



## **Peterborough City Council Research Project**

# **REPORT on Research Into 'Closing the Gap': Raising Achievement for Disadvantaged Pupils**

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## Introduction and Purpose of the Research

This research was commissioned by Peterborough City Council as a work stream as part of their Closing the Gap project. There is a gap in performance between children from rich and poor backgrounds in many countries, but the gap in the UK is considered to be significant (OECD, 2014; Strand 2014). Work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has estimated that there will be 3.5 million UK children living in poverty by 2020 (JRF, 2014). One strategy to attempt to address the problem was the introduction of The Pupil Premium by the Coalition Government in 2011 to provide additional funding to state funded schools to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers by raising the attainment levels of those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ofsted, 2012).

Many children do well in Peterborough schools but a significant minority of children do not. There were temporary difficulties experienced by the local authority during the prolonged absence of the Head of School Improvement, resulting in data analysis which was less detailed than had been the case previously. This is one of the reasons why the report was commissioned.

A number of studies have looked at strategies to raise the attainment levels of disadvantaged children, see for example: Carpenter et al (2013); Ofsted (2014); NFER (2014); Macleod, et al (2015) National Audit Office (2015); DfE (2015).

The purpose of this research was to identify the most effective strategies employed by schools to raise the attainment levels and close the gap in attainment of disadvantaged children. Previous research has shown that there are schools doing the same activities but achieve different levels of success, see for example Abbott, et al (2013). The difference is how they do it not what they do. We would argue that leadership and the culture of a school plays a key role in success (Abbott, et al, 2015).

The major aims of the research were:

- To assess the most effective strategies delivered by primary schools.
- To provide data on school improvement and the practice of school leadership in schools that have developed effective strategies.
- To understand/explain the variation in impact of the same/similar strategies in different contexts, i.e. identify the way in which the culture of a primary school impacts positively on successfully addressing the disadvantage performance gap.
- To highlight aspects of good practice.

The specific objectives of the research were:

- To evaluate the most effective strategies (and where applicable the ones that did not work).
- To identify aspects of the following that make a difference in these primary schools:
  - Culture
  - Philosophy
  - Principles
  - Commitment
  - Expectations and how leadership drives these
  - Common themes
- To identify successful practice and how it is embedded.
- To provide recommendations on the most effective practice/optimum strategies to make a positive impact on the attainment of disadvantaged children.
- To recommend ways in which the process can be improved to further raise attainment levels of disadvantaged learners.

The report is structured to provide easy access to the range of qualitative data and makes extensive use of quotes from respondents to illustrate key points and to develop a series of recommendations.

We would sincerely like to thank all the participants who allowed us to interview them and to visit their schools. We would also like to thank Peterborough City Council who facilitated access to schools and agreed to accept the report on behalf of those who commissioned it.

## 1 Methodology

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The intention of the research was not only to record some of the actual strategies and methods used by schools to help raise achievement levels of disadvantaged pupils, but, more importantly, to discern the ethos in those schools that had achieved success in making their methods effective. It was essential therefore to use research instruments which were most likely to elicit qualitative data that threw light on the more elusive aspects of a school's own individual culture. Since schools are essentially a 'people business' (Middlewood and Abbott, 2017, forthcoming), and culture is based on values and beliefs emanating from those people, the methods chosen were:

- Semi-structured interviews with those responsible for introducing and implementing the strategies; these were used because they enable researchers to 'delve into the aspects which underpin so much of what is involved' (Middlewood and Abbott, 2012:53) and also to adapt to individual personalities and circumstances.
- It was also essential to visit the actual school sites and, where possible, walk around the buildings whilst the school was in normal working mode. This enables researchers to talk less formally with whomever is encountered and receive impromptu and immediate responses, as well as observing relevant situations of interest.
- School leaders were chosen as interviewees, as well as other key personnel identified by the leaders as playing crucial roles in the chosen area. Additionally, one 'stakeholder' was also interviewed, as people who held key positions in the LA, as related to the research area. Visits were made and interviews were conducted between January 2016 and April 2016.

