Student produced artefact

In their own words: the game of education for 'more able' disadvantaged students in secondary schools.

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National Association for Able Children in Education

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Contents

Introduction

This work package built on the scoping review (Clare et al., 2025) by engaging with young people in schools to seek their perspectives as we addressed the first two research questions of the overarching project:

- To understand what is already known about 'disadvantaged' and 'more able' and removing barriers to learning for more able, disadvantaged students
- To understand how flourishing secondary school students conceptualise 'disadvantage'

To examine these questions, we wanted to explore young peoples' thoughts about ability and barriers, and to work with them to reimagine the vocabulary and school journeys. More details of the groups and interview participants can be found in the Table 1.

The work with young people involved working with four groups of school students between two different schools, one of which was a grammar school, one of which was a comprehensive school. At each school we worked with one group of Key Stage 4 (KS4) students and one group of Key Stage 5 (KS5) students, (in the English context KS4 are students aged 14/15 and KS5 students aged 16/17). We met with each group twice.

Both schools were in England; school one is a grammar school in the South of England and school two is a comprehensive in the Midlands in England. The grammar school only has boys in Key Stage 3 and 4 and is co-educational in the sixth form. The two schools work regularly with NACE and the students were selected by the schools as they were deemed by the school as being 'able' and 'disadvantaged'. In terms of 'disadvantage', we worked with students who were deemed as disadvantaged due being multi-lingual, or in receipt of student premium due to being in care or financially disadvantaged, or being autistic or having another additional need. As will be seen later in the report, the young people themselves did not necessarily see themselves as able or disadvantaged. Charlotte worked with school one and met with each group on one day and then with each group for a second time the following day. With school two, Emma met with each group in the morning and then again in the afternoon of the same day.

We gained ethical approval from the York St John School of Education, Language and Psychology Ethics Committee specifically for this phase, after we had gained outline approval for the entire project (Approval code: ETH2425-0206). Within the schools whilst we did offer parents opt out consent, we worked on the assumption that the students had the agency to consent to the research themselves, and this was supported by the schools. They were sent information by the researchers in advance, but we also explained the project and checked for consent at the start of each session. Whilst students could withdraw from the group work if they wished to due to safeguarding policies within the school, it was explained that they would still have to remain in the room but did not have to take part in the group, however no one withdrew. Due to the nature of group work, we did not offer post groupwork withdrawal of data as the artefacts created by students and notes taken by the researchers were anonymous. Both Charlotte and Emma have enhanced DBS clearance, and both schools gave permission for the researchers to work with the groups of students without a teacher or other staff member being present.

Setting	Number of participants	Pseudonyms	Method	Day
School 1 Key Stage 4 Meeting 1	8 students (boys)	Jonathon, Brijesh, Tim, Praveen, Harry, Flynn, Parker, Liam	Group work	1
School 1 Key Stage 4 Meeting	8 students (same as first meeting)	Jonathon, Brijesh, Tim, Praveen, Harry, Flynn, Parker, Liam	Group work	2
School 1 Key Stage 5 Meeting 1	6 students	Ben, Jake, Carson, Shaun, Bella, Mia,	Group work	1
School 1 KS 5 Meeting 2	8 students	Ben, Jake, Carson, Shaun, Bella, Mia, Fatima and Leo	Group work	2
School 2 KS 4 Meeting 1	5 students (2 girls, 3 boys)	Louise, Kate, James, Will and Reuben	Group work	1
School 2 KS 4 Meeting 2	As above	As above	Group work	1
School 2 KS 5 Meeting 1	5 students (3 girls, 2 boys)	Rachel, Jess, Chloe, George and Joe	Group work	1
School 2 KS 5 Meeting 2	As above	As above	Group work	1

Table 1 participants

Data collection

This strand of the project took an Appreciative Inquiry Method (AIM) approach to identify what worked well for the students in relation to their educational journey so far. We sought to capture their experience of education including early memories of education, what they enjoyed about their educational experience, their awareness and views of when differentiation occurred and how this was enacted and their views on 'disadvantage' and 'able' - specifically seeking out their views on these terms and the language used in the school setting in the identification of these.

The AIM approach draws on Vickers' idea of the 'Appreciative System' (Vickers, 1983).

Students at each of the two participating schools worked with their designated researcher. At each school participant students were grouped into Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5.

