

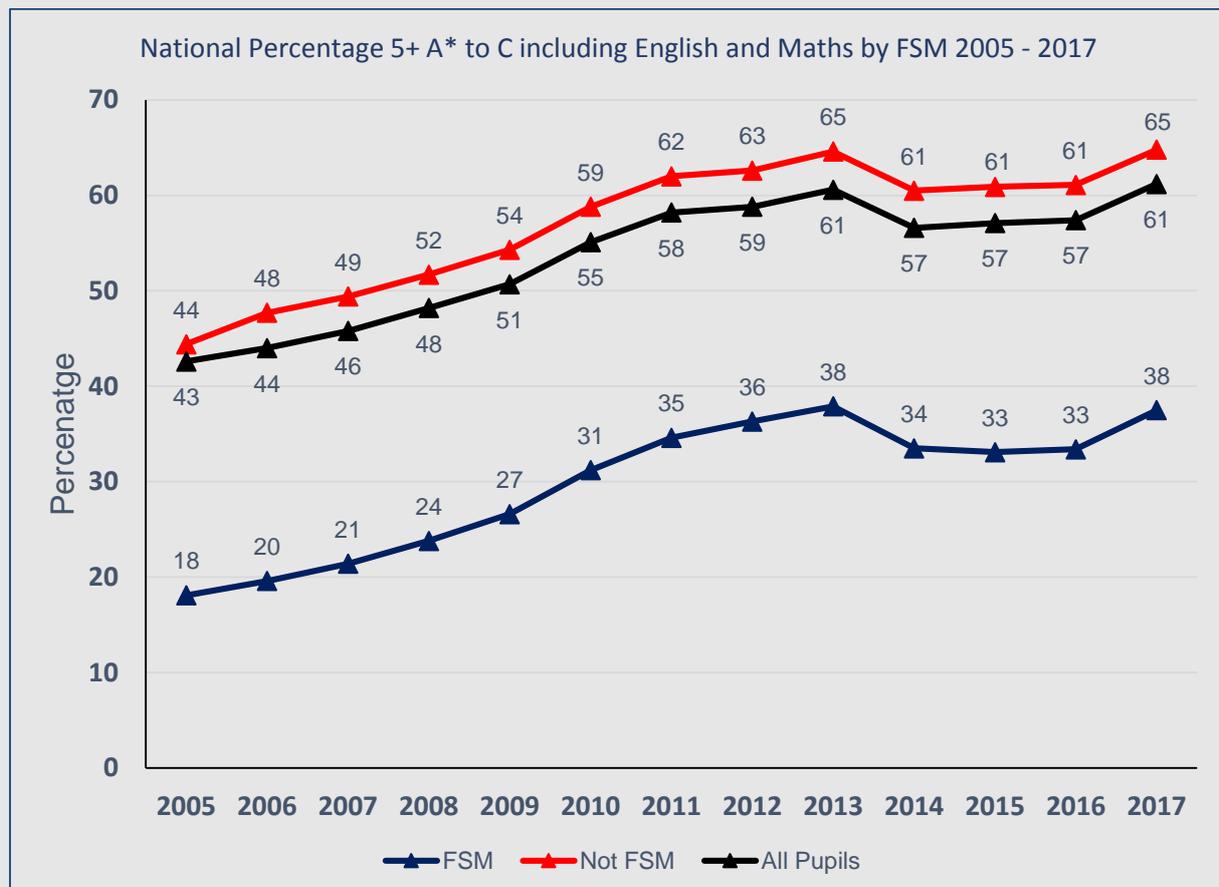
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR DISADVANTAGED PUPILS IN SCHOOLS

Research Project Brief

Introduction

Closing the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils who are entitled to free school meals and their peers is the biggest challenge faced by policy makers, teachers and school leaders in England. There is now a well-established body of research evidence that shows inequality in education outcomes has grown for some disadvantaged groups including White Working class, Black Caribbean and Pakistani pupils on free school meals (Demie and Mclean 2016). Of a particular concern is that children from poorer homes do worse educationally than their classmates with 38% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving 5+A*-C GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 65% of better-off pupils (See Figure 1). There remains a significant achievement gap between FSM pupils and non FSM pupils¹ and the gap has not changed much over the period. This is despite the national pupil premium initiatives to help schools to close the gap through targeted support and interventions in schools (Ofsted 2014, Demie and Mclean 2016).

Figure 1 Disadvantaged Pupils Achievement in England (5+A*-C including English and Maths)



Source: DfE. 2005-2017. National Pupil Database (NPD), Department for Education.

There is also a long standing debate about the role of the school in closing the achievement gap. A study by Rasbach et al (2010) explored the role that schools can play between educational achievement and family income and noted that academic studies generally found that about 20 percent of variability in pupils' achievement is attributed to school factors, with around 80 percent attributed to pupil-level factors such as the wider family environment, the neighbourhood, where they live and the school attended. Ofsted also pointed out that *'these factors are beyond the school gates and the communities where pupils live can have a detrimental impact on their achievement. Schools can do much to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils but only so much.'* (Ofsted 2014:32) and ASCL (2014:32) also suggested that *'the problem was not of schools making...they cannot solve it by themselves.'* They pointed out that the factors influencing low attainment are beyond the control of individual schools and it is impossible for them to overcome the wider problem of poverty and disadvantage. We would argue that while many of these factors influencing achievement are beyond the direct control of schools, it is a mistake to assume that schools cannot be part of a solution. The reasons for underachievement of disadvantaged pupils are indeed complex but a body of research is beginning to show that schools can make a difference, albeit within certain limits (see Demie and Mclean 2014; Demie and Lewis 2010; Mongon and Chapman 2010; Ofsted 2009).