The sample:

This is a relatively small scale study and a list of primary schools was compiled for the researchers by the Local Authority as being ones which had been effective in closing the attainment gap. Schools which were deemed to be less successful in closing the gap were not part of this project. From the list of ten primary schools given by the Local Authority, the researchers aimed to select as many as possible to visit. In the event, seven of those ten were visited and interviews carried out there. (The other schools were contacted but either did not respond to requests for visits and interviews, or were unable to offer a date for a visit.) These seven were selected simply according to the willingness of the school leaders to participate and share their practice. The numbers of disadvantaged pupils in each of the seven schools varied, with the lowest proportion of pupils receiving Pupil Premium funding being 6% in one school, while the highest proportion was 46%. The visited schools were assured of anonymity in the final report (but were advised they might be invited to be 'case studies' to be used by the LA subject to agreement). The usual research protocols were applied in the carrying out of the interviews.

The small scale of the research sample is obviously a limitation of this piece of work. However, we would argue that the focus on how successful schools in closing the gap actually set about what they do may offer useful lessons and possibly can challenge some of the assumptions around under-achievement in schools. We accept the danger in trying to generalize from this data but would agree with Demie and McLean (2015: 27) who argue that: 'learning from this practice can make a difference to schools.'

Altogether, 16 interviews were carried out with school leaders and other personnel; one stakeholder was interviewed; 6 of the 7 school visits included a walk around the site; in some, researchers were accompanied by senior staff, in others, by school pupils.

## 2 Findings and Discussion

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This section is divided into three parts. The first lists, in a fairly brief way, the main practices and strategies used by the chosen schools to make an impact on raising the achievement of their disadvantaged pupils. The second identifies those features of the schools which seem to play a significant part in developing a school culture within which these strategies thrive – in other words, HOW the strategies are employed. The third part notes the elements of effective leadership and management which appeared to be significant in the way those schools operated and achieved what they did.

(Note that in all parts no specific order of priority of importance is intended to be given in these lists.)

### 2.1 Practices and strategies

The reason why we have chosen to mention these practices in a brief way is because such practices and strategies have already been widely identified, both nationally and regionally, e.g. through the work of the Sutton Trust. In any case, our specific research brief was to focus on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’; in other words, to focus on any more intangible aspects of certain schools who may have done the same things as other schools but were clearly more effective in doing them. Here therefore, we are simply recording that in these effective schools, the following practices and strategies were among the most widely used.

**2.1.1 Ensuring the highest possible quality classroom teaching.** (See below for appraisal procedures.)

**2.1.2 Monitoring and reviewing of pupil progress.** All schools have huge amounts of data, but it is the use that the data is put to that is significant. These schools were ‘relentless’ and ‘forensic’ in their collection and knowledge of data about pupil progress. All schools made extensive use of charts and graphic illustration – found in many school staff offices – and could readily pinpoint individual pupils’ current performance and progress. In some school offices, these were accompanied by child photographs – children were never just numbers! The key feature of these schools was their emphasis on the individual child – they never became sidetracked into thinking about groups except where these were made up of individual children – which of course all groups are! These schools tended not to be interested in ‘average scores’ for example, but only in what each individual child was

achieving or might achieve. This is not to say that these schools could not produce, if needed, overall data for e.g. a year group – they could – but this was not a way they used to measure progress very much. Reviews of progress took place in every school at regular intervals to gain the overall picture of progress so that interventions could be put in place at once where required.

