemic barriers such as racial stereotyping and biases from both teachers and peers. Despite these obstacles, they actively draw on their cultural capital—non-financial social assets such as family support, language, and community values—to create opportunities for success. Wallace underscores that the educational experiences of these students are deeply shaped by the intersection of their racial and class identities, which influence how they are positioned within the education system. Similarly, Parsons (2018) identifies significant achievement gaps between different ethnic groups in England, noting that students from Indian and Chinese backgrounds, who often receive substantial home support, outperform their white working-class peers. In contrast, students from Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds tend to face additional barriers that hinder their academic achievement. Parsons argues that the relationships between poverty, ethnicity, and gender are complex and interrelated, requiring more nuanced approaches to addressing the needs of disadvantaged students.

The role of class-based disadvantage is also evident in the research on white working-class students, particularly those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). Simpson (2024) explores how these students experience significant underachievement, not due to racism, but because of systemic classism and a lack of support within the education system. Simpson argues that financial cuts and the narrow focus on academic performance create an environment that alienates white working-class students and their families. These students often disengage from education because they feel excluded from a system that prioritises exam results over meaningful engagement. Simpson advocates for policy changes that would reduce academic pressures on schools and enhance the social and emotional aspects of learning, which could help these students re-engage with their education. Importantly, Simpson suggests that fostering strong teacher-student relationships can provide a sense of safety and trust, which in turn encourages better academic engagement. Additionally, Banerjee (2016) identifies the overlapping roles of socio-economic status, ethnicity, and language barriers in explaining the underachievement of disadvantaged students, particularly in science and mathematics. Banerjee highlights how these factors negatively affect students' attitudes toward school and hinder their academic progress. She suggests that targeted interventions are needed to support students facing these intersecting challenges.

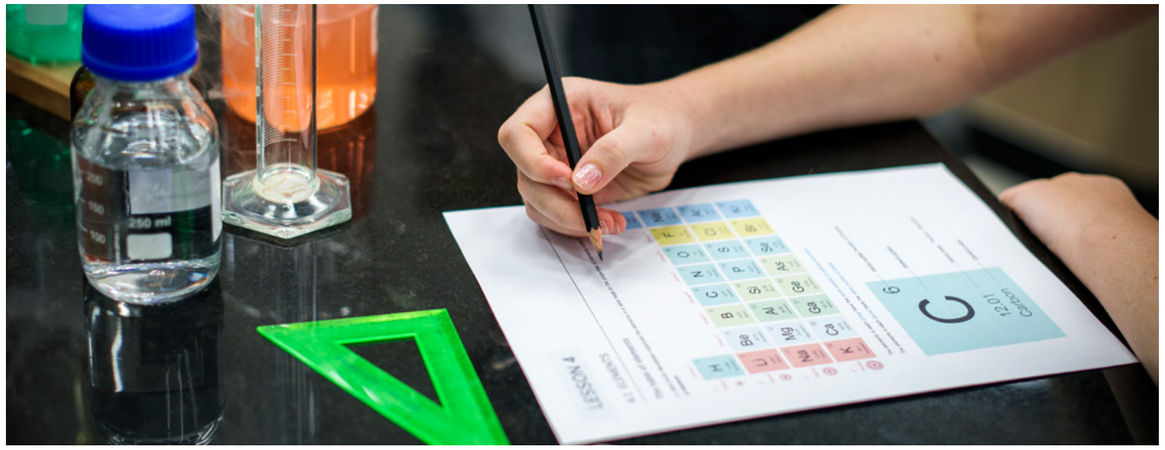
Overall, these studies underscore the importance of recognising how multiple, intersecting factors—including ethnicity, class, and gender—shape the educational experiences of students. Educational systems must consider these complex intersections to provide tailored support and address the underlying inequalities that contribute to achievement gaps. Addressing these intersecting disadvantages can help promote more equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Disadvantage and geography

Research has consistently shown that geographic factors play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Farquharson, McNally and Tahir (2024) explore how these geographical differences influence attainment across the UK, noting that urban areas generally have a higher concentration of educational resources, including better-funded schools, more experienced teachers, and a broader array of extracurricular activities. In contrast, rural areas often face challenges such as limited school choices and fewer resources, which can hinder student performance. As Farquharson, McNally and Tahir highlight, these disparities are particularly evident in the regional variations in educational attainment between London and other areas of England. Schools in London tend to receive higher levels of funding, allowing for enhanced support services and resources, which contribute to better outcomes for students. Farquharson, McNally and Tahir stress that regional disparities in educational resources and support mechanisms are a significant factor influencing achievement gaps across the country.

