What Works in Driving School Improvement Lessons from London schools

Research brief

Feyisa Demie[1]

Abstract

This research brief is about the success factors to enable schools to drive school improvement. Drawing upon evidence from case study schools, focus groups, interviews and the author's recent publications, the article suggests evidence of good practice in schools that are raising achievement and closing the gap of disadvantaged pupils.

1.   Introduction

The hard question that faces educational policy makers today, is not how to raise achievement, but how to tackle educational inequality. A well-established body of research evidence shows that inequality in educational outcomes has grown for some groups over the last three decades in England and that a large number of children are underachieving at school (Hutchinson et al, 2019; Gorard, 2018). There are long-standing achievement gaps in England associated with socio-economic status. There remains a significant gap between free school meal (FSM) pupils and non-FSM pupils. The gap in GCSE attainment has not changed much. It was a 28% gap in 2006 and was still 28% in 2018.

Figure 1: GCSE performance by FSM in England (5+A*-C incl. English and Maths)
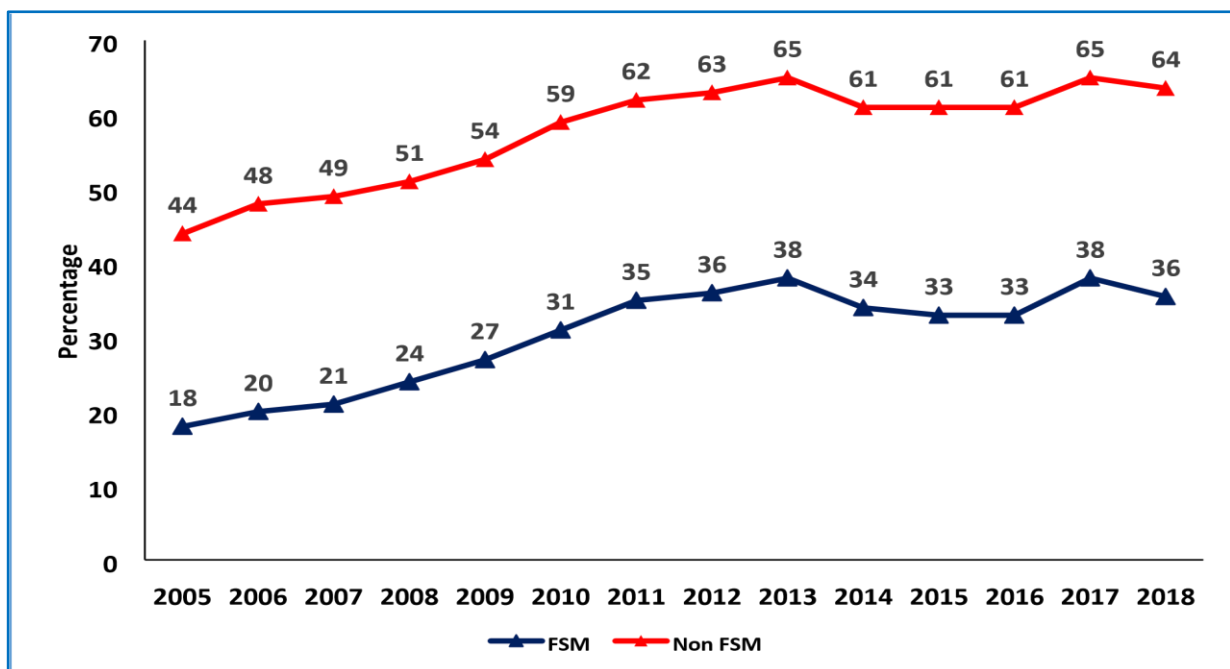
Closing the gap between the achievement of ethnic minority pupils and their peers is also one of the greatest challenges faced by policy makers in England (Figure 2). Many researchers have argued that little or no headway has been made in closing the attainment gap for Black Caribbean pupils (Demie

2019; Hutchinson et al 2019). Progress in closing the gap has stalled since 2011 and may now take over 500 years for the disadvantage gap to close by the end of secondary school (Hutchinson et al 2019). Of major concern is that Black Caribbean pupils have consistently been one of the lowest performing ethnic groups in England.