- 2.1.3 Feedback to pupils.** Some schools addressed the required improvement here by focusing first on written feedback on work submitted, analysing what seemed to be most effective, and then focusing on spoken feedback. Others did it the other way round. The remainder tackled both at the same time. In all cases, schools debated and agreed beforehand the principles involved in effective feedback for future learning. Four schools had at some stage used specific staff training in this area.
- 2.1.4 Target-setting.** The setting of attainment targets for pupils was seen by all schools as an essential tool in raising achievement. Targets were generally set and managed by staff in different ways, with senior staff usually closely involved. All the interviewees were clear that individual pupil targets were the most important, and had to be both high in aspiration and at the same time realistic. For disadvantaged pupils this could mean targets gradually being raised as pupils grew in confidence. More than one interviewee stressed that individual targets became powerful tools for motivation.
- 2.1.5 Ensuring high attendance levels.** All schools had strategies for improving attendance levels with a particular focus on disadvantaged pupils. Rewards were widely used (see below); initiatives such as breakfast clubs (see below) also made a difference. In at least five schools, home visits by an appropriate staff member were used to help children who were ‘carers’ or households that were struggling in various ways. Much care and time was expended on these cases and increased attendance was achieved in the majority. As noted elsewhere, there was universal recognition that attendance was not an end in itself, and is in fact a good example of why the focus has to be on individuals. As one Deputy Head (School B) commented, ‘We have raised our attendance level from about 90% to 93.5%, which is good of course; it could be fairly meaningless if different children were being absent during those two periods. We have to make the school experience a good one when we have ‘got someone back’, or they will just be absent again a.s.a.p.! They’ll just continue to see going to school as something they have to do because the law says they have to. So, learning to learn for us is the key!’ Therefore, schools placed emphasis on the careful nurturing of reluctant attendees in the early stages of return to school and kept the focus on the achievement of which the pupil could be capable.
- 2.1.6 Focus on good quality presentation of pupils’ work.** This was identified in a number of schools as an important way in which disadvantaged pupils could see the worth of their work being valued through fairly straightforward procedures. It also taught important lessons about communicating with other people and was also a way in which everyone could be seen as capable as all others. Examples were given of returnees gaining

confidence through a focus on presentation of work, and one teacher commented on how she had not realised how some children were embarrassed about their work initially, but became delighted when simple 'setting out' procedures became clear. One Head (School D) commented that it was a way in which virtually all pupils could see they were as good as anyone else!

**2.1.7 Mentoring.** Mentoring was widely used by all the schools in the sample. Training in mentoring was provided in the majority of them; in some schools, it was an essential part of NQT induction and in two others, part of ALL staff induction. It was in most cases provided on an individual basis and staff in all kinds of roles were found to participate, depending on the identified need of the pupil. Most mentoring was provided to enable pupils to make progress in various curriculum areas, but there were some examples of mentoring in what may be seen as social skills. Sensitivity here was required from mentors to ensure 'school was not scoring points over the home', as the Head of School E put it.

Peer mentoring was being used in three the schools visited, with others saying they planned to use it in the future. Again, training was provided for pupils chosen as mentors. There was general agreement that peer mentoring was proving valuable for both mentees and mentors.

**2.1.8 Use of relevant funding.** Six of the seven schools used Pupil Premium funding to support ALL disadvantaged pupils, ensuring that no single child lost out. (See below re creative use of funding).

**2.1.9 Involvement of parents and local community.** (See below for examples of this.)

**2.1.10 Commitment to authentic pupil voice.** (See below for application of pupil voice.)

**2.1.11 Provision of 'memorable life experiences'.** All schools showed a commitment to ensuring that disadvantaged pupils had opportunities through school to have access to experiences outside of their normal life and outside of normal school routines. Visits to theatres, concerts, historic buildings, art galleries, museums, sporting venues, space centres, were clearly part of this, but additionally schools used artists and writers in residence. Aware of the narrowness of the life 'horizons' of some children, schools tried to offer experiences which were simply 'different'. A visit to a farm for town children, following the course of a river, a coastal visit for children from inland, a 'behind the scenes' at a museum, visits to bookshops and libraries – these were all ways in which schools tried to broaden the experiences of children whose horizons otherwise could be very limited. Several schools made regular use of official LA residential centres for field studies etc. and found that the evaluations were overwhelmingly positive from both children and parents.

The other main vehicles for memorable experiences were special events in schools, often taking the form of abandoning routines for a week or a day or so, to explore a topic in a range of ways e.g. a 'bake-off day' in which everyone experimented with dishes of different kinds and of different cultures, with all staff participating and local bakeries, cafes and shops contributing. Similarly, a Language Day when simple phrases are used all day, written and spoken, where the various languages represented in school were to be highlighted and used. Others included involvement in a city sports tournament as an opportunity to be seen and applauded in the local community. 'Some parents and families supported them there, who normally did not come to watch school events'. (Teacher in School D).