There are now a number of schools serving disadvantaged communities that can demonstrate poverty should not be an excuse for low attainment (Demie and Mclean 2014, Demie and Lewis 2010, Mongon and Chapman 2010, Ofsted 2009). These studies show that high quality education can transform lives and compensate for shortcomings in a society. Recent national research and data (See Ofsted 2014 and Sutton Trust 2014) has also revealed how the pupil premium is helping to close the gaps through targeted support and interventions. The key challenge then is to find out what strategies schools can use to make a difference to the achievement of groups, such as disadvantaged pupils from a low income background.

The Aims of the Research

This research examines the success factors behind closing the achievement gap of disadvantaged pupils who are entitled to free school meals. Four overarching research questions guided this research:

- What does the data tell us about closing the achievement gap?
- What are the reasons for underachievement
- What are the success factors for closing the gap?
- What are the implications for policy and practice?

Research Methods

This study uses a mixed method research to answer the research questions. These include quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches such as longitudinal data analysis, case studies of selected schools and focus group interviews to explore the reasons for underachievement and what steps schools can take to improve the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Details of the methodological framework are summarised below:

Firstly, KS2 and KS4 empirical investigations will be undertaken to draw lessons from the last two decades by examining in detail the achievement of disadvantaged heritage pupils in the local authorities, regions and nationally. National NPD data will be the source of the evidence.

Secondly, a questionnaire survey of these pupils will be carried out to establish how they feel about school, pupils' attitudes to schools and learning and support from home and what practical steps, in their view, need to be taken in order to improve their achievement.

Thirdly, parent, pupil, governor and headteacher focus groups were carried out to ascertain their views on strategies that worked to narrow the achievement gap.

Fourthly, detailed case study research will be carried out to illuminate the complex interaction of school context, organization, and policy and practice and how these impact on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. Four primary and two secondary schools were selected for case studies to study strategies to close the achievement gap and structured questionnaires will be used to interview headteachers, teachers, staff, governors, grandparents, parents and pupils to gather evidence on how well disadvantaged pupils are achieving. The schools were chosen to reflect schools of different types in the LA which have relatively high numbers of pupils on free school meals. The key criteria for the selection of schools were those with a very high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and good KS2 and GCSE results or improving schools and Ofsted positive reports including comments on inclusion. Each of the schools will be visited between May 2018 to March 2019.

The Research Team



Feyisa Demie is Head of Research and Adviser for School Self-evaluation at Lambeth LA. Prior to this, he was Head of Research and Statistics and a university lecturer. Feyisa is a school governor and has worked extensively for the last 25 years with Local Authorities, government departments, schools and governors on the use of data and sharing good practice to raise achievement. He was responsible for pioneering work on developing school profiles, contextual and value added analyses that are widely used for monitoring, challenging and supporting schools. He is a passionate champion of school self-evaluation and an advocate of using data and research as a tool for supporting school improvement. He runs bespoke

school focussed training programmes on the use of data to raise achievement and an annual national school improvement conference at UCL Institute of Education (IOE) for headteachers, teachers, governors and policy makers to share good practice in schools. With longstanding research interests on what works in raising achievement in schools and equity issues in education, he has written a number of research reports and articles on school improvement, EAL, Ethnicity, social class, assessment and what works in raising achievement in schools.



Christabel McLean is an Education Consultant and has worked with HMI/Ofsted at national level. She has also worked extensively on the inspection, improvement and management of educational establishments. Christabel started her teaching career in Camden and Westminster in inner London and went on to become headteacher of Sacred Heart School in Hammersmith. Christabel's unshakeable belief that all children can achieve their best no matter what their background, language or circumstance, also led to a successful period as a full time Ofsted inspector. From this she was specifically recruited as a key member of a school improvement team of Advisers by a new Director of Education, to deal with a large number of

schools in special measures in Lambeth. Then as an Education Adviser in Lambeth she took part in an extensive range of school improvement activities linked to schools facing very challenging circumstances and led a number of very successful school improvement projects. More recently she has been involved in a number of research projects and contributed to books advising parents on education.

Note:

¹ For the purpose of this research the term 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils' from low income backgrounds who are eligible for free school meals. The merit of free school meals is that it provides a clear and comprehensive means of differentiating between two broad groups of FSM pupils and non- FSM pupils. In England, eligibility for free school meals (FSM) is a widely used *policy indicator of pupils known to be from a financially disadvantaged background. It is routinely* treated as context for judging both individual and school level attainment and as the basis for the pupil premium (PP) funding policy.

The pupil premium is addition funding to raise the achievement of disadvantaged pupil and to close the achievement gap. In 2014/15 schools received £1320 for each eligible primary- aged pupil and £935 for secondary- aged pupil. This covers 1.83 million pupils in England with ring fenced funding of £2.5 billion (Ofsted 2014).

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May 2018