Figure 2 Ethnic minority GCSE achievement gap in England (5+A*-C including English and Maths)
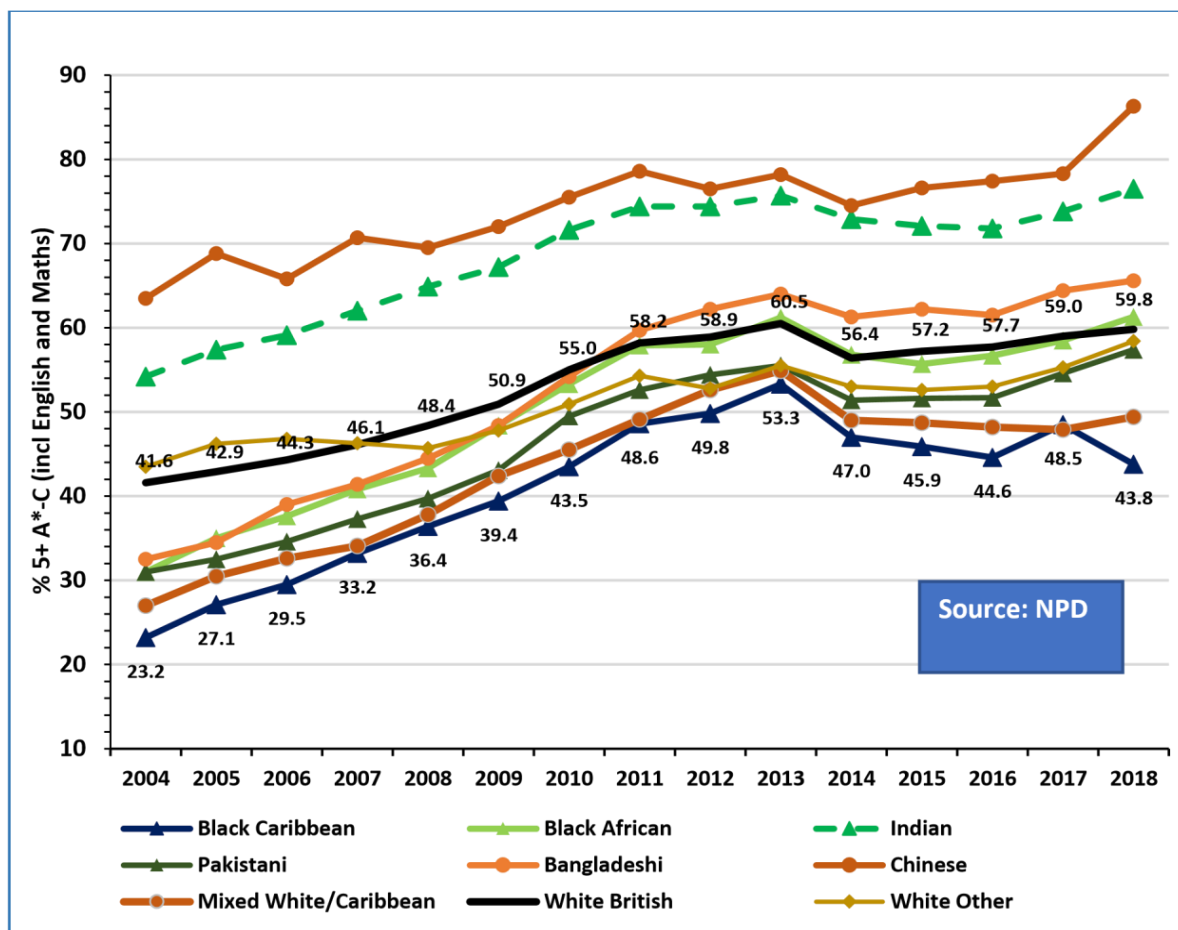
2.   Do schools make a difference? Evidence from literature

For years researchers have attempted to answer the question, '*Do schools make a difference to a child's educational outcomes?'* There is a general perception that the answer is yes but research shows that the factors influencing low attainment are beyond the control of schools and it is impossible for them to overcome the problem of poverty and educational attainment (Demie 2019, Clifton and Cook 2012, Sammons 2009; Reynolds and Sammons 1996). Education researchers, policy makers and practitioners have debated the question of what and how much, schools can do to mitigate the effect of socioeconomic factors. Recent research confirms a number of barriers to learning beyond the school gates that need to be addressed. These include factors such as poverty, parental negative attitudes to education, lack of parental involvement, lack of targeted support, curriculum barriers and low levels of literacy in the disadvantaged community (Demie and Mclean 2016). Socio-economic status is the most important difference between individuals in England (Strand 2014; Gorard 2018; Demie 2019).

