Outstanding Secondary Schools

A study of successful practice

Executive Summary

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[1] For details of the report see: Demie, F and Lewis, K. (2010). *Raising Achievement: Good Practice in Secondary Schools with Outstanding Leadership*, Research and Statistics Unit, London Borough of Lambeth, January.

Introduction

Over the last three decades considerable attention has been devoted to studying how successful practices have helped in raising achievement against the odds in British schools. Raising achievement in schools requires, at the very least, an understanding of the factors influencing performance in schools. The body of available British research suggests that most previous studies have focused on the reasons why ethnic minority children are underachieving. However, in recent years, the need for detailed case studies of successful schools that raise the achievement of pupils has become apparent as a means of increasing our understanding of the ways in which schools can enhance pupils' academic achievement.

For this reason a number of previous research projects looked at examples of schools that provide an environment in which pupils flourish. These identified the key characteristics of successful schools in raising achievement including strong leadership, high expectations, effective teaching and learning, an ethos of respect for diversity and good parental involvement (see for details Demie 2005, DfES 2003b, McKenley et al 2003, OFSTED 2002, Blair and Bourne 1998). Demie (2005) and DfES (2003) argued that there is no 'pick and mix' option. An effective school will seek to develop all these characteristics underpinned by the practical use of data to monitor the achievement of particular groups of pupils to pinpoint and tackle underperformance. Much of the previous British research in this area again is on Black Caribbean pupils and there is little research into the factors which contribute to educational success and high attainment of all groups of pupils in schools.

Research into successful schools in the USA has also provided similar insights into common practices in high-performing schools serving high-poverty student populations. For example, Edmonds (1982) uses high-performing schools to identify the common characteristics that could be the source of their success. The most recent body of research on school effectiveness has found that successful schools have: strong leadership; frequent monitoring of student progress; shared goals in the professional community; parental involvement and a positive and academically focused school climate (e.g. Williams et al. 2005).The findings of research into successful schools have increased our understanding of the ways in which schools can enhance pupils' academic achievement.

Recent studies by Ofsted into twelve outstanding secondary schools also highlighted the prime contribution of leadership and management, together with a number of other features responsible for the success of each of the case study schools. The Ofsted review shows that the outstanding schools in the sample succeed for the following reasons:

- '*a strong and caring ethos and commitment to the children from all staff, coupled with a genuine desire to achieve the very best for children*
- *a positive 'can do' culture where praise and encouragement prevail and self-esteem is high*
- *outstanding teaching by consistently high-quality staff who show great commitment and passion*
- *a constant focus on maintaining and improving standards of attainment, emphasising the systematic development of basic literacy and numeracy skills*
- *high-quality planning, assessment and targeted intervention to enable all children to achieve the best they can*.' *(Ofsted 2009)*

One crucial aspect, without which the above would not be so effective, is the quality of leadership. '*The majority of the headteachers spread the credit for success widely and also play a pivotal role in creating the ethos of the school and exercising strong pedagogical leadership*' (Ofsted 2009). The evidence from the international literature also demonstrates that effective leaders exercise an indirect and powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students in most countries (see Muijis et al 2004). They argued that headteachers in effective and improving schools focus on teaching and learning issues. They put students first, invest in their staff and nurture their communities. In addition they are also good at proving that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, that speaking English as an additional language can support academic success and that schools really can be learning communities (see Demie et al 2006).

Policy makers and schools need more evidence on 'what works'. There is now a need to look more closely at why these outstanding schools do well against the odds. An increase in research of this type which focuses on what works and challenges perceived notions of underachievement in schools, will provide positive messages.

The aims and objectives of the research

The aim of this research paper is to examine the success factors behind outstanding achievement and improvement of schools that serve Britain's disadvantaged areas. Two overarching research questions guided this research:

1. Why do some schools succeed against the odds?
2. What are the factors contributing to this success?

Terminology: What do we mean by the term outstanding schools?

For the purpose of this study we used the Ofsted definition of outstanding schools (see Ofsted 2010). Schools are graded overall as outstanding by Ofsted when "*Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils and the school's capacity for sustained improvement are judged to be outstanding.* In addition, the majority of judgements in the quality of provision such as leadership and management, teaching and learning, effectiveness of governing body, engagement with parents and careers, pupil well being, effectiveness of safeguarding procedures, community cohesion need to be also outstanding" (Ofsted 2010, p. 85).

Research Methodology

This research is an ethnographic study of outstanding schools in an inner London Local Authority. Two complementary methodological approaches were therefore adopted, each contributing a particular set of data to the study.

Firstly GCSE empirical investigation was undertaken to draw lessons from the last seven years by examining in detail the attainment of all pupils in the authority.
Secondly, detailed case study research was carried out to illuminate how the complex interactions of context, organisation, policy and practice help generate effective practice in raising the attainment of all pupils. Four secondary schools that serve disadvantaged communities were selected for case studies. The case study schools' GCSE results were exceptionally good and the schools as a whole covered a range of ethnic groups, community languages spoken, free school meals, EAL issues. A higher than average proportion of students in these schools come from disadvantaged backgrounds. On average about 37% of all secondary pupils are on free schools meals and in one school it is as high as 72%. Key criteria for the selection of schools were as follows:

- an above-average proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals
- 'outstanding' or 'good with outstanding features' grades overall in the most recent Ofsted inspection
- exceptionally good results, high standards and a sustained GCSE improvement over the last 10 years

Each of the case study schools was visited for two days between July 2009 and March 2010. A structured questionnaire was used to interview headteachers, staff, governors, parents and pupils to gather evidence on how well all pupils are achieving and the factors contributing to their achievement. Topics explored the school curriculum, the quality of teaching and learning, how the school monitors pupils performance, how it supports and guides pupils, school links with parents, parents' and pupils' views about the school and its support systems, race and ethnicity in the curriculum, quality of school leadership and management, competence and materials to use the existing flexibility within the curriculum to make subjects more relevant to pupils' own experiences and to reflect their cultural heritage.