In addition to general geographic disparities, specific groups of students, such as looked-after children, are particularly affected by geographic factors. Mannay et al. (2017) investigate how location influences the educational experiences of this group. Their research highlights that looked-after children often face significant regional disparities in the availability of educational resources and support services, which can impact their academic success. In areas where resources are scarce, these students may encounter challenges such as a lack of experienced teachers, limited extracurricular opportunities, and insufficient special education services. Urban areas, by contrast, tend to offer more opportunities and better access to specialised support services. The study further reveals that local educational policies and practices vary by region, influencing how effectively looked-after children are supported. Areas with more comprehensive policies and greater community involvement in education tend to offer better outcomes for these students. Mannay et al. emphasise the importance of community engagement and social capital, particularly in regions where looked-after children might lack stable home environments. Communities with strong support networks and active parental involvement create more conducive learning environments, which are essential for supporting disadvantaged groups.

Another key factor influencing educational disparities is social segregation within the education system. Burger (2019) defines social segregation as the unequal distribution of students from different socio-economic backgrounds across schools. This phenomenon exacerbates disparities in access to critical educational resources such as social, economic, and cultural capital, which are essential for academic success. Burger's research highlights the reciprocal relationship between school segregation and residential segregation. In affluent areas, schools are more likely to attract advantaged students, leading to a concentration of resources in these institutions, while schools in less affluent areas serve disadvantaged students, deepening the divide in educational opportunities. Burger argues that in highly segregated systems, the impact of socio-economic status (SES) on student achievement becomes more pronounced, intensifying educational inequalities. Although not focused solely on the UK, Burger notes that these patterns of segregation and their impact on educational outcomes are common across Europe, with the UK's education system reflecting broader trends of social inequality.



Disadvantage and English as a second language

Strand, Malmberg and Hall (2015) explore the educational achievement of students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in England, examining the factors influencing their attainment. They found significant gaps in educational attainment between EAL students and their native English-speaking peers, with EAL students, on average, performing lower in standardised assessments. Students who arrived in the UK at a younger age tended to perform better than those who arrived later. Younger students generally had more time to acquire English language skills and adapt to the educational system. EAL students who had been in the UK for longer periods showed improved academic performance, suggesting that sustained exposure to the language and culture positively impacts academic achievement in this context. EAL students from certain ethnic backgrounds, such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani, faced additional challenges related to cultural and linguistic barriers. Furthermore, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were at a higher risk of low attainment due to limited access to educational resources and support. Strand, Malmberg and Hall emphasise the need for targeted interventions and support for EAL students to help bridge the achievement gap. They recommend that schools implement strategies to enhance language acquisition, provide additional resources, and foster an inclusive learning environment that recognises the diverse needs of EAL learners.

Disadvantage and gender

Research has shown that gender intersects with socio-economic disadvantage in complex ways, creating unique barriers to educational success for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, Cullen *et al.* (2018) found that girls from disadvantaged backgrounds often face unique barriers that can hinder their academic success. Societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles can impact girls' educational aspirations and confidence. In some cases, girls may be discouraged from pursuing certain subjects or career paths that are traditionally male-dominated. Socio-economically disadvantaged girls may have less access to educational resources, such as tutoring or extracurricular activities, which can enhance their academic performance. Cullen *et al.* also establish that parental engagement in education can differ by gender, with boys sometimes receiving more encouragement in certain subjects. This can lead to disparities in motivation and achievement between boys and girls. To address these issues, Cullen *et al.* suggest schools should implement interventions specifically designed to support girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing on building confidence and encouraging participation in a wider range of subjects. Additionally, establishing mentorship programs that connect disadvantaged girls with role models in their fields of interest can help inspire and motivate them to pursue their academic goals.

Further, Jerrim (2017) notes significant gender disparities in educational achievement, with girls generally outperforming boys in various subjects, particularly in literacy and language skills. However, socio-economic background plays a significant role in shaping these outcomes with disadvantaged girls in particular facing unique challenges that can hinder their academic performance despite their potential. This is particularly so for the most able disadvantaged girls who lag three years behind their more affluent peers in science.

Disadvantage and disability

Tan, Hughes and Foster (2016) highlight several specific disadvantages that disabled students, particularly those who are also gifted, experience in comparison to their peers. Disabled students often have limited access to educational resources and support services that are crucial for their success. This lack of access can be exacerbated by systemic issues within the education system, which may not adequately address the needs of students with dual exceptionalities. There is often a lack of understanding and awareness among educators and peers regarding the needs of students with co-occurring disabilities. This misunderstanding can lead to stigma and negative perceptions, further marginalising these students within the educational environment. Traditional educational practices often fail to provide the necessary support for students with dual exceptionalities. This inadequacy can result in underachievement and a lack of fulfilment of their potential, as the educational system may not recognise or address their specific needs. Tan, Hughes and Foster advocate for tailored interventions that consider the specific challenges faced by gifted students with learning disabilities, emphasising the importance of individualised support.