**2.1.12 'Deployment of staff'**. There was a general recognition that simply using an additional resource, such as pupil premium, to employ more staff, whether teachers or teaching assistants, was NOT an effective strategy. Several schools had actually reduced the number of teaching assistants. Such staff were increasingly being used in a highly focused way with specific training being provided to develop particular skills that were required to support disadvantaged pupils.

## 2.2 Principles and ethos

**2.2.1** In these schools, pupils had come to believe that they 'mattered' as individuals. Whatever the ability or circumstances of a child, they were beginning to know that there was someone who believed in them; in extreme cases 'This person at school, whether teacher or assistant or whoever, might seem the only such person in their lives' (Head of School F). In some dysfunctional environments, some children have no one 'to speak for them' and these schools seemed to provide this. It was interesting to note that various staff referred to previous schools at which they had worked, where there had been cultures where certain types of pupils predominated in much of school life, generally middle class children, who dominated particular activities. Without reducing opportunities for these, these schools now tried to ensure that ALL children had an equal place and opportunity to succeed.

These elements appeared to permeate these effective primary schools in an informal way. Additionally, a very important factor in this valuing was found to be in the increasing use of more formal 'pupil voice'. This development is seen by many educationalists as a crucial one in the decades ahead. It is already well established in Nordic countries (among the most successful in pupil achievement, it should be noted) where it is 'one of the ways in which the next generation of citizens are introduced to democracy' (Mortimore, 2013:232), a view supported by research (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Others argue that it is a recognition of the changing relationships between adults and children (Thomson, 2009) where instead

of adults speaking for children, 'Children and young people are more likely to be expected to speak on their own behalf' (Middlewood and Abbott, 2015:41). In this context, it was encouraging to find that in most of these schools, pupil voice was developing into a powerful means of supporting all children, including disadvantaged ones, in making their views known and listened to. We were given examples of pupil voice having had an impact, especially on the learning environment and at least two schools were involved in initiatives in which the primary school pupils were asked about their own learning and teaching processes through formal inquiry. Two others indicated this was on their own agendas for action in the very near future. Three school leaders stressed that pupil voice had to be authentic and not tokenistic, as children quickly saw through such tokenism.

A stress on equality of treatment in no way meant that competition was not valued. In several schools, a strong competitive element was encouraged and used for motivation. In one primary school, the Head of School C described how school teams were celebrated and not only enjoyed winning but always were learning from losing. Other interviewees referred to competitions where taking part was important and succeeding in them even better!

**2.2.2** 'Disadvantages are not an excuse' appeared to be the underpinning belief in these effective cultures being established. However dysfunctional and extreme the circumstances of an individual child, with the many barriers to effective learning these appeared to establish, these schools appeared not to be willing to let these disadvantages be excuses for that child not being able to achieve to the maximum of their capability.

'No Excuses' was a mantra in at least four schools visited. Others had their own key phrases, such as '*We never give up on anybody*', '*Failure is not an option*,' to get across the school's prime values in consistent messages, so that behaviour – good and bad – could be assessed in the context of these values. The role modelling of adults at all levels in the school was critical in all this: The Head of School A noted that plenty of children had poor role models out of school without adding to that here!' and another principle that school leaders emphasised was that schools are for the children not for the adults in them.' I know it is obvious but it's true, and occasionally a young teacher may need to be gently reminded of this.' (Head of School D.)

**2.2.3** An equally important aspect of these effective cultures was ensuring that ALL children felt safe and secure at school. Children from difficult circumstances, including in extreme cases, abusive and/or neglectful homes were in particular need for anxieties to be removed.

All these effective primary schools placed emphasis on child protection and safeguarding, ensuring all staff were familiar with correct procedures; training ensured all staff were alert to any signs of problems, such as abuse or neglect. The crucial element here is the link between safety and achievement. Two schools had established 'nurture groups' in children's early days at school, and others ran various kinds of what may be termed 'social

skills groups', aiming to increase children's confidence to be able to interact with other children and adults. As one Deputy Head (School C) noted, 'In a few cases, speaking at home is very limited, even forbidden, so learning to trust adults and believe they will listen to you can be a big step forward for some children.'