Background to the Case Study Schools

This research paper considers evidence from Lambeth schools. The Local Authority (LA) is one of the most ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse boroughs in Britain. About 83% of pupils are from black and ethnic minority groups. The 2008 census shows that there were 10097 pupils in the LA's secondary schools. Of these, African pupils formed the largest ethnic group with 23% followed by Black Caribbean 20%, White British 17%, mixed race 10%, White other 5%, Portuguese 6%, Other Black 6%. There were also a small number of Indian, Bangladeshi, Irish, Pakistani and Turkish pupils in the schools.

The social and cultural diversity noted in the ethnic composition of the school is also reflected in the languages spoken. Around 150 languages were spoken in the LA's schools. 41% of students spoke a language other than English as their main language. The most common were Yoruba, Portuguese, Spanish, Twi, French, Ibo, Ga, Krio, Tagalog and Luganda. The Local Authority therefore has a large proportion of bilingual pupils that need support in English as an additional language.

The case study schools serve some of the most deprived wards in Lambeth. Many pupils come from disadvantaged economic home circumstances. The number of pupils taking up free school meals is about 34% and ranges from 19% to 72% for all schools. There is a high proportion of pupils joining and leaving the school at other than usual times. Over half the pupils are from homes where English is not the first language. The number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs is less than average but the number with learning difficulties is very high. The majorities of the pupils are from a wide range of minority ethnic groups and speak more than fifty different languages. The school populations mirror the communities in which the school sit. Most pupils come from African, Caribbean, Portuguese and White British backgrounds. A significant proportion of pupils are of a mixed heritage. Despite challenges in terms of the level of deprivation in the area, the overwhelming impression the schools create is of confidence and cohesiveness. The schools are exceptionally inclusive schools. The schools promote community cohesion and ensure pupils understand and appreciate others from different backgrounds with a sense of shared vision, fulfilling their potential and feeling part of the community. Through the school curriculum, pupils explore the representation of different cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in the UK and in the LA.

Table 1. GCSE attainment at the end of secondary education (5+A*-C)

| Years | Case Study Schools | | | | | LA Average | National Average |
	School A	School B	School C	School D	All Case schools		
2000	43%	11%	40%	56%	33%	32%	49%
2001	43%	29%	54%	55%	48%	36%	50%
2002	55%	26%	59%	61%	51%	40%	52%
2003	53%	39%	59%	69%	54%	42%	53%
2004	68%	54%	56%	61%	56%	48%	54%
2005	73%	53%	73%	64%	68%	52%	56%
2006	71%	57%	73%	74%	69%	55%	58%
2007	71%	67%	69%	75%	69%	56%	62%
2008	72%	61%	76%	82%	72%	62%	65%
2009	78%	73%	85%	94%	82%	73%	70%

The case study schools studied in this report defy the association of poverty and low outcomes and they enable such young people to succeed against the odds. Table 1 shows that attainment of all pupils has been exceptionally high. About 82% of the pupils in the case study schools achieve 5+A*-C. The improvement rate of pupils in the case study schools is also impressive. Between 2000 and 2009 pupil outcomes in all case study schools improved

from 33% to 82% 5+A*-C. This is an improvement rate of 49% compared to 21% in all schools at national level.

Overall the case study schools' data shows that from their generally low starting points, pupils reach exceptionally high standards. The key challenge is to find out what outstanding schools are doing and why their strategies are proving to be effective in raising the achievement of all pupils. For this reason Ofsted has looked at examples of schools that are excelling against the odds in raising achievement (OFSTED 2009). All these reports agreed on the key areas: Leadership and ethos, relationship in schools, expectation and commitment, parental engagement, monitoring and curriculum enrichment and good quality teaching and learning.

Successful Practice for Raising the Achievement in the Case Study Schools

In the comprehensive research carried out into good practices in the case study secondary schools, researchers have identified a number of key features as the reasons for success.

Leadership and management

It is well-known that leadership plays a key role in school improvement. Harris and Chapman (2001) argued that leadership in schools in challenging circumstances is critical and has a powerful influence on the achievement of students and effectiveness in school. Leaders adapt different styles to suit their circumstances.

All schools demonstrate 'outstanding' leadership by the headteacher and senior management teams. Each is supported by a committed team of teachers. Leaders are described as 'inspirational' and 'visionary'. Each has a strong moral drive for pupils to succeed whatever their background. One headteacher stated,

> 'What a great and noble thing it is to be around children and change society. Anybody who says children from round here can't achieve is badly letting down local children and communities. We challenge stereotypes about the area served by school by asking questions such as why can't a school behind Brixton be a good school where achievement is outstanding? Why cannot children in the area have their dream? We have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently.'

The head teachers are excellent role models and have clear visions for raising standards and effective monitoring of the curriculum at all levels.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities in leadership teams are evident at every level in each school. One school attributes its dramatic improvement over the last decade to the promotion of a dynamic and decentralised approach to leadership which has given staff genuine authority but supported them in developing the best possible way of going forward. A Deputy Principal characterises her leadership team as:
> 'Cohesive…it is not negatively competitive, it is cohesive.'