Disadvantage and looked after children

Mannay *et al.* (2017) investigate the educational experiences of looked after children in Wales, emphasising the negative impact of being labelled as looked after and low expectations from educators and peers on their academic success, while highlighting young peoples' desire for challenge and support. Being labelled as looked after can have a stigmatising effect for young people, impacting their self-esteem and motivation and making them feel marginalised within the educational environment. Despite the systemic low expectations placed upon them, many participants in Mannay *et al.*'s research expressed a strong desire to be academically challenged and to achieve their potential. They articulated a need for educators to recognise their aspirations rather than define them solely by their circumstances. Mannay *et al.*'s findings highlight the importance of providing appropriate support and encouragement to looked after children. Participants emphasised that they are not passive recipients of their educational experiences; rather, they are active agents who wish to succeed and require high expectations from their educators.

School-based factors and the role of teaching

Research on disadvantage has also highlighted that the curriculum and teaching quality play crucial roles in addressing educational disparities. Providing strong, thought-out curricula and access to powerful knowledge enables disadvantaged students to engage critically and equitably both in their education and their wider world. Effective, adaptive teaching that maintains high expectations can help mitigate achievement gaps, while teacher biases and low expectations for disadvantaged learners can reinforce inequalities, limiting their academic potential.

Curriculum

The role of curriculum in shaping educational outcomes for disadvantaged students has been a subject of some discussion in recent educational research. A key concept in this discussion is "powerful knowledge", which refers to a well-defined body of knowledge that transcends students' immediate lived experiences, enabling them to engage critically with societal issues and develop agency in the world. Rata and Barrett (2014) argue that providing all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, access to powerful knowledge is essential for fostering critical thinking and improving life chances. They highlight that unequal access to such knowledge has historically marginalised certain groups, particularly disadvantaged students, and stress the importance of addressing these disparities to achieve educational equity. By ensuring that disadvantaged students have the same opportunities to engage with powerful knowledge as their more advantaged peers, educators can help level the playing field and avoid offering a diluted or irrelevant educational experience. The curriculum, therefore, should be designed to challenge students and provide them with opportunities to engage meaningfully with knowledge that enhances their cognitive development and future success.

Curriculum design also plays a crucial role in promoting educational equity by fostering environments that encourage critical thinking and deeper engagement with complex content. Taber and Riga (2016), while focusing on the curriculum for gifted students, assert that well-designed curricula benefit all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The authors argue that disadvantaged students often face barriers that hinder their engagement with rigorous content, such as limited access to resources or lower expectations. However, a curriculum that is flexible and responsive to the needs of all students can help mitigate these disparities by encouraging engagement with challenging material. This approach not only benefits disadvantaged students by equipping them with essential skills but also provides them with the tools to critically analyse and understand the world, which can enhance their life chances. This perspective aligns with the emphasis placed on critical thinking in Rata and Barrett's framework, where powerful knowledge is seen as a tool for empowerment.

Persson (2014) further explores the concept of powerful knowledge in the context of gifted education, focusing on its relevance to disadvantaged students. He argues that providing access to knowledge that goes beyond everyday experiences is essential for understanding complex concepts and navigating social environments. However, Persson highlights that disadvantaged students often lack access to high-quality educational opportunities, which can prevent them from engaging with powerful knowledge. He advocates for a curriculum that not only recognises the talents of highly able students but also ensures that all students, regardless of background, have access to the knowledge that empowers them to influence their social environments. In this way, Persson's analysis reinforces the idea that a well-designed curriculum is crucial for bridging the educational gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged students.

However, the implementation of flexible curricula, as seen in Wales' recent curriculum reforms, raises concerns about the potential for further inequalities in access to essential academic content. Power, Newton, and Taylor (2020) examine how the successful implementation of Wales' new curriculum hinges on teachers' ability to adapt their pedagogical practices, with most educators indicating that extensive professional learning will be necessary. While flexible curricula may offer benefits, such as emphasising areas like health and wellbeing, Power, Newton, and Taylor caution that this focus could detract from core academic content, especially for disadvantaged students who may already face significant barriers in accessing rigorous knowledge. Furthermore, they highlight the challenges of implementing these curriculum changes effectively in disadvantaged schools, where inadequate resources and insufficient funding may limit students' access to critical academic content. Without proper accountability and support, these curriculum reforms could inadvertently exacerbate existing educational inequalities, hindering the academic success of disadvantaged students.

Teaching quality

Research consistently underscores the importance of high-quality teaching in supporting disadvantaged students and closing achievement gaps. Ofsted's (2015) report highlights the central role of teaching quality in improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged learners. It emphasises that effective teaching practices, which include high expectations and tailored support, are crucial in addressing the challenges these students face. When teachers implement strategies that meet the specific needs of disadvantaged students, they can help mitigate the barriers these learners encounter, leading to improved academic achievement.