- 2.2.4** Success and achievement was recognised and celebrated. These schools recognised that some disadvantaged children had rarely or never received praise or recognition for accomplishment and had devised systems for reward for endeavour and achievement relevant to the particular age group. Use of local resources was often crucial; thus Pupil Premium money was used, but also local firms and businesses were encouraged to sponsor and donate prizes and rewards.

Academic achievement, behaviour, improved attendance, and, above all, effort were widely praised and rewarded when merited. Every one of the seven schools referred to the emphasis being placed on effort. We should note that any culture which celebrates success should ensure this includes all people involved including adults in a place for children, and in the majority of these schools, successes of teachers, administrative personnel, teaching assistants, lunchtime supervisors, technicians, were all noted and recognised in various ways, informal and sometimes formally.

- 2.2.5** There was a major focus on learning as the reason why school is important. Whilst high quality teaching was the priority, schools were aware that it is the resultant learning that matters for the pupils. Constant reiteration of 'Learning how to learn' and the consequent value of learning throughout life seemed to be central to these effective cultures. When unconventional or 'off timetable' events occurred, there was always great stress on how these were different learning opportunities. What was striking in the majority of these schools was the insistence that real learning was something that was way beyond being measurable by standardised tests and examinations. Whilst recognising the crucial importance of assessment, school leaders and staff were totally committed to learning that was deeper than that which can be measured in a simplistic way, which is structured to suit everyone. Hostility to a culture which focused on testing at the expense of true learning was expressed in at least five of the schools. (See also leadership section below.)

The role of staff being learners is critical in a school ethos of learning. The notion of the best teachers being effective learners has been long recognised (Stoll et al, 2003, Early and Bubb, 2004, Middlewood et al, 2005, Brooks, 2012) and these schools encouraged staff learning through CPD as well as informal opportunities for all staff. (See section in Leadership below.) In the majority of schools, teachers were encouraged to share their own learning with the pupils, and not knowing something was in no way seen as a weakness for anyone. The use of technology was the commonest example given where pupils lead the way for the adults, right from Year 2 or 3 pupils!

- 2.2.6** High aspirations were encouraged. Part of the self-belief that disadvantaged children come to have is in what may be possible for them. Whatever their background, children were

encouraged to aim as high as possible. One Head (School E) seemed to explain it well: 'It's a way of making them see that everyone is important and whatever you are going to do or be, you can be the best possible FOR YOU at that. So we ask, do you think you have done the best possible you could have done there? That becomes the starting point for a discussion and they are remarkably honest.'

**2.2.7** A 'no blame' culture develops. In essence, this relates to a 'we are all in this together' ethos. A sense of shared responsibility was important and most leaders placed a strong emphasis on equity and fairness. Collaborative working was widely encouraged; not only was this helpful to staff but children felt they were able to relate to various adults, not too dependent on one. Most of the interviewed heads – although not all – had tried to develop flatter management structures in schools, ensuring responsibility and accountability was shared as widely as possible.

## 2.3 Leadership

**2.3.1** Leaders had their 'fingers on the pulse' of the school. They tended to know all or a very large percentage of the pupils, and the disadvantaged ones in particular. They tended to know most of these by name individually, knew about their progress, where they are at present and what they are aiming at. They are well briefed before meeting any individual pupils (or their families). They were familiar with the relevant data, but were not involved in collecting data, which task was delegated to a senior colleague.

**2.3.2** Leaders tended to be a visible presence in their schools – in corridors, classrooms, playgrounds and at after-school activities. Some have systematic means of ensuring this; others have more informal ways, but in all cases, pupils and staff were aware of the likelihood of the leader visiting or appearing in an area, and were comfortable with this. Informal questioning suggested it was seen as a positive expression of interest, not as any kind of threat.