Each group was tasked with creating an individual map or narrative account of their thoughts following prompts from the researcher to capture their lived experience of education with a particular focus on the language of 'ability' and 'disadvantage' and how this had played out so far on their own educational journey.

In a second session, student participants were then asked to discuss and then combine their individual 'maps' to create a shared vision for what might be imagined and therefore had the potential to be created.

In addition, both researchers made extensive field notes capturing their observations and additional narratives from the student discussions. The field notes were taken both during sessions and afterwards. They might have included important points made by the students, although not precise quotes, but also reflections on our work after the meetings. We then both carried out our own thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) based on the field notes, and artefacts from the groups we worked with. After sharing our analysis with each other we met and noted the similarities and differences and refined our themes together. When quoting data – sometimes it is from our field notes and as close to verbatim as possible of a young person. Other times it is from the artefacts but as many of those are anonymous the quote might attributed to someone from a particular group but no name. Some images of artefacts are included within this report, on the front page, and pages 6, 7 and 8. All names used are pseudonyms.

Findings

This section combines the findings from all two datasets and captures themes that were identified. In part this was to assist with anonymity.

School as a 'game'

In both school settings the student participants shared on their mapping and in their narratives the idea that they felt and understood that schooling and education was in many ways a 'game'.

School 1 students often favoured competitions but low stakes such as spelling bees, times-tables, poetry or 'remembering the numbers of pi'. This often provided opportunities to excel, or even to discover one's talent but was not high stakes enough to cause stress. However, there was more divide about wider competition, with one boy saying he was motivated by rankings and wanting to move up the rankings, but many found such rankings dispiriting. Brijesh suggested that each subject could have 'a top ten ranking but then no-one would know what ranking you were if not in the top ten.' He thought it would be motivating to want to get into the top ten but 'not if you knew you were 25th', he just needed to know he was not in the top ten. There was discussion about other methods of motivation with Jonathon saying that 'badges for blazers are inspiring when I see them on others'. However, Brijesh rejected this arguing that education was a 'craft', and it was the 'love of the artform' that motivated him.

In School 2 there was also debate about the purpose of education with George asserting that it was the competition that motivated him although he was aware that being 'identified by the school as 'more able' gave him an unfair advantage in understanding the 'rules of the game' and in his ability to successfully navigate these and therefore succeed. There was a group discussion about how certain subjects were privileged and therefore the 'game' was narrowed by disciplines that were deemed to be worthwhile such as STEM subjects. This hierarchy of subjects, they argued, also led to an 'uneven playing field' as the perceived value of subjects were linked to outcomes relating to Russell Group university entry and final careers as opposed to any enjoyment a subject might bring and the idea that subjects such as cookery might indeed lead to successful careers but were not viewed as having the same status.

School 2 students also discussed and language 'game' as testing was referred to as a 'knowledge check', homework as 'home learning' and being in detention as 'rest and recovery'. They were uncomfortable with these terms arguing that there needed to be more honesty about what these terms actually meant and more dialogue with students about the need for these.

Also discussed in School 2 was the notion that 'playing the game' was intrinsically linked to a student's ability to successfully navigate the school behaviour policy. They felt that in this arena any sensitivity of 'disadvantage' was lost. As Jess put it 'there is no awareness of how challenges can affect you' - she went on to talk about the uniform pressure which for many students was an area that they struggled with.

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Student produced artefact
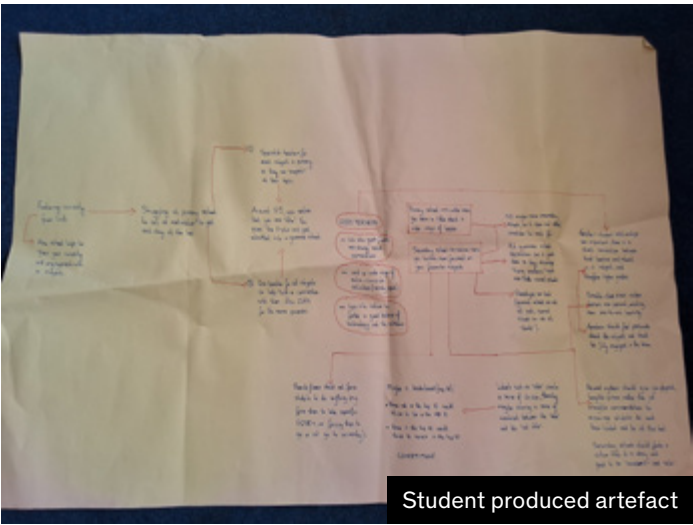
Enjoyment versus ability