School effectiveness research has shown that only about 8-15% of the attainment difference between schools is accounted for by what they actually do (Sammons 2009; Reynolds and Sammons

1996; Strand 2014; Rabash et al, 2010). The rest is attributed to pupil level factors such as the wider family environment, the neighbourhood where they live and the school attended (Strand 2014, Ofsted 2014). Overall research has shown that the gap isn't caused by schooling. There is now consensus in the field of educational research about 85% of the difference in how well children do at school is dependent on what happens outside the school gates (Rabash et al, 2010). There is, therefore, a need for national and local initiatives beyond the school gates to tackle disadvantages.

However, schools can make a difference, albeit with certain limits. We would argue that schools cannot compensate for society and we would like to remind policy makers to acknowledge the importance of the relationship between social disadvantage and educational achievement (Gorard 2018, Demie 2019). 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.*' There are now a number of schools serving disadvantaged communities that have defied the association of poverty and low attainment (Ofsted 2009). 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 gap through targeted support and interventions (See Ofsted 2014 and EEF 2019). My two recent research publications, *Educational Inequality (Demie 2019)* and *Tackling Educational Disadvantage (Demie and Mclean 2019)* also provide evidence of good practice in schools that are closing the achievement gap. Drawing on key stage 2 (KS2) data at the end of primary and general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) data, 14 case study schools, focus groups and interviews with headteachers, teachers, school staff, policymakers, parents, pupils and governors, it charts the road to improvement and to tackling inequality in education over the last 20 years. The evidence from longitudinal studies confirm how schools in one diverse and disadvantaged inner-city local authority have raised children's attainment to levels that far surpass the national average at both KS2 and GCSE level. These studies show that high quality education can transform lives and compensate for shortcomings in society. 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 with low income background.

3.   Success factors to drive school improvement

There are a number of reasons why the schools are bucking the national trend in closing the achievement gap. The evidence from the case study schools suggest that a well-managed and effective school can make a real difference in raising achievement and closing the gaps in the locality it serves. The research identified the following key features and success factors: Headteachers' excellent leadership on diversity and equality issues
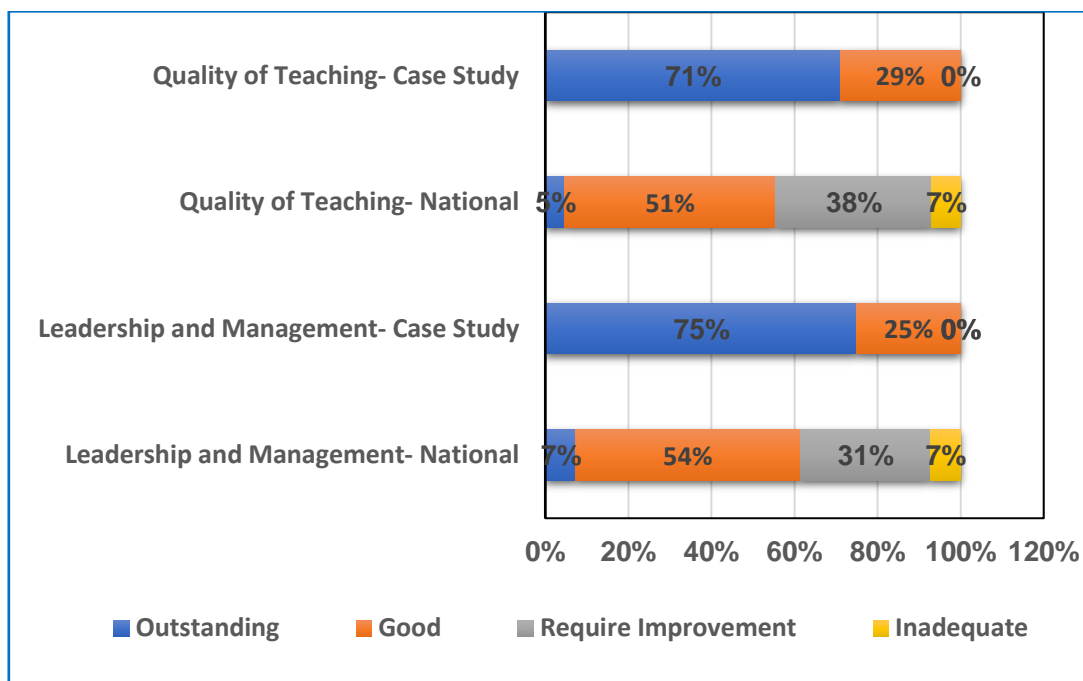
- High quality teaching and learning
- Use of inclusive curriculum
- Effective use of data
- Strong link with the community
- Effective use of diverse multi-ethnic workforce
- Targeted interventions