Leaders in each school set high expectations for their staff teams with a relentless focus on improvement, particularly in the quality of teaching and learning, effective use of data and higher achievement by students.

> 'It is about staff taking responsibility for outcomes… everyone is clear about their roles and everyone is supported!' (Deputy Principal)

There is an exceptional sense of teamwork across each school which is reflected in the consistent and committed way managers at all levels work toward the schools' aims to raise achievement. Schools are proud of their efforts to maintain an inclusive ethos. This is seen in the very good progress made by all groups of students.

> '*We are constantly reviewing ourselves, reflecting on why we are here, our vision, our ethos. Our spiritual connections are strong- the belief in the agenda goes beyond the contract, there is a moral obligation to get this right.*

Despite the regular reviews and restructures, the fundamentals don't change. Such fundamentals are summarised by one headteacher,

> '*There is an energy flowing through the school. It's almost an eastern philosophy- what you believe you translate into reality.*'
> '*Heads and senior managers need to remain excited about the agenda*'.

Governance in the schools is strong. Governance share the school's aspirations for the students. Governors are involved in the life of each school through '*regular meetings and fact finding visits*' and it's strategic direction. They are well informed about development plans and increasingly effective in the balance between support and challenge. One headteacher states that;

> '*They have been righteous in the way that they have changed things. They have a vested interest in the school and the direction within which it goes. Throughout the rough times they have had the ability to be optimistic, the governors have taken very difficult decisions.*'

A strong culture of self-evaluation pervades all areas of the schools. At senior level it is particularly incisive. It is underpinned by a drive to get the best possible outcomes for each child.

> '*We teach them to the highest possible expectation. We want them to keep their options open until the last minute.*'

> '*We have the support of the parents. They want the kids to do well. They appreciate that we are spending the extra time with them.*'

At one school the specialism is Business and Enterprise gives pupils the opportunity to enhance their leadership across the school. 'We have a strategic system to challenge children's leadership qualities'. School managers had a clear rationale for their choice of school specialism. The head states;

> '*Many of our children come from family backgrounds where the ethos is 'if you don't do it for yourself then no one else is going to do it for you' therefore the business and enterprise specialism is very important.*
> *Why shouldn't these children be business leaders, I believe it is morally wrong for children not to believe in themselves- why shouldn't these children not have their dreams, without the ego of the headteacher getting in the way.*'

There are many opportunities for children to develop leadership through sport, army cadets, sea cadets, Boys to Men, London Young Chamber of Commerce, Girl Guides' and the Black Rose initiative- pupils have developed the leadership side of this and the older children train and develop the younger children.

The views of pupils, parents and students are sought regularly, are much valued and used to inform worthwhile changes in the schools. Head teachers are keen for children to have a greater say in the way the schools are run and a greater involvement in their learning, to get the culture of learning right. A member of staff in the English department of one school states, '*If we are doing it for them we need to know what we can do better for them. We need to know what they want from us.*'

A headteacher states;

> '*We want pupil voice to be credible to the children. Pupils do feel that they have an input into policies etc. As school leaders we have to be flexible, to look at our*

population- know who is in the population- connect with the community. If the kids won't buy into the agenda they won't do it. We constantly reflect with the children.'

The strength of pupil voice is summed up in the words of a one student to the headteacher,

'Well you know this place is good but we have to take it further.'

Pupil views are sought through School Council meetings with Senior Management Team (SMT), pupil questionnaires, target setting days, student committees and through a range of Action groups for example Chaplaincy, Environment and Fundraising.

The case study schools also pride themselves in the diversity of their workforce. They have recruited good quality teaching and non teaching staff who reflect the languages, cultures, ethnic background and faiths of the pupils in the workforce. The schools recruit from their local communities, which sends a strong message to the communities that they are valued. This has helped the schools to become the central point of the wider community and has built trust. Teaching Assistants, often from the local communities, are greatly valued in the schools. They play key roles in communicating with parents and supporting pupils.

At one school the headteacher employs ex students who act as powerful role models to the students. One is a Learning Support Assistant on her gap year between school and university. Her role has been so successful that the headteacher intends to recruit her replacement from the current Year 13 for next year. She states;

'I am an ex student on my gap year. I have done well- I am going to Bristol University next year to study medicine. I can be an example to the other girls, I know how hard it is, GCSEs are hard, A levels are hard.'

Effective teaching and learning

'We teach them to the highest possible expectation. We want them to keep their options open until the last minute. We want the students to believe that they can do anything. 'We have the support of the parents. They want the kids to do well. They appreciate that we are spending the extra time with them.' (Head of English)

There is an active focus on learning in the schools with a sustained focus on ensuring access to the curriculum for every pupil, whatever their background. Curriculum planning focuses on the individual. Teachers have an excellent understanding of where pupils are at in their learning; they know the learning profiles of each child and what interventions pupils might need. Pupil progression is very much an area of discussion and staff teams and schools are keen to bring a discussion of learning not only in the core subjects but to have a '*microscopic view into the foundation subjects too.*' Through weekly targets teachers focus on pupil learning and constantly review what they do in the classroom.