Montacute (2018) further explores the critical role of teaching quality in addressing achievement gaps among disadvantaged students. According to Montacute, high-quality teaching—characterised by strong subject knowledge and effective pedagogical strategies—is one of the most significant factors influencing educational outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Teachers who possess deep expertise in their subject matter are better able to engage students and explain complex concepts clearly, which is especially important for students who may require additional support. Montacute emphasises the value of differentiated instruction, noting that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient to meet the diverse needs of disadvantaged students. Tailored teaching methods, including the use of varied instructional strategies, ensure that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, have access to the curriculum. By maintaining high expectations and using effective strategies, teachers can foster increased motivation, engagement, and participation among students, leading to better academic performance. Montacute advocates for continuous professional development for educators, focusing on effective teaching strategies, an understanding of the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged students, and the creation of inclusive classroom environments that support diverse learners.

Strand (2014) expands on the theme of differentiated teaching by investigating disparities in educational achievement across various demographic groups, including those defined by socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender. Strand's research reveals that disadvantaged learners often experience significant achievement gaps compared to their more advantaged peers. He stresses the necessity of differentiated teaching strategies to address these disparities. A key argument in Strand's work is that a one-size-fits-all approach to education fails to accommodate the diverse backgrounds, abilities, and needs of students, particularly those from marginalised or underrepresented groups. To close achievement gaps, Strand advocates for teaching methods that are specifically tailored to the individual needs of students. This includes ensuring equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities, providing additional resources, and implementing targeted interventions that address the specific barriers faced by disadvantaged learners. By offering differentiated support and resources, schools can help level the playing field for disadvantaged students, improving their chances of academic success.

Teacher expectation and bias

Teacher expectations play a crucial role in shaping the academic experiences and outcomes of disadvantaged students. Archer et al. (2018) explore how set ability grouping can exacerbate educational inequalities, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ability grouping often results in these students being placed in lower ability groups, which limits their access to quality instruction, resources, and opportunities for advancement. Such placements can reinforce negative stereotypes and lead to lower expectations from both teachers and peers. Teachers' beliefs about a student's ability significantly affect the support and encouragement they offer, which, in turn, influences the student's academic self-concept and motivation. Disadvantaged students, when subjected to lower expectations, may internalise these beliefs, resulting in reduced academic self-confidence and disengagement from learning. This cycle of low expectations and diminished academic self-worth can perpetuate disadvantage, making it essential for educators to adopt strategies that provide targeted support and foster the academic potential of all students, including differentiated instruction and tailored interventions (Archer et al., 2018).

The impact of teacher attitudes and biases is further explored by Parsons (2018), who investigates the complex relationship between teacher perceptions, socio-economic factors, and cultural influences on educational attainment. Parsons highlights that teachers' expectations are often shaped by their perceptions of students' socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers may hold implicit biases based on these backgrounds, leading to lower expectations and reduced academic support for students from lower socio-economic groups. This bias can further entrench educational inequalities, as students are not provided with the encouragement and opportunities necessary for academic success. Additionally, cultural factors, such as ethnicity and social class, can influence teachers' attitudes, often leading to the application of stereotypes that affect teacher-student interactions. Parsons argues that such biases are particularly detrimental to 'more able' learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, as teachers may overlook their potential or fail to provide appropriate challenges and support. This bias can limit opportunities for advancement, perpetuate cycles of underachievement, and hinder the academic progress of disadvantaged students.

Wallace (2024) focuses on the concept of academic profiling, which refers to the mischaracterisation of Black and other racially minoritised students based on cultural stereotypes and previous academic performance. Wallace argues that practices such as setting and streaming based on perceived ability contribute to the academic marginalisation of Black students, often placing them in lower sets and reinforcing negative stereotypes. This institutional practice not only harms the educational experiences of these students but also shapes the perceptions of those in higher sets, perpetuating racialised and classed outcomes. The consequences of such academic profiling are compounded by the fact that these practices are often legitimised within school structures, making them difficult to challenge. Wallace calls for a systemic change to address these structural inequalities, noting that students, teachers, and school leaders all recognise the racialised nature of these practices. The need for institutional reform is essential in dismantling the biases that contribute to unequal educational outcomes for racially minoritised and disadvantaged students.

