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Success Against the Odds: A Study of Outstanding Schools in Disadvantaged Areas in Britain

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Background

This study looks at schools that serve Britain's disadvantaged areas and examines the success factors behind their outstanding achievement and improvement over the years. The body of available research suggests that most previous studies focussed on ethnicity and achievement by looking at examples of schools that provide an environment in which Black Caribbean and African heritage pupils (OFSTED 2002, Demie 2009) do better or are underachieving. Overall, the evidence from previous research enables the conclusion to be drawn that the schools in the study demonstrate the many ways in which they work to support mainly pupils with ethnic minority backgrounds, through a wide range of imaginative and inclusive strategies. These research findings have also raised the concern that little research has been undertaken to study poverty and achievement in schools. A review of literature (see Demie 2009; Harris 2009) shows that schools can break the powerful negative relationship between social disadvantage and achievement and there is now a need to look more closely at why some schools in challenging circumstances do well against the odds. An increase in research that focuses on what works and challenges perceived notions of underachievement in schools in disadvantaged areas.

Research Questions

Three overarching research questions guided this research:

1. Why do some schools succeed against the odds?
2. What are the factors contributing to this success?
3. What are the implications for policy, practice and research?

This study provides evidence based answers to these questions, drawing on the practice, experience and ambitions of schools in challenging circumstances.

Methods

The research adopted a case study approach involving five secondary schools. The key criteria for the selection of schools was a very high proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals; a very high proportion of students with English as Additional Languages (EAL); an 'outstanding' grade in the most recent inspections; a high standard and sustained improvement of attainment over the period. A complementary methodological approach was used to explore performance and the views of teachers, parents and their children about schooling. First, detailed GCSE pupil level data related to sex, ethnicity, free school meals, mobility rate and levels of fluency in English was collected covering the last 10 years and matched to their attainment data for contextual and value added analysis. Secondly, case studies were carried out to observe lessons and to hold discussions with headteachers, staff, governors and pupils to evaluate and gather evidence on how well all pupils are achieving and the factors contributing to this. The main method of data collection was open ended semi-structured interviews with senior management, teachers, administrative staff and support staff as well as pupils. Interviews were conducted by two researchers. Finally, pupil and parent focus groups were undertaken to ascertain the views of pupils and parents regarding their experiences and on what works in school. This was followed by 1500 pupil attitudinal survey using a questionnaire to ascertain pupils' views and opinions on school and learning and aspirations for the future. Such combination of data collection methodologies give a broader complementary view of the research problem in the study of the same phenomenon. It also leads to greater validity and reliability of the evidence than single methodological approach.

Frame

For the purpose of this research each analytical framework that relates to data, case studies and attitudinal surveys was considered as a different lens offering an alternative explanation to understand and to answer the over arching research questions of this study. By close analysis of data by background factors we attempted to illustrate differences in attainment and to understand how the school helped pupils progress from low starting points to exceptionally high standards at GCSE. Taking a broadly realistic approach to analysis we then unpacked the sorts of factors that we found to be most effective at supporting different group. We carried out detailed systematic analysis of each of the case study findings and focus groups evidence to understand more about the educational experiences of all pupils by triangulating the voices of the various participants. Interview and case study observations were triangulated with focus group and attitudinal survey evidence to explore the relative effectiveness of the schools and the reasons why the schools were bucking the trends. By triangulating the data and linking school experience to their outcomes we are able to identify what works and examples of good practice in the case study schools.

Research findings

Despite challenging circumstances, the main findings of the research show that the GCSE results have improved significantly in the case study schools and the schools are consistently rated as outstanding in their inspection reports. Overall the data shows that from 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 being on free school meals which is used as proxy for levels of disadvantage. In another school GCSE improved from 56% to 93% 5+A*-C between the same period. There are a number of reasons why the schools are bucking the national trends and are doing much better. The research identified the reasons behind school's success, which include consistent student routines, quality of teaching and learning, effective leadership at all levels including maintaining discipline and paying attention to individual student's needs, supportive professional development by investing in staff and their communities, 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. What is particularly special about the case study schools is that they tended to employ a range of strategies and targeted support to challenge underachievement and poverty through an extensive use of a diversified workforce including teaching assistants, EAL teachers and learning mentors. There were a lot of local people working at the case study schools both in teaching and other posts. Each of the above good practice is explored in detail in the paper to reveal exactly what the school is doing to ensure it provides the very highest quality of education for all its students. This is followed by discussion on the findings of the focus groups and attitudinal survey that mirrored the views of those participants in the case study interviews. In conclusion the paper draws out key findings to summarise why the case study schools are outstanding and do well against the odds. Policy and research implications are also discussed in the final section.

References

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