'Are they achieving? It might be a pastoral issue if they aren't. We have a system of referral and have a dialogue with pastoral staff about our more vulnerable pupils. After every 6 weeks the directors of learning and teachers look at the eight classes of Year 7 for example. Maybe X amount are underachieving, this is what the teacher has done, this is what we are going to do to raise achievement. These are the resources. Maybe we will give support before and after school- many pupils prefer this rather than in the lesson.' (Deputy Headteacher)

In one school there is a policy of early entry in Y10 in Maths. If girls do well in maths A, A* then they can go on to do GCSE Statistics, if they get a B they can do it again to get a higher grade. For those students who won't get a C in Maths *'we identify areas of weakness and give them mentoring, also they can come to maths club every Thursday, this is compulsory.' (Head of Maths).* Students also receive a Maths watch DVD to support them with their revision. The examples on the DVD are individualised and interactive, made in a way to make revision better. In the Spring term a representative from Ed Excel comes into the school to work with three groups- Year 10 early entry, Year 11 C/D group and Y11 A* group. This is to

give hints on exam techniques and *'what they need to do to get the results.'* Similarly in the Year 11 mock GCSEs the exam papers are scrutinised and topics highlighted that students need to focus on. These parts are highlighted on the DVD.

In another school the heads of Maths and English also argued that teachers use data extensively for lesson planning and targeting support:

> *'We track pupils over the term, fill in the excel spreadsheet and identify key groups. Also I do a book scrutiny and give individual feedback to teachers. They look for constructive feedback. We do informal observations as a coaching tool.*
>
> *Again in English we have 6 classes in Year 11 which means that there are only 18/19 girls in the bottom set. Restructuring helped with this. We are very well resourced. We can provide texts to meet the needs of the learner. They get their own new books. They value this. Some classes might study Austen, Bronte- other classes, Golding. We can make a careful choice of text according to the class. We have small units – modules for each text.'*

One of the Headteacher stresses:

> *'We hold our departments accountable. In September they come to see me with the line managers with their department analysis, and then at mid year. We give them an Ofsted grade. In our classrooms there is a feeling that we want to get our work done and achieve, this spreads from the majority, many African children, to the minority. Most girls want to go to University and do a profession.* (Headteacher)

In recognition that many pupils do not possess independent learning skills another school started the 'Learning to Learn' programme which is promoted as a process of discovery about learning. It involves a set of skills that teach pupils to be learners for life promoting the five attributes to becoming a lifelong independent learner; resilience, resourcefulness, responsibility, reasoning, reflective learning. A strong part of this school's identity is the range of academies on offer to its pupils which extend the curriculum and develop skills beyond the classroom. Examples include the writing, drama, science, sports and film studies academies. Pupils apply for academies, '*going through the interview process is part of the Business and Enterprise identity.'(Assistant headteacher)*

There is now a big focus on Gifted and Talented (G and T) pupils in the schools. Gifted and Talented pupils have Individual Education Plans which are monitored. Using data as a tool, gaps in the learning of Gifted and Talented pupils are discussed with teachers, pupils and parents in order to consider interventions to raise achievement. In one school to meet the needs of the G and T pupils the mathematics department is running different programmes, such as an after school club to organise trips and to prepare pupils for the UK maths challenge. One pupil was given the opportunity to attend a Maths Day which was organised by UK Maths Challenge which gave the pupil the opportunity to meet pupils from other countries.

In the case study schools the pupils appreciated teachers' expectations of them and the support they gave to achieve this.

> *'Teachers in this school teach well and help you'*
> *'The teachers push you- you can take GCSE maths early and then take a new subject on like media.'*
> *'We are encouraged to aim high and we are supported to achieve it'*
> *'They give us opportunities to broaden our experience and travel to other educational places and institutions to learn'*
> *'They help us to achieve beyond expectations'*
> *'They are strict and firm'*
> *'The teachers are very good'*
> *'Teachers are very good at teaching and making lessons fun'*
> *'We all enjoy learning here'*

Parental engagement and a strong link with the communities

The schools encouraged and valued the active involvement of parents in their children's education and communication is a major strength. They tried to find imaginative ways to break down barriers and make parents welcome, always responsive to parents' needs. Information was shared with parents on achievement and development as well as discipline issues and there was a high level of communication. The school staff see themselves as being part of a community. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the schools and know what the schools do to provide an environment of learning. They were appreciative of the schools efforts to guide their children and give them grounding, both academically and socially. They felt that each child was valued in his/her own terms and although children might perceive differences in standards between them the schools encouraged them to do the best for themselves:

> '*One parent wrote, 'I am extremely grateful for all the encouragement, care and support my daughter gets.' Care, guidance and support are outstanding*' (Ofsted 2007).

The pupils interviewed also praised their schools on parental engagement and communications and argued that:

> '*The school goes the extra mile to communicate and work with our parents*'
> '*Parents are invited to get feedback about our performance and to celebrate our achievement during award ceremonies*'
> '*The school uses text to send information to parents*'
> '*They send parents information through leaflets and letters every time*'
> '*They have prayer meetings for parents and these are well attended and valued*'
> '*Our parents are very confident to talk to our teachers and staff*'
> '*The school is seen by our parents like a family*'
> '*Our school see itself as part of the community*'
> '*We are all like families*'
> '*School is a multicultural school. It is the school that values every culture, heritage and religion*'.
> '*The school is good in breaking cultural differences and outstanding in community cohesion. They bring everyone together*'

All case study schools have strong links to their community. One school is a designated training school which allows opportunity for community engagement. There is a wide offer to the community; work experience, training, offering degrees. Many people are referred from the local Community Resource Centre to the school for a variety of training e.g. Family learning, ICT training, digital photography. Parents are brought into the school with the aim of making the school the heart of the community. Through the Business and Enterprise specialism the school is to launch a Community Project which will be available to 60 participants. This will bring together a range of ethnicities e.g. Portuguese, Somali. Together they will decide on their focus, learn how to get funding and about working together.
The purpose of their continuing education is threefold; to raise their aspirations, to support them to support their children and to bring the community together.
As part of the higher school's performing status the school has also been developing school improvement training.