School resources and support systems

The role of school resources in supporting disadvantaged students is critical to their academic success. Montacute (2018) highlights how socio-economic disadvantage can significantly hinder the academic progress of high-achieving students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite their potential, these students often face barriers such as lower parental engagement, limited access to educational resources, and fewer enrichment opportunities, all of which contribute to their underachievement compared to their more affluent peers. Montacute argues that schools must ensure equitable access to resources to support academically able disadvantaged students. This includes not only financial resources but also the provision of high-quality teaching, mentoring programs, and extracurricular activities that can enrich their educational experience. Furthermore, Montacute outlines various support systems and interventions, such as tailored academic support, differentiated teaching strategies, and the effective use of pupil premium funding, to provide additional resources for disadvantaged high attainers. By addressing these disparities in resources and support, schools can better equip disadvantaged students to reach their full academic potential.

Sammons, Toth, and Sylva (2015) similarly emphasise the importance of adequate school resources in supporting disadvantaged learners. They argue that schools which invest in high-quality teaching, learning materials, and extracurricular activities create an environment conducive to student learning. These resources are essential in mitigating the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage, providing disadvantaged students with a more equitable chance of achieving academic success. The authors advocate for a collaborative approach, encouraging partnerships between schools, families, and communities to create a holistic support system for learners. Such collaboration ensures that disadvantaged students receive the necessary resources, both inside and outside the classroom, to thrive. Additionally, Sammons, Toth, and Sylva recommend targeted support for schools serving disadvantaged communities, ensuring that these schools have the specific resources they need to close the achievement gap and improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners. This multi-faceted approach underscores the importance of systemic investment in both academic and community resources to support disadvantaged students.

Young people's perspectives on their experiences of education

Empowerment through participation and valuing young people's perspectives

Young people possess unique and invaluable insights into their educational experiences, including the barriers they encounter in their learning journeys. Their perspectives are essential for understanding the complexities of their situations and for developing effective interventions. Researchers and educators are encouraged to adopt inclusive practices that prioritise youth participation in educational research and decision-making. This includes using age-appropriate data collection methods, ensuring that young people are informed about the research process, and providing them with feedback on how their contributions are used. Involving young people in research not only enriches the findings but also contributes to their personal development. By engaging in these processes, young people develop critical thinking, communication, and advocacy skills—capabilities that are valuable for their future endeavours.

The empowerment of students through active participation in their educational experiences is a key theme in recent research. Buckingham (2024) advocates for centring the voices of 'more able' students in educational research, arguing for a deeper understanding of their specific challenges and experiences. This perspective aligns with Conn et al. (2024), who emphasise the importance of incorporating learners' voices in discussions about educational practices and policies. They argue for a rights-based approach that positions students as competent participants in their education. By involving students in conversations about their learning, educators create an inclusive environment that values their input and promotes a sense of agency. Conn et al. further stress that creating opportunities for students to share their experiences fosters a more collaborative relationship between students and educators, leading to more effective educational practices which are informed by young people's views and experiences. Importantly too, these must include the experiences of students whose views may be harder to access and not just the most vocal and articulate.

Egan et al. (2018) highlight the significance of student participation, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, in shaping educational outcomes. They argue that actively involving students in research and discussions about their experiences encourages them to take ownership of their learning. This participation allows students to express their needs, articulate challenges, and advocate for themselves, increasing their engagement with the learning process. When students feel that their opinions are valued, they are more likely to be motivated to succeed academically. Additionally, prioritising student perspectives provides educators and policymakers with direct insights into the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged pupils, such as academic pressures, social dynamics, and emotional struggles. These insights enable educators to develop more targeted interventions that address the real needs of disadvantaged students.

Support systems

Young people consistently express the need for comprehensive support systems within schools to help them navigate their educational challenges. Tan, Hughes, and Foster (2016) found that students, particularly those with complex educational needs, such as gifted learners with learning disabilities, often struggle with traditional educational approaches that fail to address their unique requirements. These students would greatly benefit from tailored support systems, including differentiated instruction and specialised resources designed to accommodate their specific learning profiles. Tan, Hughes, and Foster stress that a more personalised approach, coupled with access to mentors, counselling, and academic resources, could significantly enhance their educational experience and outcomes. Further, mentorship plays a crucial role in supporting students, especially those facing educational and personal challenges. Tan, Hughes, and Foster highlight the significant impact of mentors in the lives of students, with mentorship providing not only academic guidance but also emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. These relationships help students set goals, develop strategies to overcome difficulties, and build confidence in their abilities. Positive mentor-student relationships can facilitate the development of essential skills and emotional resilience, which are key to navigating the complexities of their education. In addition to mentor support, peer relationships also contribute to the social and emotional well-being of students, fostering an inclusive school environment where students feel valued and understood. Tan, Hughes, and Foster underscore that supportive relationships with both educators and peers are crucial for the success of students, particularly those who face dual challenges such as being gifted and having learning disabilities.