Students in both schools described how the pressure to sustain being identified as 'more able' eroded in some cases their enjoyment of study. They talked of the narrowing of their experience as they were encouraged to focus on their areas of strength as opposed to the opportunity to study a broader curriculum. They shared that they felt there was a tension between ability and enjoyment and that this felt unnecessary. Students in School 2 made links with the freedom of primary school before setting and ability was judged or as Louise put it 'before you are chosen'. They reflected that space, freedom, outdoor learning, pupil led learning, connected learning where disciplinary boundaries were more flexible, and creative learning, all led to their increased enjoyment of school.

The parental pressure – discussed in other sections of the report – also fed into the erosion of enjoyment as a number of the student participants agreed that they felt they did not want to let their parents down and therefore felt inhibited to try things that they were perhaps not so good at or subjects that were not deemed as 'academic' but that they enjoyed. Joe made the link on his map that 'family' linked with 'want me to overachieve them' and had 'high expectations for results'.

Feeling the focus was on particular academic subjects, and they had to concentrate on what they were good at. In the grammar school there was a feeling they had to be completely academic 'I barely ever told anyone about breakdancing it was too embarrassing' (KS4 boy artefact).

Differentiation enacted

In School 2 there was wide discussion of the language of differentiation and how this impacted the students and their self-efficacy. The programme adopted at the school to support those students identified as academically 'able' is entitled: 'Able and aspiring'. In being selected for this programme students were able to access additional 'lecture style' learning and additional opportunities to engage in local, regional and national events such as the 'Maths Challenge' and tailored school clubs such as the STEM Club. There was much reflection on the advantages that this brought and the concern that as Chloe questioned 'does this come at the price of other people?' Louise added 'if the group is called 'able' if you are not in it are you 'unable'? In addition to the advantages that the group acknowledged was also a concern that with this 'label' comes an immense amount of pressure to maintain that status. Parents, the group argued, were proud if you got into this group but were then keen to ensure that you stayed there and the group felt that this was understandable for a parent's perspective but also problematic. Some members of the group talked openly and sensitively about their own struggles with mental health and anxiety and attributed the pressure they felt to perform and maintain their status and position on the programme as a contributory factor.