> '*We have trained 31 PGCE students; their experience was broad, they got trained in data analysis and a lot of them had experience teaching the middle band. This really makes their experience real.*' (Assistant headteacher)

Some of the teachers have been doing their Masters Degrees 'in house' through action research and many Teaching Assistants (TAs) benefit from this in house training.

In another school the Christian ethos has greatly contributed to links with the community served by the school. The School chaplain states;

> '*The school is like a family for parents and children. We are part of the community and the school has a leadership very committed to community cohesion and inclusion'.*

There are a number of innovative activities that strengthen community links at the school. These include the Gospel Choir where parents and communities play a key role in the singing. The school has a strong link with St Martin-in-the Fields in Trafalgar Square and the whole school goes once every year to sing there. This is a tradition the school has kept going since it was established and *'it is a beautiful finish to the end of the year by singing at St. Martins'. (School Chaplain)*

As part of a strong community link and to celebrate diversity, one school has organised an annual International day. This event involves pupils, parents and neighbours celebrating cultures from across the globe at the school. In the words of the Headteacher:

> '*All the colours, sights and sounds of the world were brought to life at a buzzing international day. The parents and pupils from different parts of Africa played colourful African dances and music in traditional dress from Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia and other African countries. A Scotsman played the bagpipes in traditional dress, while elsewhere a steel band played by pupils from the Caribbean world and there was African drumming by pupils from African continent. Many parents and students performed traditional Portuguese dance and music.' The* Headteacher of the school said*: 'It went really well; the best turnout we have had. It is something we have been doing for many years, and it is about including all our different communities.'* A teacher who helped in organising the events added: '*it was a really great atmosphere, and a really good way to get everyone socialising together to celebrate the achievement of the school and the community the school serves.'*

Celebration of Diversity and Culture

The case study schools saw the diversity within the school community as a genuine asset to the life of the school, to widen students' horizons and to enhance learning. School leaders are committed to community cohesion and inclusion. Each school therefore is described by parents and staff as a family. A student from one school stated *"everyone should be proud of their heritage; as a community we have embraced the different languages that we have..'*

The school celebrates the cultural heritage of its pupils in a number of ways. The displays in the school celebrate pupils' achievement and acknowledge the diversity of its pupil population. One staff member commented;

> '*Displays are the reflection of our community. They are part of the community dialogue. They reflect what is going on in the school. They are part of the ethos of high expectations'.*

The celebration of diversity is also embedded into school life through e.g. assemblies, the teaching of modern foreign languages and the curriculum. One pupil stated:

> '*Everyone should be proud of their heritage; as a community we have embraced the different languages that we have. Everyone feels they can succeed.'*

Another school organises a Gospel choir every year where parents and the community play a key role in the singing. Also the school has a strong link with St Martin-in-the Fields in Trafalgar Square and the whole school go once every year to sing there. This is a tradition the school has kept going since it was established and *'it is a beautiful finish to the end of the year by singing at the school.'*

All schools use Black History month as an opportunity to explore different countries and celebrate diversity. *'Every class studies a different country to give them a wealth of knowledge about the culture, the food, the language and the people'.*

Another project links one school with Anchovy High School, St James, Jamaica and St Andrews Complex, Sekondi, Ghana. The project was developed to mark the bi-centenary of the abolition of slavery in 2007. It was named the 'Triangle project' in recognition of the historical triangle of trade which existed between Britain, Ghana and Jamaica. The aims of the project were to consider the impact of the slave trade and its abolition, to consider global social justice and human rights, to increase identity and the contribution made by people of Caribbean origin and to forge links with schools in Ghana and Jamaica. The school chaplain states;

> *'The project has a Christian ethos of 'love' of other communities and shares the resource we are blessed to have here. Many of the children's parents have a close link with the community and value highly the school link with Ghana and Jamaica. This project not only helped to enrich the school curriculum here but also helped to improve cultural understanding and exchange between Britain and the two countries. Parents are very supportive of the school link*.'

The project produced a teaching resource entitled 'The Triangle Project: Cross Curricular resources' which is widely used in the link schools. This publication is used to share the school and staff experience of visiting the schools in Ghana and Jamaica.

> *'The school works closely with the local community to organise charity events to support people in need in Africa and the Caribbean through the Triangle programme'*

As part of the inclusion strategy one school has now introduced a 'Britishness project' into the curriculum. This is to ensure students understand what it means and how to be involved and how to play a key role in British society whatever their background or heritage. The school celebrates heritage of all groups and the contribution all made to British society. Similarly the school is involved in the Anne Frank Project which draws on the power of her life to challenge prejudice and to help foster an understanding among all pupils of positive citizenship, human rights, democracy and respect for others. Supported by the Anne Frank Trust the school ran workshops and exhibitions on Anne Frank. Pupils became active ambassadors of the school and informed citizens.

Use of data for monitoring and self evaluation

Use of performance data for school improvement is a strength of the four schools. All see this as an essential part of school improvement and schools have used data as one of the key levers of change and improvement. The use of data involves all staff, governors and parents. One of the core elements of the schools' success in raising achievement is a robust focus on tracking and monitoring individual student's progress and achievement in the widest sense of the term.

