Tackling Disadvantage: What Works in Schools?

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Outline

1. Why does the achievement gap matter?
2. What does research tell us about the role of schools in narrowing the gap?
3. Research aims and methods
4. Achievement of disadvantaged pupils in the case study schools
5. Success factors and reasons for narrowing the gap
6. Conclusions and key messages
Why does the achievement gap matter?

• Narrowing the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and their peers is the highest challenge faced by policy makers in England.

• There are long-standing achievement gaps in England associated with socio-economic status (Cassen and Kingdon 2007 and Strand 2014)

• Of particular concern is that children from poorer homes do worse educationally than their classmates, with 34% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving 5+A*-C GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 62% of better-off pupils (DfE 2014).

• There remains a significant gap between FSM pupils and non-FSM pupils.
What does research say about the role of schools in narrowing the achievement gap?

- School effectiveness research has shown that only about 8-15% of the attainment difference between schools is accounted for by what they actually do.

- About 85% is attributed to pupil level factors such as the wider family environment, the neighbourhood where they live and the school attended (Reynolds et al. 1996, Sammons 1999, Strand 2015).

- Bernstein (1970) argued that education cannot compensate for society and social factors have a huge impact on achievement.

- Ofsted also pointed out the factors beyond the school gates and the communities where pupils live can have a detrimental impact on achievement (Ofsted 2014:32).

- ASCL (2014) suggested that factors influencing low achievement are beyond the control of schools and it is impossible for them to overcome the problem of poverty and disadvantage.
What does research say about the role of schools in narrowing the achievement gap?

- However, Clifton and Cook (2012) argued that ‘While many of the factors driving low achievement lie beyond the direct control of schools, it is a mistake to assume that schools cannot be part of a solution.’

- Recent research has shown how schools succeeded against the odds (Demie and Lewis 2010, Mongon and Chapman 2010, Ofsted 2009) and pupil premium is helping to close the gaps through targeted support and interventions (See Ofsted 2014 and Sutton Trust 2014).

- Ofsted (2009) has also identified effective strategies in raising achievement including rigorous monitoring of data, effective use of feedback, targeted interventions, providing a strong Headteacher and working with parents.

- Despite that, there is little research to study good practice to narrow the achievement gap.
Research Questions

The Narrowing the Achievement Gap research has tried to answer three questions about pupils who are entitled to free school meals.

• What does the data tell us about narrowing the achievement gap?

• What are the success factors behind narrowing the achievement gap of disadvantaged pupils?

• What are the implications for practice?
Research Methodology

1. Case studies and observations:

Four primary and two secondary schools were selected for case studies. Key criteria for the selection of schools were:

- an above average proportion of students with FSM
- exceptionally good results and a sustained KS2 and GCSE improvement over time
- good KS2 and KS4 achievement by disadvantaged pupils

A detailed questionnaire was used to interview headteachers, staff, parents and pupils to gather evidence on the experience of disadvantaged pupils in the school.

2. Focus groups:

Headteacher, parent and pupil focus groups were carried out to ascertain their views about what works in schools and the impact of the pupil premium grant.
# The achievement of disadvantaged pupils in the case study primary schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study Schools</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>KS2 Level 4+ (Reading, Writing, and maths combined)</th>
<th>2 levels of progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School Pupil Premium</td>
<td>KS2</td>
<td>All Pupils</td>
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<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
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<td>57%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Success Factors: Reasons for narrowing the gap in the case study schools

The research identifies a number of factors that are successful in closing the gap:

• Strong leadership
• High quality teaching and learning
• Effective use of data to identify underachieving groups
• Providing an inclusive curriculum that meets the needs of disadvantaged pupils
• Effective targeted support for disadvantaged pupils
Success Factors: Strong and Inspirational Leadership at School Level

• The schools managed to recruit and keep many exceptional school leaders who with their staff and governors have fostered a climate of high expectations and delivered such impressive outcomes.