The creation of a holistic support system requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community organisations. Egan et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of a collaborative approach in supporting disadvantaged students. Their research suggests that when these stakeholders work together, they can provide the necessary resources, guidance, and emotional support to help students overcome barriers to academic success. This coordinated effort is particularly vital for disadvantaged pupils, who may face multiple challenges both inside and outside the classroom. By fostering partnerships between families, schools, and community organisations, a robust support network can be established to ensure that students receive the personalised and comprehensive support they need.

Teacher attitudes and expectations also play a critical role in shaping students' perceptions of their abilities. Archer et al. (2018) argue that teacher perceptions, particularly towards 'more able' students, can significantly influence how students view their potential. Positive reinforcement from teachers, including the recognition of students' abilities and achievements, can enhance self-esteem and motivate students to pursue higher academic goals. When teachers demonstrate a belief in their students' potential and offer encouragement, students are more likely to internalise these positive expectations, which can drive academic ambition and success. By cultivating an environment where teachers actively support and challenge students, educators can help build students' confidence and motivation to achieve their best.

A future-focused language of growth and (cap)abilities

Young people express a strong desire for a shift in the language and framing of their abilities, particularly in relation to their future potential rather than being defined by past assessments. Young people advocate for a narrative that emphasises their future potential rather than their past academic performance. They want to be seen as capable of growth and improvement, rather than being limited by previous assessments or labels. Many young people express a preference for positive and empowering language that reflects their aspirations and capabilities. They feel that current terminology often reinforces negative stereotypes and fixed mindsets about their abilities. There is a strong call for fostering a growth mindset within educational settings. Young people believe that schools should promote the idea that abilities can be developed through effort and perseverance, rather than being fixed traits.

Conn *et al.* (2024) highlight young people's concerns about being defined by past assessments and the detrimental effects of such labels on their self-esteem and motivation. They found that young people in lower attainment groups reported often feeling marginalised and students wished for recognition of their potential rather than being judged largely on their past performance. Young people want a shift in language and framing that emphasises their future capabilities. Further, Conn *et al.* (2024) found that the lack of movement between groups often reinforced negative identities for young people. This indicates a need for educational systems to provide opportunities for growth and change, aligning with young people's aspirations for a focus on their future potential.

Further, Archer *et al.* (2018) explore how ability grouping (setting) can affect students' experiences and perceptions of their abilities. They note that when students are placed in groups based on perceived ability, it can lead to a fixed mindset, where students believe their abilities are static and unchangeable. This can diminish their motivation and willingness to engage in challenging tasks. Instead, Archer *et el.* advocate for inclusive educational practices that are dynamic and future-focused, and consider student voice in discussions about ability. By involving students in conversations about their learning and abilities, educators can create a more supportive environment that fosters growth and development. They stress the importance of promoting student agency through voice. When students feel empowered to share their experiences and advocate for their needs, it can lead to more equitable educational practices and improved outcomes for all students, particularly those who may be marginalised or overlooked.

Impacts and overcoming disadvantage

Egan *et al.* (2018) found that many young people expressed an awareness of the socioeconomic barriers that contributed to their disadvantage. Students reported feelings of isolation and alienation, particularly when they perceived that their peers had more resources or support. This sense of being different or left out can exacerbate their challenges during the transition to secondary school. The students indicated that their experiences of disadvantage often affected their self-esteem and confidence. They noted that being aware of their socioeconomic status compared to peers could lead to feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt, impacting their motivation and engagement in school. Despite the challenges they faced, many young people expressed hope for their future. They recognised that with the right support and opportunities, they could overcome disadvantages and achieve their academic and personal goals.

Key Findings

The key findings of this scoping review were derived through a systematic analysis of the last ten years of academic and grey literature on the educational experiences and needs of 'more able' learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A comprehensive search and synthesis of studies enabled the identification of recurring themes, challenges, and gaps in the current understanding of how to effectively support these learners. The findings reflect an evolution in terminology, an exploration of barriers to identification, the role of teaching strategies, and the importance of curriculum and enrichment opportunities, with a particular focus on the intersectional impacts of socio-economic disadvantage. These key insights were developed through a careful examination of trends across studies and grey literature, highlighting the importance of inclusive, adaptive practices and ongoing professional development for educators to ensure equitable educational outcomes for all learners, regardless of background. Our key findings were:

1. **Evolution of Terminology**
   The terminology surrounding "'more able'" learners has evolved, with a shift from 'gifted and talented' to more inclusive terms like "exceptionally able" and "higher attaining." This change is driven by the need for clearer identification and effective educational provision and a recognition of the potential damaging and limiting effects that labelling can have on views of ability.

2. **Challenges in Identification Methods**
   There are significant challenges in the identification of 'more able' learners, particularly for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups and this may hinder more equitable educational practices. Traditional methods, such as standardised testing and prior attainment data, often fail to account for socio-economic and other contextual factors that can influence academic performance. This can lead to the under-identification and misallocation of capable students from disadvantaged backgrounds and can be limiting for educational outcomes and detrimental in terms of perpetuating disadvantage.