The schools are now data rich, with a wide range of data including KS2, KS3, CATS and QCA optional assessments/tests for monitoring performance. GCSE examination data is rigorously analysed to identify areas for improvement and to identify support needs and organise the deployment of resources appropriately. The schools have good systems for assessing and mapping the progress of all pupils, including ethnic and bilingual pupils at individual and group level. High quality assessment and tracking pupils are therefore features of the school. The school sees *'the use of data as an essential part of school improvement and self-evaluation and is used as one of the levers of change.' (Deputy Headteacher)*

There is good practice in the use of data at all schools and evidence provided during a recent school visit confirms that:
- Key stage data is gathered as early as possibly and analysed carefully by gender, ethnicity, and mobility, supplemented by other tests such as in English, Mathematics or verbal reasoning tests.

- The schools use KS3 to GCSE and KS2 to GCSE value-added data to improve the attainment of individual pupils in addition to monitoring the standards of year groups or the whole school. Each individual pupil is plotted on the chart according to their GCSE point score or KS3 point score and a level point score. The value-added charts offer the opportunity to probe the strengths and weaknesses within the group.

- Data is used as a baseline to monitor and review individual pupils progress, especially to identify signs of underachievement or unusual potential and to help set targets for pupils and subject departments. Subject teachers and tutors use data and other assessment information to review the performance and expectations of pupils. Test results and teacher assessments are analysed to illuminate aspects of pupils' performance.

- The schools also use a range of other comprehensive benchmarking, contextual and value-added reports provided by the Local Authority, FFT and national data from RAISEonline. Data is made available across the school and is used to help review the pupils' progress and set targets.

- Teachers make effective use of data to evaluate the quality of provision and to identify and provide support for differentiated groups of pupils. At classroom or pupil level, effective use of data enables the schools to highlight specific weaknesses of individual pupils, identify weaknesses in topics for the class as a whole, inform accurate curricular targets for individual pupils and provide evidence to support decisions as to where to focus resources and teaching. Heads of Departments use data to identify and target specific areas of improvement in their development plan.

The most common type of interventions employed in the schools, where data analysis had highlighted issues to be addressed, were: providing additional support, including one to one support or booster groups and making changes to the teaching programme or curriculum such as more personalised or differentiated teaching to meet the needs of EAL pupils, SEN pupils or pupils in targeted initiatives to improve performance. Data is also used in the school effectively to review pupils' setting and teaching groups and this has helped in raising achievement.

In the words of the Deputy Headteachers and the Data manager:
'T*he school is good in assessing all pupils and teachers look at data carefully.'* (Deputy Headteacher)
' We use data incredibly well for personalised learning and we have a well developed tracking system with detailed assessment data and background information, including ethnic background, language spoken, level of fluency, SEN stage, data of admission, mobility rate, years in schools, which teacher's class has been attended, attendance data, type of support and postcode data that is used for tracking pupil progress.' (Data Manager)
'Teachers use the data to review pupil performance, to have reflections and good conversations and to produce class profiles. This has been useful for assessment for learning and tracking individual pupils' performance. You cannot do without data.' (Assistant Headteacher)

Teachers interviewed also acknowledged the effectiveness of data and commented that:
'Data has been a fuel that has kept the 'engine for improvement burning'
'Use of data raised the expectation of staff and pupils and makes you focus on what children are actually learning.' (Teacher)

'It has forced teachers to look at particular areas of attainment and decide what to do to help the children get to the next level.'

'The data provided by school helps you to target groups of children for specific types of help.' This is further supported by another Assistant Headteacher who commented that data provided to teachers has been extremely useful '*to highlight specific weaknesses for individual pupils, identify, weaknesses in topics for the class as a whole, inform accurate curricular targets for individual pupils and tailor teaching to the needs of targeted groups*'. (Teacher)

'The school is very successful in identifying and tackling barriers to learning for students from different cultural backgrounds and providing well targeted guidance and support.'(EAL Teacher)

To conclude, one common feature of strategies for raising achievement in all schools is intelligent use of assessment data, progress tracking, target setting and support for students slipping behind with targeted interventions. Every student is expected and encouraged to achieve their full potential by teachers in all Schools. These high expectations are underpinned by the effective use of data to pinpoint underachievement and target additional support. Data is used effectively by senior managers, teachers, teaching assistants to pose and answer questions about current standards, trends over time, progress made by individual pupils, to track pupils' progress and to set high expectations in case study schools.

'Data is critical for raising standards. It is useful to track pupil progress and identify strengths and weaknesses'. (Deputy Principal)

Targeted support and guidance

Inclusion in the case study schools is of a high priority. Schools access a variety of support for pupils before considering exclusion. One Head of Inclusion reinforced the necessity for a focus on *'academic qualifications',* but also stressed the need for teachers developing the *'therapeutic support of each girl where necessary.'*

The schools have;

'High expectations of everybody, every teacher expects pupils to do as well as they can. We do see their differences and we make a virtue out of them. It's about the needs of those individuals…a focus on the individual student. I hope pupils never feel singled out for what they are, but we single them out because of who they are'. (Headteacher)

In order to meet the individual needs of students, schools have developed exceptionally strong, committed and very well-co-ordinated teams, who draw on a wide range of external, multi-agency professionals. These include Compass and Young Carers, CAHMs, a police liaison officer and an on site part time counsellor.

Schools tailor their curriculum to their pupil bodies. In one school, Year 7 students, with attainment below national expectations, are put into smaller groups with specialist teachers, with whom they stay, and have, what the school describes as 'a supportive curriculum'. This eases transition from primary school.