**2.3.3** Leaders actively encouraged the use of pupil voice. Whilst it was to be expected that enabling structures would be in place, the effective leaders saw the development of pupil voice as an indication of a 'confident' learning establishment. They saw it as a positive means of ensuring disadvantaged pupils were treated the same as others and that their views were as important. Some leaders took specific steps to ensure disadvantaged pupils were represented in pupil voice structures, such as pupil councils; others felt that the democratic processes would ensure this anyway and, as confidence developed, this would occur naturally. Three primary schools referred to 'pupil leadership' and had introduced or were introducing programmes which helped suitable pupils take leadership initiatives. One

of these schools took specific steps to ensure that Pupil Premium pupils played a part, or had the opportunity to do so, in pupil leadership initiatives.

**2.3.4** Leaders knew their local communities well. Most were skilled in using various support staff, some through a formal role, some informally, to build up a picture of the social networks and sociological indicators of the community context e.g. in employment, poverty levels, crime, community services. They were highly adept at recognising their overall parental attitudes and where they were clear that formal approaches e.g. through curriculum workshops, would not attract, they, with key staff, devised informal ways to entice parents into school. Drop-in sessions and facilities and following up on, e.g. joint parent-child work/activity at home, were all ways in which previously alienated parents were encouraged to become more involved.

**2.3.5** They were creative and flexible in their use of relevant funding, such as Pupil Premium. The range of staff support roles in schools was considerable, many of them not generic but specific to a school and its community. Many were part time and all were of the local community. Such staff were paid for with Pupil Premium money and used to work with specific groups, sometimes very small (2 or 3 pupils), or with individuals. Some were specialists (paid at instructor level) to develop skills in for example dance, music, various sports and speech. In some cases these were used to support an individual child's outstanding talent (musical instrument or drama or dance) where the family could not afford fees, but in others the activities such as dance or drama were used to increase children's self-confidence and simply enjoy themselves.

Another example was of the Pupil Premium money being used to reduce stress and improve performance by ensuring that a large reserve of spare PE kit was available for children who came without it. Head of School B said, 'We came to see that having a go at the children – or even their parents – for not bringing kit to school was completely counter-productive. In some cases, parents were still in bed, and in others they were already at work when the child left for school. Some say that giving them kit just makes them lazier but we have found the opposite! After a while, most pupils start to bring their own kit more.' Two schools had specifically identified the lack of proper PE clothing as a source of pupil anxiety, leading to absenteeism on PE days and poor performance in PE lessons. The PE kit provided brought about a clear change in improved attendance and attitude to and performance in PE. In some cases, the kit brought through Pupil Premium money for a pupil was retained at school for them to use on PE days.

Six of the schools had invested some funding in provision of food for pupils. Breakfast clubs were widely available, open to ALL pupils, often for a nominal sum. Not only were these seen as an obvious aid to improved learning through better diet, but the security offered to children coming to school early, well before lessons, rather than being left in an empty house was welcomed. Additionally, the social aspect of eating together was very important to the disadvantaged pupils, plus the punctuality to the first lessons was greatly improved.

**2.3.6** Leaders used rigorous appraisal processes to try to develop and maintain staff at a high performance level. This applied not only to teachers but to all employed staff. These schools used 'customised' systems of performance standards, either adapting nationally recommended ones, or devising their own. In the latter cases, and in fact in the majority of schools altogether, these were finalised following consultation with the relevant staff. Linked to this was a commitment to professional learning for all staff, whatever their role in school.

There was a strong emphasis on relevance in CPD. All school leaders were committed to development and training that was specific to the needs of the school, the group or the individual. As much as possible was provided in-house; several leaders mentioned that it was often more productive to bring a speaker in to the school, than send staff out to hear such speakers. Of course, some staff did attend externally provided courses where they were seen as relevant. Most schools encouraged staff to obtain accreditation where possible, and were supportive of the gaining of relevant qualifications.

A further feature of leaders' staff management was to try to develop staff stability. Effective teachers were encouraged to apply for promotion within the school, to gain qualifications with the help of on-site learning, to take on different roles which recognised their acquired skills. Apart from the very smallest schools in the sample, where promotion opportunities for NQTs beyond the first few years for example were very limited, the majority of schools had records of staff stability with fairly lengthy service being the norm, and some had examples of senior staff having begun there as NQTs. These schools also recognised the values of 'new blood' as well of course, but felt that the willingness of staff to remain there was a tribute to staff satisfaction and morale engendered and also helped the ethos of security for pupils that was sought. All leaders were well aware of the need to avoid any complacency, hence the focus on achievement of each pupil.