3. **Adaptive teaching and differentiated instruction**
   Adaptive teaching and some forms of differentiated instruction can effectively support the needs of 'more able' learners, however other forms of differentiation can lead to fixed mind sets and have negative impacts for 'more able' learners. The emphasis should be on high expectations for all groups of students, flexibility and providing additional support where necessary for both 'more able' students and those struggling with classwork.

4. **Role of Curriculum and Powerful Knowledge**
   Curriculum design plays a crucial role in supporting 'more able' students. Curricula need to be flexible, challenging, and enriching, allowing all students to engage deeply with the content. All students should have access to powerful knowledge embedded in their curriculum, defined as knowledge which enables students to achieve academically and engage critically with societal issues. This is particularly important for empowering disadvantaged students to have the same opportunities to engage with knowledge as their more affluent peers.

5. **Access to Enrichment Opportunities**
   'More able' students from disadvantaged backgrounds lack access to enrichment opportunities from which their more affluent peers benefit. Providing access to these enrichment opportunities can enhance learning experiences and foster potential by enhancing a student's ability to utilise aspects of social and cultural capital made available to them through enrichment opportunities.

6. **Impact of Teacher Attitudes**
   Teacher perceptions significantly influence the educational experiences of 'more able' learners. Teachers' expectations can shape the support and encouragement provided to students, which in turn affects their academic self-concept and motivation.

7. **Need for Professional Development**
   There is a clear need for targeted professional development programs that equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively identify and support 'more able' learners. Ongoing professional development should focus on strategies for recognising diverse talents and implementing differentiated instruction.

8. **Barriers to Academic Success for disadvantaged 'more able' learners**
   Many highly able students from disadvantaged backgrounds fall behind their more affluent peers due to a lack of access to enrichment opportunities and tailored support. The importance of access to academic enrichment opportunities as part of targeted support activities emerged from this research with some research pointing to the value of such opportunities, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Montacute, 2018). This underachievement is a critical concern that needs to be addressed through targeted educational strategies.

9. **Socio-Economic Barriers**
   Socio-economic disadvantage is a critical factor influencing educational outcomes. Research consistently shows substantial achievement gaps between students from low-income backgrounds and their more affluent peers. The findings indicate that the effects of socio-economic disadvantage extend beyond academic performance, impacting students' life trajectories, including employment and health outcomes.

10. **Intersectionality of Disadvantage**
    Whilst socio-economic disadvantage remains the major factor in educational outcome disparities, several other intersectional factors also influence this, including ethnicity, gender, disability, language, geography, care-status, and immigration status. Simplistic explanations based on a single factor fail to capture the complexities of educational outcomes and should therefore be avoided. Studies such as Farquhar *et al.* (2024) point to the intersectionality of these factors, meaning that addressing educational inequalities requires a nuanced understanding of how they interact.

11. **Teacher expectations and biases**
    Teacher perceptions and biases can play a substantial role in shaping the educational experiences of disadvantaged students. Teachers' expectations can influence the support and encouragement provided to students, which in turn affects their academic self-concept and motivation. It is important, therefore, that teachers recognise the potential of all learners, and that awareness is raised of the role that teacher perceptions can play in shaping attitudes and influencing student experiences and progress.

12. **Need for Effective Teaching Strategies**
    Implementing effective teaching strategies that cater to the diverse needs of students is vital, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes adaptive teaching and some forms of differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching practices that recognise and value students' backgrounds and experiences.

13. **Professional Development for Educators**
    There is a clear need for ongoing professional development that equips teachers with the skills to address the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged students. To enhance teacher understanding and pedagogic practice, professional development should focus on recognising biases, fostering high expectations, and providing tailored support to enhance the educational experiences of all learners

14. **Valuing Student Voice**
    Students' insights can provide valuable information about their experiences, needs, and aspirations, which can help educators and policymakers create more effective and responsive educational environments. Listening to and valuing students' insights and experiences is not only a key source of information from an important stakeholder constituency but also contributes to student agency. It is important though that not only the vocal and articulate voices are heard but that strategies are also found to engage the views of harder to access students.

15. **Future-focused language around dynamic (cap) abilities**
    Young people express a strong desire to be recognised for their ability to grow, adapt, and improve, rather than being constrained by fixed labels tied to past assessments. This reflects a broader trend towards fostering a growth mindset, which emphasises the importance of dynamic capabilities and students' ongoing potential for development, highlighting the value of continual learning and resilience.