School 2 students were also concerned that students were categorised much too early and that it was then difficult to move sets. Joe questioned 'how can you tell in Year 7 those who will do A-levels or more vocational subjects?' As Will reflected on his map 'education leaves lower sets behind – when younger should everyone just do the same?' Setting was discussed in more detail and whilst the groups could see that learning with peers at a similar level to you was easier, the setting structure felt inflexible and there was no consultation about how and where your best learning could take place. Chloe had come to the school from Hong Kong and had joined part way through the school journey. She talked openly about being put in the 'bottom set for everything as English wasn't my first language and they didn't know what I could do or understand'. Kate had concerns that 'lower sets can have the negative connation that being in sets 3-4 is 'bad'. We need to shift that mindset – being in a lower set isn't bad!'.
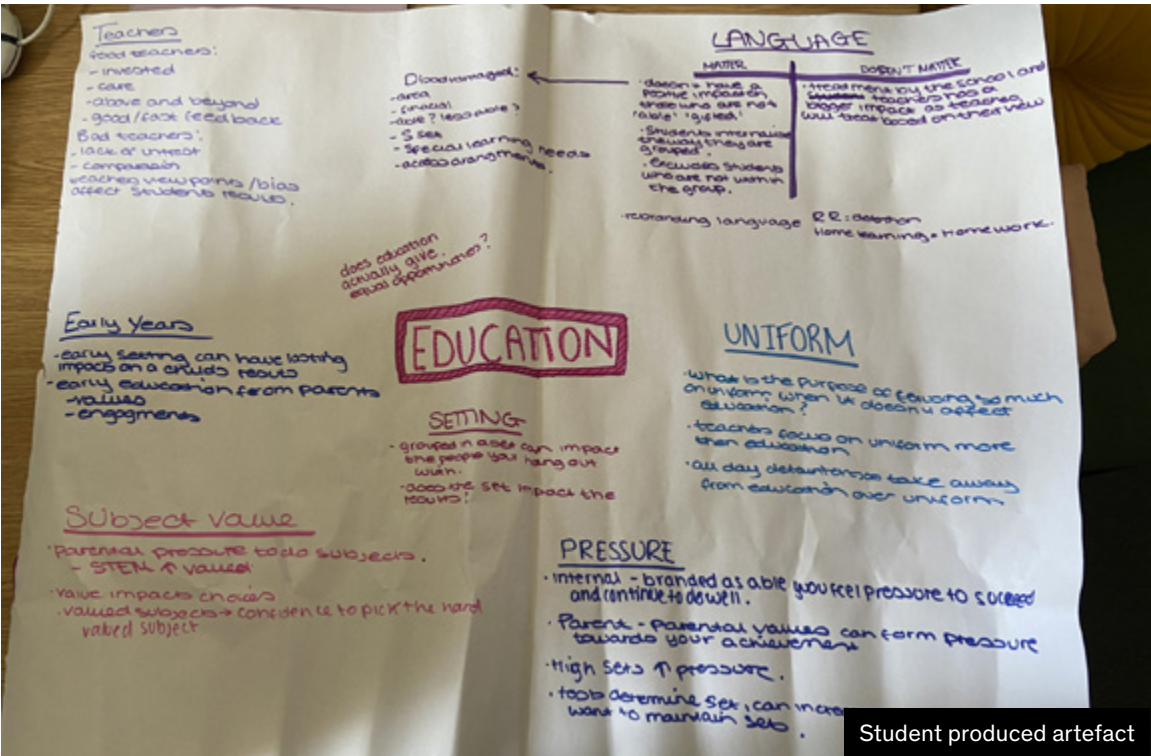
School 1 is a Grammar School and the students were keenly aware of the differentiation that had occurred by way of the 11 plus. This weighed on them more heavily than differentiation within the school. Both groups in school 1 shared great awareness of their place at a Grammar School and that it was beneficial to them but the divide in society was problematic. 'No offence Charlotte but this project is a waste of time because society is broken' (Carson). They all had siblings or friends who had not been given a place and Ben said: 'one minute I had friends at primary school, they next they all hated me, but I hadn't changed'. There was frustration that 'the opportunity of Grammar School' is not available to all and that a place depended on one day is someone's life when they were very young. Several commented that they felt the expectations of other schools on their siblings and friends were much lower and that was the difference between the types of schools. It was not about how 'able' a student was but how much teachers were willing to set high expectations and help support them.

However, the high expectations that frequently go with being 'able' were seen as often being problematic. The pressure of being called 'able' weighed heavily on Parker who said 'my friends always used to call me more able, which I didn't like as I was scared that I might drop my levels'. And later his fear was realised as his grades dropped in English in Year 8 and 'due to me being the 'smart kid' I got ridiculed

on'. Another student said they did not deserve the label they were just good at learning facts and the pressure of the label could lead to burnout.

Part of the 'game' was also being aware of the language of categorisation. Even from primary school all the participating students form School 2 were aware that they were being categorised/ streamed in some way. This ranged from tables with names of flowers or animals to the more formal setting that they had experienced since starting secondary school. As Rachel commented 'you know what is going on and you know when you are on the teacher's radar'.