Success Factor 1: Providing strong leadership

The single factor that links all the case study schools' success in raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is the excellence of their leadership in promoting equality and diversity in schools. The schools managed to recruit and keep many exceptional school leaders who with their staff and governors, have fostered a climate of high expectations. All schools demonstrate 'good and

outstanding' leadership by the headteachers and senior management teams (see Figure 3). Each is supported by a committed team of teachers. Leaders are described as 'inspirational' and 'visionary'. Each has a strong moral drive for pupils. There is an exceptional sense of teamwork across each school which is reflected in the consistent and committed way managers at all levels work towards the schools' aims to raise achievement. In each of these schools there is a culture of high expectations and no excuses, collaboration with colleagues and close links with parents/carers and the community.

Figure 3. Ofsted inspection grades

Source: Demie (2019)

Success Factor 2: High quality teaching and learning

Another key factor in raising achievement is the high quality of teaching and learning. This too was evident in the case study schools. There is good and outstanding teaching by consistently high-quality staff who show great commitment and passion. There is also an active focus on learning in the schools with a sustained focus on ensuring access to the curriculum for every pupil, whatever their background. Ofsted data also confirm that about 71% of the quality of teaching in the case study schools are outstanding compared to 5% nationally (see Figure 3). The case study schools have teachers with passion and energy and belief that they can make a difference. They have no excuses approach. Ofsted praised the schools, which achieved an outstanding grade for teaching and learning stating:

> 'High quality teaching has had a significant impact on impressive rise in pupils 'achievement over the last three years.' (Ofsted Inspection report, Primary)

> 'Teachers systematically and effectively check pupils' understanding throughout lessons anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with sticking impact on the quality of learning. The teachers' subject knowledge is excellent and is kept at this level because of the high-quality professional development they receive.' (Ofsted Inspection, primary).

'Teacher have excellent subject knowledge, very high expectations and plan a range of activities that inspire and enthuse pupils in lessons.' (Ofsted Inspection, secondary)

On the basis of this evidence, we would argue that there are no more important determinants of pupils outcomes than good teaching. This evidence is well supported by other researchers who have also drawn attention to the centrality of teaching and learning (see Sammons 1999, Reynolds 1996).

Success Factor 3: Effective use of data

One of the core elements of the case study schools' success in raising children's academic achievement is a robust focus on tracking and monitoring individual students' progress and their achievement in the widest sense. The schools have accumulated rich national curriculum assessment data at pupil level, including FSP, phonics, KS1, KS2, KS3 and GCSE. All of this plus pupil data from the school census have provided sophisticated information about the progress of different groups of pupils at each key stage by background data such as ethnicity, language spoken, EAL level of proficiency in English, attendance rates, free school meals, SEN, summer born and types of support. Schools also have more information about their own pupils than they once did, for example optional and individual pupil targets and results from their own assessment and monitoring. The teachers in all these schools expect every pupil to achieve their full potential. Teachers and school leaders use the data to pinpoint underachievement and target additional support. The evidence about the use of data confirms that data is used effectively to support school improvement, by, for example:

- identifying pupils' achievement and informing target setting
- supporting the allocation of staffing and resources
- challenging the aspirations of staff, pupils and parents
- supporting school self-evaluation
- tracking pupils' performance and progress
- identifying underachieving groups
- closing the achievement gap

Overall, the strategies for raising achievement are characterized in all the schools by the effective use of assessment data to trace progress, set accurate targets and support the students who are slipping behind with targeted interventions.