Similarly in another school staff looked at the learning needs of children and realised that they had many children with a reading age below the age of 9 years. It was decided that these pupils would spend the majority of their time with one teacher. Many of the teachers teaching in these classes are primary trained or have a primary school background and the pedagogy employed have much in common with primary practice. Teaching assistants were deployed in these classes to support learning. This classroom arrangement also provides emotional stability for pupils, which may be particularly important for group of pupils who may have experienced trauma and difficulties in their circumstances.

'We set up a Supplementary curriculum -each year we had 60 children. This intervention was revolutionary and successful. These children needed the stability similar to that which they had at primary school- one teacher for the majority of

subjects, not having to move around the building so much- this would be too disruptive for these children. They only went out for PE, drama etc.' (Assistant Head)

There were also other opportunities in the Supported Curriculum for example a gender split in Year 7, there were 2/3 boys and 1/3 girls anyway and the gender split helped in raising achievement.

> *'It builds confidence amongst girls to experiment with their language. I would say 'the learning journey is about risk taking, the need to create an atmosphere where children can say the wrong thing- good teachers will make good learning out of wrong answers.'*
> *'Girls have different learning styles to boys, boys like the quick fire approach, competition. Girls prefer extended learning- we have good teachers who can do both.' (Assistant headteacher)*

Ofsted recognised the work of this school in Key stage 3;

> *'The majority of students enter the school with exceptionally low standards. By the end of year 11 they reach standards that are broadly average. As a consequence of consistently good teaching most make excellent progress.'*

There is a focus on the impact of transition from primary school for many children. One school employs a SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) Lead Teacher working primarily with Year 7. This teacher team teaches Year 7 with the PSHE teacher at the beginning of Year 7 and together they identify seven students who are then withdrawn to follow a curriculum, covering the five themes of SEAL- self-awareness, managing feelings, empathy, motivation and social skills. As a result of this work the Principal feels there are less incidences of poor behaviour.

Elsewhere there has been in school support with the development of the early morning reading club (8- 8.25am) for students in Years 7 and 8 with lower reading ages run by the SEN department. The SEN corridor is open all the time for students to access the additional support they need with homework/coursework. They have access to computers. There is now a more formally run homework and coursework club at lunchtimes for targeted children to attend which is run by LSAs.

One school targets students in Year 11 with the 'Increased Flexibility' project which enables students to attend local colleges for practical/vocational training. Students are able to work towards NVQ Level 1 or Certificates in Construction which feed into school qualifications.

> *'By Year 10/11 some of the students want to be doing something a little more flexible, something practical within their learning. 'These might be students who are always struggling at school but yet are the first to change a wheel on the college course! They are always on time for college, they like it, they get treated like adults, it's a more relaxed environment. It's a bit of a carrot and stick- going to college keeps them on track at school and many of them go onto college full time at a later date. '*

Learning Mentors play an extremely valuable role in enabling students to overcome barriers to learning in the schools. One mentor states;

> *'My focus is always on what are this student's strengths? Is it debating, poetry or sport? I try to get them involved in a range of extra curricular activities in and outside of school. It's also about finding one good role model for them.'*
>
> *'I focus on school work and reading: I set up ground rules with them, about respect, expectations of themselves and expectations of me. All students keep a journal, to enable them to open up and get their feelings out on paper. It releases their stresses and the issues which are in their heads.''*

Mentors have initiated successful programmes to target young people e.g. the Kick-start Project, a 12 week programme for students, which focuses on self-esteem, self-perception, and e.g. the role of a male in society, sexual responsibility, and drugs awareness.

Another mentor sees her role in supporting Year 11s as crucial to their success;

> *'The current Year 11s- it's a case of helping them to get into routine, sleep patterns, diet, easing down on the social life. Others have personal difficulties which impact on their work. Year 11 is a very difficult year for them- very stressful…I say to them 'ok, this is crunch time.' Some girls are really ready for college, for the outside world, it's about reigning them in.'*
> *It's hard to get a place in college and some girls don't get the support from home. There are homework clubs here though, they can get the support, there is no excuse not to get their homework done.*

In another school Year 11 targeted students do fewer GCSEs and receive extra support at school where none is available from home. The LST observed: *'We are like the parents… With this type of support you can push them to get over the C/D borderline… We make timetables for revision, e.g. 3 x 2 hour slots a day, eating properly, going out to play. The sorts of things you would do with your own children.'*

The Learning Mentor supports with attendance too.

> *'The Year 11s, there is some shaky attendance. Some need encouragement and support with their attendance. I check in with the girls, give them strategies for getting into school on time, give them a call on their mobile if necessary.'*

Highly effective and innovative support from the Learning Support Team in one school has had a significant impact on pupils' achievement and progress throughout the schools. Any concerns about the transfer to secondary Schools of vulnerable pupils, or those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, stem from the difficulties students face in dealing with the wide range of teachers they need to engage with. The benefit of one school's approach is described by a Learning Support Assistant (LSA):

> *'In this school you have an LST and three LSAs per year group, so we know pupils well…..We are a constant feature of the lessons, even when they change teachers, we are always there. We try to balance up pupils to the adults they get on well with, because we spend all day every day with them'*
> *We have a strong philosophy about working in the classroom in lessons, team teaching across the curriculum, not withdrawing. The strategies we use are good for all pupils, visual aids, key words, timing of activities. We plan with the teachers focusing on how will my child access this lesson, can we look at this activity in a different way?'*

One Learning Support Assistant (who is also a qualified teacher), gave us examples of success stories for particular students she has supported:

> *'A statemented, autistic student, with social/communication difficulties who I have been working with over the years, has achieved a GCSE in Drama and is on target to get five more GCSEs. I meet regularly with his mum and he has received additional support from the Larkhall Autistic Unit.'*
>
> *'We also run a club at lunchtime for the autistic children because this is a difficult time for some of these children. They can come and play Connect 4, draw etc. One child would only play with a car by himself but as a result of coming to this club he has learnt to interact and play with other children.'*
> *'Another statemented student has completed the Duke of Edinburgh Award'.*

Such an excellent, well-co-ordinated approach enables staff to get to know students and their families very well, providing much needed stability. There is an emphasis on the school, the

family and the external agency working together to support the child and give them the same message.