In School 1, Key Stage 5 preferred talking about being 'book smart' and 'smart', terms more colloquially used, but they also went onto say that it is was more about enjoying academic subjects not being 'more clever' than others. This group also discussed how they 'hated' the word 'gifted' – 'we are not given it' –the implication is 'as if we haven't worked for it'. There was also shared frustration that it was assumed by others that they had a tutor to get into Grammar School whereas they had not been able to afford one (although Bella was provided one as she was in care), 'it ['gifted'] implies we have private tutors or genes to a degree but it's about what we do with our life' (Ben). There was also a frustration that in Primary School those who got into Grammar School were treated as 'celebrities' and the elite, which was not felt appropriate.
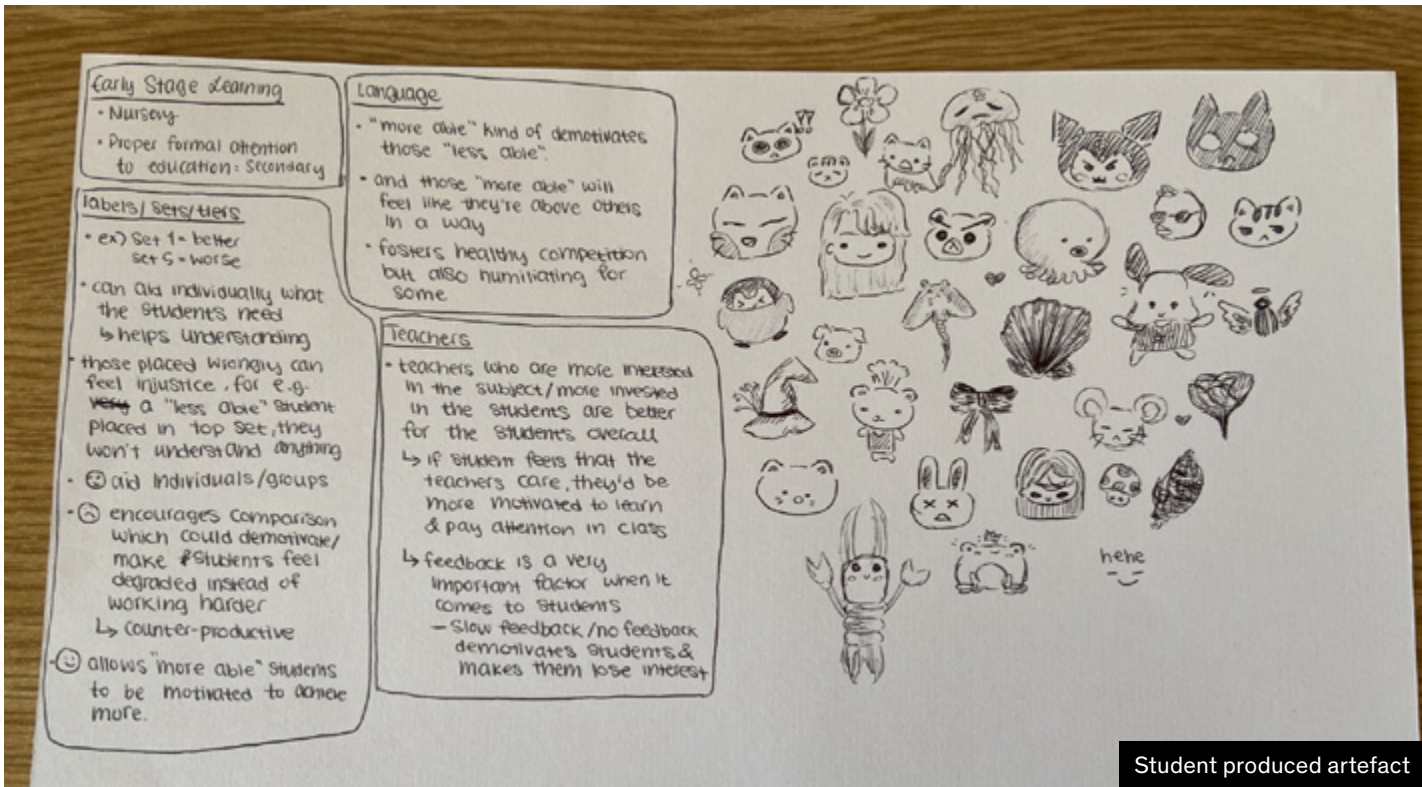
Student produced artefact

Disadvantage

Often students felt that it was not their 'disadvantage' that disadvantaged them but the things around them that did. For example, Harry said that he got extra time in exams due to his disability but that being 'alone in a room whilst having extra time in tests is demoralising'. He also found 2-hour lessons very difficult due to his ADHD and said that 'teachers move on too quickly from topics' assuming he can cope. Several students in School 1 said that Covid disadvantaged them; Parker said 'it decreased my communication skills and confidence' and Praveen said 'lockdown sort of stunted me socially', although some said it advantaged them as they could teach themselves new things, and it 'helped me develop socially as I was not set much work' (Harry).

Bella argued she was not disadvantaged because she was in care (currently seen a marker of disadvantage), rather going in to care was an *advantage*. 'The opportunity I was given was going into foster care. It gave me pretty much a stable home. It gave me safety. Also, my week of tutoring for the 11+. More access to mental health services in Secondary. Grammar school was a massive, massive opportunity'. The disadvantages she said she had experienced included 'Child neglect. Abuse. Poverty. Death of a parent… Dyslexia. ADHD. Mental health challenges'. However, going into care had helped. She saw the week of tutoring when in care as a turning point as it helped her get to Grammar School where she discovered she was 'smart' and able to write poetry.