Success Factor 4: Use of inclusive curriculum and multi-ethnic school workforce

The case study schools serve some of the most deprived wards in the LA, where many pupils come from disadvantaged economic circumstances. The school population mirrors the community in which the schools sit. Most pupils come from African, Caribbean, Portuguese and White British ethnic backgrounds and a significant proportion of pupils are of mixed heritage. The schools promote community cohesion and ensure pupils understand and appreciate others from different backgrounds with a sense of sharing a 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. Senior managers provide strong leadership in ensuring the schools are inclusive organizations. The ethos that is developed is based on a commitment to a vision of the school that serves its pupil community in the context of diversity. The schools are multicultural. Staff are aware of the many pressures young pupils face in the wider

society. They actively consider this in their approach to education. They are promoting equality and diversity in the classroom actively promoting multiculturalism in lessons and planning lessons that reflect the diversity of the classroom

A key success for the case study schools is the leadership's ability to create a community that reflects the student population by employing a diverse multi-ethnic workforce. They play a key role in communicating with parents and supporting pupils. They challenge a worrying picture of national statistics which shows that in England, 91% of the leadership, 86% of teachers and teaching assistants, and 87% of other staff and of the workforce as a whole are White British. However, in the case study schools:

- The percentage of leadership staff in the schools recorded as ethnic minority is 38% compared with 9% nationally.
- 52% of teachers in the schools are from ethnic minority groups compared with 14% nationally.
- 60% of all the school staff are ethnic minority compared to 13% nationally.

The schools are truly multicultural schools where the diversity of ethnic origin, languages spoken and cultural heritage, brings real life to learning. The schools pride themselves on the diversity of its workforce and actively recruit from the local community.

What is even more important, in addition to the diversity in the school workforce, is that these schools are good in using an inclusive curriculum that reflects the pupils' heritage, culture and experience to explore the representation of the different cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in the area. They have developed an inclusive and broad curriculum that has relevance to their lives and reflects and values cultural diversity and engages the students in multicultural society.

Success Factor 5: Strong links with parents and the community

All schools have strong links with parents and local communities in their area. Partnerships with parents are a key component of the schools' success. Many parents were very positive about their school's diversity and the schools reflect the local community it serves and respond to their needs. Many staff including learning mentors are recruited from local communities that the school has built close links to. They give extra support to disadvantaged pupils, ethnic minority pupils and pupils who are learning the English language. This approach enables children to reach a high level of educational attainment, which closes the gap between the groups that underachieve nationally and their peers.

Success Factor 6: Targeted interventions and support

Another key strategy used by case study schools to raise achievement is targeted intervention and support through effective use of small group additional teaching, one-to-one tuition, use of the strongest teachers to teach English and Maths for intervention groups, use of well-trained teaching assistants (TAs), booster classes, early intervention, mastery learning, EAL support, pastoral care and enrichment programmes e.g. trips to cultural venues (see for details Demie 2019 and Demie Mclean 2019). Pupil premium funding is used to target and support these intervention programmes. This is effectively monitored to ensure they are having a real impact on raising standards. The evidence from the schools suggests that these targeted interventions have undoubtedly had a significant impact on raising achievement and closing attainment gaps for eligible pupils. They also use data to measure how pupils are achieving in relation to their peers in similar schools as a result of targeted

support. Our findings in what worked in targeted intervention and support are in line with other studies (Figure 4). For example, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF 2019) research into 'what worked and what failed' in school improvement revealed a number of similar effective school based interventions and targeted support that have had an impact in raising achievement including effective feedback, peer tutoring, early intervention, one-to-one tutoring, homework (in secondary school), mastery learning, phonics, and small-group tuition.