• All schools demonstrate ‘good and 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:

  ‘We challenge stereotypes about the area served by the school by asking questions such as why can’t a school in a disadvantaged and challenging area be a good school, where achievement is outstanding? Why can’t children in the area have their dream? We have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently.’

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

• Focus on high standards and the needs of the individual child.

• Personal contact with parents and the community.
Success Factors: Effective Teaching and Learning

1. Good and outstanding teaching by consistently high-quality staff who show great commitment and passion.

2. 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.

3. The schools are good in using an inclusive curriculum that reflects/uses the pupils’ heritage, culture and experiences.

4. In the case study schools disadvantaged pupils appreciated teachers’ expectations of them and the support they gave to achieve.

- ‘Teachers in this school teach well and help you’
- ‘We are encouraged to aim high and we are supported to achieve it’
- ‘Teachers are very good at teaching and making lessons fun’
- ‘We all enjoy learning here’
Success Factors: Effective Use of Data to Target Support to Disadvantaged Pupils

- **Rigorous monitoring of data.** Data is used as a driving force to raise standards. All schools have high quality assessment and tracking, target setting procedures for individuals and groups.

- Background data such as ethnicity, language spoken, EAL level of fluency in English, attendance rate, free school meals and types of support.

- Use robust data from a range of tests and assessments e.g. Phonics, FSP, KS1, KS2 and GCSE assessment data to set targets/appropriate lessons.

- Data is used to decide priorities - planning, reviewing activities including resourcing priorities, school improvement priorities, monitoring, evaluating, reviewing effectiveness of initiatives and strategies:

  ‘Data should be used as a lever for change. We are a school that is effective in the use of data, is responsive and able to act on what data tells us.’ (Headteacher)

- Termly pupil progress meetings - attended by the Headteacher, class teacher, TAs and Inclusion Team members.

- Pupil progress is discussed and actions are agreed. Actions are reviewed termly.

- There is a clear strategy for support that is shared and reviewed each term.
Success Factors: Effective Targeted Support

Effective targeted support through extensive use of:

- the best teachers to teach English and maths intervention groups
- the pupils’ class teacher to deliver booster classes
- well trained teaching assistants
- tailored support for individuals in the classroom
- one to one support
- parental engagement
- enhanced Maths and English staffing
- wide range of visits
- homework clubs
- extra-curricular provision
Conclusions

1. The research findings contain a number of messages for schools with implications for replication and sharing good practice with other schools.

2. The data shows the case study schools have succeeded in not merely narrowing the gap but closing it.

3. The findings suggest that disadvantage need not always be a barrier to achievement.

4. The research identified the following success factors:
   - **Rigorous monitoring of data**
   - **Ensuring access to high quality teaching**
   - **Providing a strong and visionary Headteacher**
   - **Use of the best teachers to teach English and maths intervention groups**
   - **Use of well trained Teaching Assistants**
   - **Effective use of pupil premium funding for targeted support**

5. The broad findings of our study are in line with other studies (see example Ofsted 2009, Demie and Mclean 2014, 2015; Sutton Trust 2014).
1. Key Messages for Policy Makers
   • The case study schools were good at challenging poverty.
   • Some of the approaches used in the successful schools can be applied elsewhere.
   • However, the study argues that there is no ‘pick and mix’ option. An effective school will seek to develop all these characteristics underpinned by practical use of data to monitor the achievement of particular groups to pinpoint and tackle underachievement.

2. Key Messages for Researchers
   • Policy makers and schools need more evidence on ‘what works’ which are relevant to teachers’ practical concerns.
   • We would argue much of the available research is constructed upon deficiency model that seeks to examine only those factors which is characterised pathologically within disadvantaged communities- underachievement issues.
   • An increase in research of this type which focuses on what works challenges perceived notions of underachievement in schools and will provide positive messages.
End of Presentation - Thank You

QUESTIONS?

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Good Practice research report website:
http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/research-reports
References