There is also a comprehensive support for pupils with EAL in the case study schools. The levels of expertise within the schools to support pupils with learning English as an additional language are good. The English as an Additional Language (EAL) Co-ordinators are well qualified, experienced and knowledgeable. Staff are well aware of the needs of those learners who speak English as an additional language. As a consequence, these learners' needs are met in lessons and the learners make very good progress during their time in school.

Another school also describes its support in detail. When a new EAL pupil arrives at the school an assessment is done within two weeks. They are then tracked to monitor their progress and their levels of English and targets are adjusted accordingly. This is in reading/ speaking/ listening and is modified depending on the child. This informs what group the child should go in to.

Many pupils are withdrawn for English support. This doesn't stop as they progress although it might lessen if they have a strong background which is helping them to make good academic gains. The children are tracked and then picked up again in Key Stage 4 where there is a focus on academic language ahead of GCSEs;

> 'More sophisticated tenses, different language, extending vocabulary etc. They might be at stage 3 but they need to start using the academic language.' (EAL co-ordinator).

There are Individual Education Plans for pupils on Stage 3 which recognise the need to support them to access the academic language of the KS4 curriculum. All teachers differentiate for EAL children in the school but appreciate that the language focus will benefit all children regardless of EAL needs. There is in class support which focuses on the core subjects from qualified EAL staff and there is also pre teaching in English lessons which gives them a head start when they start their lessons.

> 'They can go on to get a 'C'. We also give them any lunchtime or after school help that they might need. We also encourage the EAL children to read a book a week and encourage the use of the thesaurus. We send them away to watch the news and then ask them to summarise.' (EAL co-ordinator)

An Assistant head reiterated this,

> 'I can see an individual child make progress in one lesson, if you throw them into a Year 7 lesson with collaborative learning. With the visual, media, drama and arts they learn to interact, learn a new language. Teachers group them carefully.'

As a concluding question, we asked one pupil focus group 'what is special about your school? As can be seen in the comments below the students felt that their school is outstanding, they get a good education and teaching is of a high standard. They gave a number of reasons why they liked their school:

> 'The school is high achieving and the progress we make from where we started is very impressive'
> 'Good support is available for students in our school. They go all the way to support you'
> 'Teachers give extra help. We have a lot of help and revision support'
> 'We are encouraged to aim high and we are supported to achieve it'
> 'We celebrate our achievement at the Achievement Award Ceremony and Assembly'
> 'Our school is ambitious and helps us to achieve our dreams.
> 'This school prepares you for life in addition to academic successes
> 'The school is good in accepting new ideas'
> 'Our school allows us to be active and be a good leader'
> 'This school is a great school'

> *'There are a lot of curriculum activities that motivate you in this school'*
> *'They take us from our comfort zone'*
> *'You get individual support with the teacher, teaching assistant, learning mentors in our school'*

The pupils were clearly very happy with their school experience. It is evident from their comments that they felt valued and treated equally.

Conclusions

This study looks at a selection of schools that serve Britain's disadvantaged areas and examines the success factors behind their outstanding achievement and improvement over the years. The research adopted a case study approach. The key criteria for the selection of schools was a very high proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals; an 'outstanding' grade in the most recent inspections; a high standard and sustained improvement of attainment over the period. The main findings of the research show, despite challenging circumstances that GCSE results have improved significantly in the case study schools and the schools have been consistently rated as outstanding in their inspection reports. Overall the data shows that from the generally low starting points, students reach exceptionally high standards at GCSE in all schools, performing above national average. For example, in one school GCSE results improved from 11% in 2002 to 72% 5+A*-C in 2009 despite 76% of the pupils were on free school meals which is used as proxy for levels of disadvantage. In another school GCSE success improved from 25% to 93% 5+A*-C between the same period. The research identified the reasons behind the schools' success, which includes effective teaching and learning, effective leadership at all levels including paying attention to individual student's needs, inclusive pastoral care, strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and effective use of data to monitor performance and to identify underachieving groups. Other common features of the success of these schools included tracking pupil progress closely against targets, supporting children who may need extra help behind, giving high priority to appointing effective teachers, providing continuous professional development. Schools have clear discipline with consistent expectations and also nurture, praise and celebrate the success of students, which builds self-esteem and encourages students to excel.

What is particularly special about the case study schools is that they employed a range of strategies and targeted support to challenge underachievement and poverty through extensive use of a diversified workforce including teaching assistants, EAL teachers and learning mentors. There were many local people working at the case study schools both in teaching and other posts. Teachers were able to reflect the cultures and identities of the communities represented in their school in their lessons. Each of the above school strategy is explored in detail in the paper to reveal exactly what the case study schools do to ensure it provides the very highest quality of education for all its students.

Acknowledgements

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