**2.3.7** Effective leaders placed emphasis on prioritising key elements in progressing to a culture of high achievement. It was important to succeed in some chosen areas and then add more; as Head of School F said, 'You cannot do everything well at once. When you start (as a head), you have to decide what are the priorities and go all out for them.' The ability of effective leaders to prioritise was identified by, among others, Hargreaves and Fink (2005) as a critical attribute of sustainable leaders in the twenty first century. Head of School A noted that, on the topic of priorities, 'If your first priority is getting better staff, for example, you need to remember that that is the priority for the children!'

**2.3.8** A very significant feature of the leadership of these effective schools was their understanding and commitment to learning as being something that their schools existed for first and foremost. Whilst this is in one sense an obvious truism, these leaders were passionate about their schools not simply being ones that achieved high test scores but gave their pupils opportunities to learn in a way that they could carry forward through life. They accepted the need to 'work within the system' but believed this could be done by a

commitment to deeper learning than could be assessed through standardised tests. Some expressed a desire to 'rescue' (Head of School B) children from a 'tyranny of testing' (Head of School F).

**2.3.9** Finally, a key feature of these effective leaders was their readiness to recognise where something was not working effectively, and their willingness to abandon it and adopt something new, or at least to amend significantly.

All leaders agreed with the Head of School F: 'You have to be confident enough to admit that something is not working and scrap it if necessary, not blaming anyone for its failure, but changing to a new approach.'

### 3 Conclusions & recommendations

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Our findings reflect the views of headteachers, senior leadership and teachers in schools who have been successful in closing the gap. In some senses there are no surprises in what we have reported. Many of the findings would be common to all successful schools. The question is why do only some schools adopt the strategies we have described? As Ball et al (2012: 11) have noted, headteachers are concerned 'with good learning outcomes and with creating a broad and positive school experience for the young people in their charge.' All schools have choices to make about how they develop their strategies and the ways in which they will deploy their resources. So what sets the schools in our sample apart and what contributes to their success in closing the gap? As we noted earlier the two key areas we have identified are leadership and culture and values.

#### Leadership

There has been a large amount of research linking improving and effective school performance with effective leadership, see for example: Leithwood et al, 2006; Robinson, 2007; Hattie, 2009; Bush and Glover, 2013; Fullan 2014. This piece of research strongly supports the link between positive and effective leadership as a major factor contributing to the success of the schools in the sample. From the research we have identified a number of common themes that need to be developed in schools to ensure that disadvantaged pupils are given the best opportunity to succeed. In particular, leadership needs to:

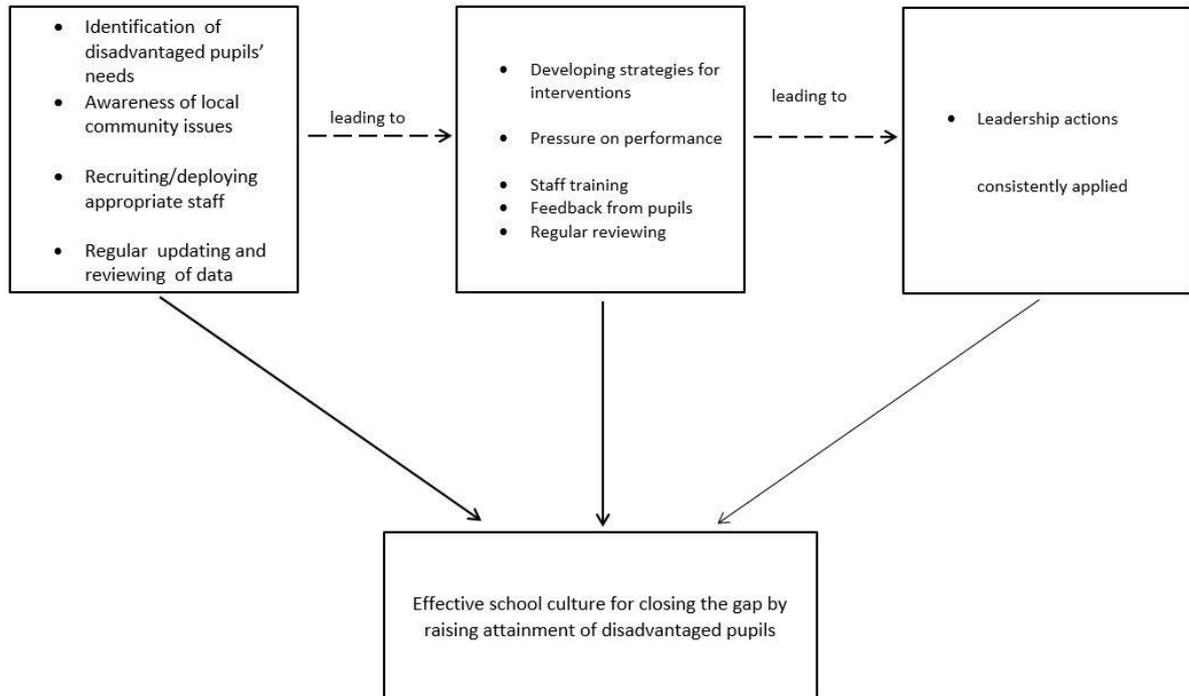
- Commit to a view of learning which incorporates testing but is aimed at developing children's progress which is far wider than can be assessed simply through tests.