Other students felt their mental health struggles caused disadvantages along the way. '1st year of secondary school, heavy mental blocks which majorly stopped me form normal education – mainly mental barriers' (Carson). However, Bella felt that there was not so much support for mental health at Grammar Schools, as there were expected to cope. She also argued that it was inappropriate to have to seek support from the same place students have to go when they are in trouble which added to the stigma. Flynn said he had a mental health crisis in year 8 and it was exacerbated by the expectations to be smart at everything. Carson said that Grammar School had a heavy focus on failure and 'life is over' if it happens, which added to the stress.

Several students found language barriers a disadvantage, but not so much having to learn English but how they were treated. For example, Mia arrived in the UK late on in secondary school and found she was put in 'bottom sets' for everything because of English which she was quickly learning. This did not reflect her abilities in any subject, and she argued this disadvantaged her more than the lack of English. When asked for a symbol of their education, Fatima proudly said her tongue was her symbol as it symbolised how her tongue (languages) had defined in many ways her life – but mainly seeing her multilingualism as a skill rather than a problem. Brijesh was exceptionally proud of learning

Tamil in from year 2, so he could 'speak to his grandmother'. But there was nuanced discussion about language around disadvantage, one student said: 'it's not a valid term' but then another said it's 'important to highlight it and realise how you have got here compared to naturally you versus someone not disadvantaged.' Yet someone else said it 'feels demeaning when people say how well I have done'.

School 2 students had powerful reflections on the association that 'disadvantage' had with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) that captured the stigma attached to the SEND label. The names of the sets corresponded to some of the initials of the school – this was to avoid numbered setting. The students (as discussed earlier) had a clear idea of exactly what sets meant what perceived level of ability however so as with some of the language examined earlier there was some scepticism as to the rationale for this. The lowest set according to the student participant group was set 'S'. They explained that everyone just refers to this set as 'special'. They said that they felt 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed' to share this but wanted to be honest about what it. It raised discussion about how the pathologising discourse that can be associated with SEND feeds into the complexity of both 'disadvantage' and 'ability'.

Spatial Exclusion

The participants from School 2 shared that the result of both the differentiation that occurred early in their school journey and the subsequent categorisation in the form of setting resulted in friendship groups being determined by 'ability'.

George talked about the fact that he had 'never met anyone really form set S' and Will described how setting in Year 7 meant that 'your friendship group was formed in Year and that was it'. This was viewed as problematic by the group, and they identified the lack of spaces for all students to meet and interact. Due to the timetabling constraints, subjects that were not taught in sets still followed the pattern as they had to fit around the core subjects. Part of this groups 'wonderings' about how things might be different (discussed later in the paper) centred around the spaces for learning and developing relationships.

Reimagining education in their own words...

Negotiated Learning Spaces

This idea came from the students in School 2 who argued that rather than setting in its current form a more dialogic approach to where students would be able to do their best work could be a way of reimagining school structures. Student participants felt that the precarious nature of when they move sets at any time led to feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Even for students who acknowledged that they were regarded as 'more able' or 'high achieving'. Their idea was that rather than sets being decided purely on test results and a subsequent move up or down resulting from these that consultation with students individually about where they felt comfortable and which group did they feel they could do 'their best work' would take away pressure and make any assessments not feel that they were a cliff edge. They advocated for 'learning spaces' where broadly learners were working at the same pace and therefore could all access the learning more equitably but there would be less language of categorisation and more agency in the decision of where to learn.

In School 1, students wanted to negotiate other practices. The school had moved away from reporting to students and parents about progress and attainment using GCSE grades to words 'Developing, Thriving, Mastering' which was seen as more inclusive. However, the group was divided as to whether this was helpful and felt that students should be asked as to which kind of reporting worked best for them. Some suggested the school could start with the words and move later to numbers if a student found it more motivating. They felt it was important to work with what the student found motivating rather than taking a universal approach.

Students in School 1 did not want to be distinguished as 'able' but at the same time wanted to be safe if they liked academic subjects. They felt there needed to be more respect for all students and all jobs rather than seeing some as better than others in a narrow range of subjects (or jobs).