Figure 4: Targeted intervention strategies: Lessons from EEF research (Effect size)
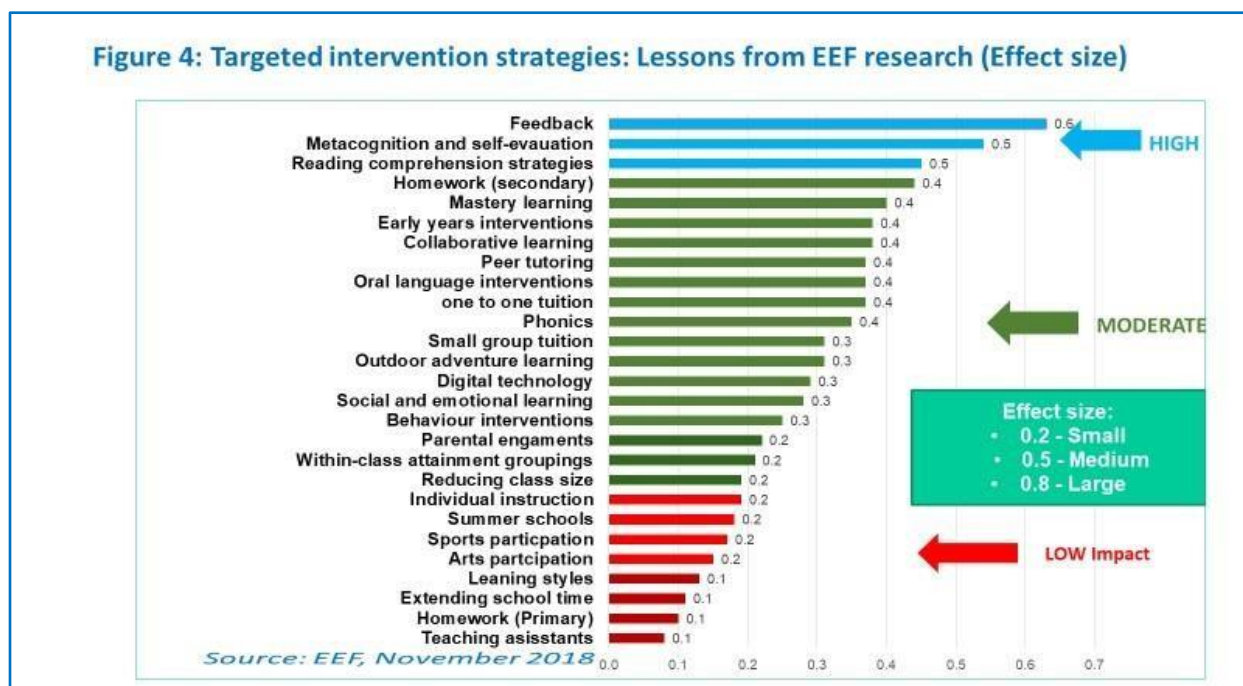
4. Implications for school and policy makers

The focus of my research over the years is to provide practical solutions and 'what works' evidence for teachers and policymakers to address inequality and to develop strategies to raise achievement. The case study schools' success stories in raising achievement through the use of a range of highly effective targeted support are of local and national significance. Our study confirms, without a doubt, that the excellent education provided in the schools is the reason for challenging poverty and closing the achievement gap. It also shows that effective schools have been dealing with these issues over a number of years, and they hold the key to the way forward. Schools and policy makers will want to learn what has been proven to work and the factors that make a difference. The lessons from the successful schools provide hope for school improvement practitioners and policy makers who are trying to close the achievement gaps. Whatever the challenges and the experiences of schools that succeed against the odds, the lessons from the London schools are enormously valuable in pointing towards changes that other struggling schools can try to learn from in the future. We would argue that schools can and do make a difference and it is possible to tackle the link between poverty and underachievement. The methods used by the case study schools can be used elsewhere. The key ingredients are, as we have seen, strong leadership on equality and diversity, high-quality teaching, the effective use of data, effective use of an inclusive curriculum and multiethnic school workforce, and targeted support and interventions. However, it is important to recognise 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.

The overall conclusion from this article is that the good practice identified from the case study schools and the EEF toolkit (2019) have relevance for practice and offers a worthwhile example of a success story that is worth learning from by schools. A number of teachers and school leaders are now using what works research evidence to make decisions and to improve classroom practice. This is further confirmed by school surveys (Demie 2019) which suggest that a significant number of schools now use what works research evidence. Generally, comments made by headteachers and teachers in the survey were positive and schools feel that the evidence was useful for their school improvement and selfevaluation. It has helped schools to identify underachieving groups and to target interventions and support to ensure improvement.

About the Author

1 Feyisa Demie is an honorary professor at Durham University School of Education and also Head of Research and Adviser for School Self-evaluation at Lambeth local authority. He has worked extensively with local authorities, government departments, schools and school governors for over 25 years in the use of data and research to raise achievement. This article is an abridged version from the research findings in *'Educational Inequality' (Demie 2019) and 'Tackling Educational Disadvantage' (Demie 2019)* . For further information, contact **E-mail: fdemie@lambeth.gov.uk; Feyisa.demie@dur.ac.uk**

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