Conclusion

This scoping review has explored the literature surrounding ‘more able’ disadvantaged students in secondary education in England and Wales, with a focus on the evolution of terminology, the barriers these students face, and their educational experiences. The shift in language over the past decade, from terms like ‘gifted and talented’ to future-focused terms such as ‘more able’ and ‘exceptionally able’, reflects a broader move towards more inclusive and accurate understandings of student potential. However, this review highlights that despite improvements in terminology and identification practices, socio-economic and cultural factors continue to obstruct the recognition and support of these students, resulting in significant achievement gaps. More than a linguistic shift, the education system must refocus on adopting learner-focused, inclusive approaches that address the unique needs of each student.

The key barriers identified in the literature include limited access to enrichment opportunities, low teacher expectations, and socio-economic disadvantage – all of which compound the challenges faced by ‘more able’ disadvantaged students. These students frequently lack tailored support, flexible teaching, and enrichment opportunities, all of which impedes their academic progress. Teacher perceptions, shaped by biases related to socio-economic status and ethnicity, can further restrict these students’ experiences and opportunities for success. To overcome these barriers, education must recognise the fluidity of student potential, adopt effective identification and support processes, provide equitable access to powerful knowledge, and develop challenging, adaptive curricula.

While the term ‘more able’ is understood by organisations like NACE as indicating broad, inclusive potential, it can still be perceived as a static label in some contexts, limiting its ability to foster dynamic, growth-oriented education approaches. This review highlights the need to refine language and identification processes further to reflect the fluid nature of students’ potential, while also ensuring that socio-economic, and other marginalising factors are considered to prevent the under-identification of disadvantaged students with high potential.

Looking ahead, the next phase of this research project will reconsider the language surrounding ‘more able’ students by centring student voices and prioritising their perceptions and capturing their lived experiences of education. By engaging directly with students, we seek to better understand how they define their own abilities, navigate educational challenges, how they perceive the support structures in place for them, and how these can be reimagined. This shift in focus will not only enrich our understanding of these students’ experiences but will also provide vital insights into how language, identification practices, and educational interventions can be improved to better serve their needs. The voices of students themselves must be central to any efforts aimed at achieving more equitable and inclusive educational outcomes for ‘more able’, disadvantaged learners. It is essential that education systems evolve to empower students, not just in terms of academic achievement but also in terms of fostering self-determination and resilience in the face of adversity.

Recommendations

This scoping review highlights several key implications for policy, practice, and future research concerning the support and identification of ‘more able’ disadvantaged students in secondary education:

1. **Reconsidering Terminology and Identification**
   There is a clear need to continue to refine the language used to describe ‘more able’ students, moving away from traditional, deficit-oriented labels like ‘gifted and talented’ and adopting more inclusive and fluid terminology that better captures students’ potential. This shift should also inform more equitable identification practices, ensuring that socio-economic and cultural factors are adequately considered to prevent under-identification of ‘more able’ students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. **Teacher Expectations and Professional Development**
   Teacher expectations and biases continue to play a critical role in shaping the experiences of ‘more able’, disadvantaged students. Addressing these biases through ongoing professional development can equip educators with the tools to recognise and nurture students’ potential. Training should focus on fostering high expectations for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and on developing culturally responsive teaching practices that value diverse experiences and learning styles.

3. **Targeted Support and Enrichment Opportunities**
   ‘More able’, disadvantaged students often face barriers related to limited access to enrichment opportunities, such as extracurricular activities, academic mentoring, and tailored learning resources. Providing equitable access to these opportunities is vital to enhancing academic outcomes and fostering personal development. There is a need for advocacy at the policy level to ensure that educational reforms prioritise equity for ‘more able’ disadvantaged students. Schools should adopt adaptive teaching strategies and offer differentiated support to meet the specific needs of these learners, ensuring that they are appropriately challenged and engaged.

4. **Encouraging Parental/Carer and Community Involvement**
   Engaging parents/carers and the community in the educational process can enhance support for ‘more able’ disadvantaged students. Schools should look to build partnerships with families and local organisations to create a support network beyond the classroom. Involved parents/carers can reinforce learning at home, help set academic goals, and support students through challenges, leading to better motivation and achievement. Schools should look to address barriers to involvement for parents/carers, such as work schedules, language issues, or lack of awareness of educational opportunities, by offering flexible meeting times, translation services, and engaging in proactive outreach. Partnerships with local businesses, universities, and non-profit organisations can provide valuable resources like internships and mentorship programs, further enriching students’ educational experiences.

5. **Valuing Student Voices**
   Future research and practice should prioritise the perspectives of ‘more able’, disadvantaged students themselves. By centring their voices in discussions about their educational experiences and the barriers they face, educators and policymakers can develop more responsive and effective interventions. Listening to students’ experiences will also allow for a more holistic understanding of how their academic potential can be nurtured and supported, fostering a more inclusive and empowering educational environment.

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