Well-being

A much wider programme of education was advocated by both School 1 groups with extracurricular activities, nature, sport and arts sitting alongside maths, English and science. There was a feeling there should be public education including for parents about the importance of arts, so there was less of parents pushing their children down traditionally academic routes at the expense of a rounded education. The Key Stage 5 group discussed how there should be a change in the mindset encouraged at school, criticising the current one: as 'success equalling economic power'; 'not allowed to feel weakness'; 'can't be different'; 'parents 'forcing' you to do something. They advocated a new mindset in which 'success equals happiness'; 'should show and feel comfortable to feel'; 'embrace who you are'; 'don't be ashamed'; 'parents encouraging you'.

Both School 1 groups debated when they thought education started, with many seeing socialisation from birth as key to social education. They felt opportunities socialise, instil values, other than doing well at school to earn money were important. Such holistic thinking was also present when reflecting on where they would like to be in 10-20 years' time with Brijesh saying he wanted to be a paediatrician in a good NHS practice with enough money saved to 'go build a hospital abroad'. Parker wanted to be a respected engineer and that his future kids would look up to him but also 'I want to be an accomplished dancer; dancing in many shows' and wanted to build on his 'vocal and violin skills to perform in concerts and shows.' Jake wanted to be able to help his parents financially. They felt society and schools should value a wider range of subjects, activities and jobs.

To develop resilience and well-being, the students in School 1 felt that when starting primary school, all students should have to undertake a wide range of challenges and not simply be channelled into things they were good at or stretched in that area. They thought if from day one, students should grapple with different difficult things, it would become normal to find things 'hard', and resilience could be built.

School 2 participants sought 'kinder language' and a celebration of those who were working hard and an awareness of all learners when recognising achievement. They argued that a slower pace and a more connected curriculum as they had experienced in primary school would support wellbeing and foster a more inclusive learning community with space to connect with peers across the boundaries of academic achievement.

Summary

The labelling of high attainers, such as 'able', or 'gifted', is problematic and contested by the students themselves. Some felt that it was an inaccurate label – they were just good at learning facts or liked particular subjects that they felt were more valued than others. Some felt the label added pressure and was detrimental not only to their mental health but to their education as it can result in a narrow focus. Students were also concerned about the divisions labels cause and how other students may feel if they are not sharing the label. Rather than simply changing labels – for example from *gifted* to *able*, we need to think about what we are trying to achieve and why. What are the unwitting side effects of such labels?

Labelling students as disadvantaged is also problematic as students felt that it inaccurately put the focus on the individual rather than the different systems and structures that disadvantaged them. However, there was acknowledgement that the label 'disadvantage' could at times bring them advantage – for example, being in care brought the help to pass the eleven plus and gain a place in the grammar school. The students in the grammar school were very aware that their place at the school, mitigated much of the disadvantage they may have experienced. The school has a hub for neurodiverse students, which provided a space for support, resetting, and some of the participants recognised they would not be thriving in a grammar school without such support. They were keen to point out that because of the support, they were not disadvantaged.

There was a desire for a broader curriculum from the start of primary school and that all children should have access to myriad opportunities whether academic, sporting, or arts based. It was felt that everyone should have access to enriching broad activities and challenges and that others should not miss out because they did not have a particular label. In school one, students were keenly aware of the advantage they had being in a grammar school and had friends and siblings who they considered disadvantaged by missing out on a place and that this was unfair. The students at school two felt their friends were disadvantaged by not having the opportunity to work alongside a range of peers due to the rigid setting regime. They also felt that setting was decided on a narrow focus of academic subjects such as English and STEM and that this meant that students might find themselves in the 'bottom' set for subjects, such as Art or Cookery, in which they might excel but that the timetable had link to these privileged subjects.

The young people had a wide range of aspirations for the future, including universities, apprenticeships, and having children. They did not feel held back by their disadvantages and arguably this is in part due to their place within the school system – they felt that they were advantaged due to being good at favoured subjects, which many felt was unfair. There was a strong call for a more equitable society in which particular jobs and school subjects were not favoured over others.

Finally, a more dialogic approach was called for by the students, whether in design of grading criteria or learning spaces. They wanted their agency recognised and wanted to be able to shape education around individual needs rather than a one size fits all, top-down approach.

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