- Understand that raising attendance rates and similar measurable scores are important, but not ends in themselves, merely aids to improve positive learning experiences for children.
- Develop detailed and effective use of data which generates action with clear lines of accountability.
- Establish clear leadership responsibilities, with all staff being encouraged to take responsibility to improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils.
- Develop a visible presence in the school – ensure you are seen!
- Enable flexible and realistic use of resources.
- Focus on the importance of learning throughout the school – make this overt.
- Promote high quality teaching across the school.
- Recognise the importance of the individual pupil and develop strategies that focus on individuals.
- Enable a range of staff development to take place which is accessible to all staff.
- Develop an effective and appropriate appraisal system that supports high quality teaching and pupil learning.
- Establish continuity of staffing through staff retention and the appointments process.
- Promote effective use of genuine pupil voice.
- Identify a clear and consistent vision that is effectively communicated to all stakeholders.

## Culture and Values

Figure 1 illustrates the factors in developing an effective school culture to close the gap.

Figure 1 Factors in developing effective 'closing the gap' school culture



There is a strong connection between leadership and the culture and values of a particular school. However, if culture is ultimately about values and beliefs, as the literature and research suggests it is (e.g. Deal and Peterson, 1999; Walker, 2010; Bush and Middlewood, 2013), then the overriding belief in the schools we carried out the research in, is that every single child or young person is worthy of respect and is capable of achieving something worthwhile. We have attempted to identify, from the research, particular aspects of culture and values that have been developed in the schools we visited:

- Strong engagement and identification with the local community.
- Development of a number of external links across a range of organisations.
- A willingness to encourage innovation.
- No excuses for poor performance.
- A recognition that policies that do not work should be reviewed and if necessary changed.
- An emphasis on detail and micro-strategies.
- A focus on individual pupil achievement.
- A willingness to challenge accepted convention.
- Encouragement of innovation with no blame attached.

- A recognition of the importance of social and emotional support in addition to academic support for pupils.
- Creation of a safe and secure environment.
- Clarity of values and vision that is constantly reinforced.
- All pupils are valued and listened to – including through pupil voice.
- All staff are valued and listened to.

These effective schools have reached a stage in the establishment of a culture where ‘its culture becomes more a cause than an effect,’ (Middlewood and Abbott, 2015), that is, when the new people entering the culture are absorbed into it and influenced by its beliefs and values.

We propose that this report contains a number of important messages for schools and their leaders. The schools in this sample have shown that it is possible to begin to break the link between disadvantage and poor performance in school. As we commented earlier there is nothing surprising about our findings, but these schools have adopted broadly consistent policies to close the gap. With commitment, organisation and attention to detail all schools should be able to develop the strategies we have described. We would argue that all schools should be aiming to reach that situation.

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