Department for Education

School cultures and practices: supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils

A qualitative comparison of London and non-London schools

Research Brief

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Introduction

In recent years considerable attention has been directed to how the attainment of disadvantaged pupils can be improved. There has been particular interest in the improved performance of disadvantaged pupils in London schools since the mid-1990s, which has resulted in a relatively small gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers in the capital compared to the more sizeable gap within other regions of England. Research has examined the 'London Effect' from a number of different angles, from the effects of policy initiatives, accountability and governance, to demographics, pupil characteristics and workforce factors.

This Research Brief provides a summary of the full Research Report, setting out findings from new research that adds another piece to a growing jigsaw. The research is based on two-day, in-depth, qualitative case studies of 16 primary and 7 secondary schools across England, conducted between September 2016 and July 2017. Our analysis builds on an established body of literature on school cultures and practices, considering a range of factors spanning the intangible assumptions and values that teachers hold through to the observable, concrete behaviours that emerge from them. We understand school practices as emerging from a school's culture; they are the most concrete, visible aspect of that culture and allow insights into its constituent underlying assumptions and values.

The research provides an in-depth analysis of a set of school cultures and practices that existing research has linked to positive outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. These cultures and practices range from how schools support parents' and pupils' aspirations and expectations, to the way in which they use data and evidence to monitor outcomes and how they respond to the latest developments in research. Through interviews with teachers, senior leaders and governors; focus groups with parents and pupils; and observations of lessons, assemblies, meetings, corridors and playgrounds in each school, we have been able to build-up an in-depth picture of variation and consistency in cultures between schools, and the ways in which cultures influence practice.

The report categorises the cultures and practices in schools according to 11 themes. These are:

1. Aspirations and expectations
2. Positivity, energy and purpose
3. Collaboration and competition
4. Data and evidence
5. Behaviour and attendance
6. Staffing
7. Leadership

8. Targeting resources
9. Partnerships and activities
10. Learning environment
11. Parental engagement

Across these themes, the research compares how cultures and practices operate in schools inside and outside the capital, and in schools where disadvantaged pupils perform at different levels relative to their peers. We compare ‘high-performing’ schools in which disadvantaged pupils attain well in absolute terms, and which have consistently maintained a small attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, with ‘lower-performing’ schools in which the attainment of disadvantaged pupils has not been consistently strong in absolute or relative terms. In constructing our sample, we aimed to compare schools with wide disparities in their results for disadvantaged pupils but with similar levels of per-pupil funding and similar pupil populations in terms of the proportion eligible for free school meals and minority ethnic composition. This was done in order to minimise the influence of these factors in interpreting differences in disadvantaged pupils’ attainment, relative to the effect of schools’ cultures and practices.

By comparing cultures and practices in high-performing and lower-performing schools inside and outside London, we ultimately aim to identify whether there are cultures and practices that appear to be unique to, or more deeply ingrained in, high-performing London schools, with the aim of making recommendations for approaches to develop with lower-performing schools.

Methodology

A literature review generated a number of hypotheses linking school cultures and practices to the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. We cross-referenced these hypotheses with a thematic analysis of an existing set of interviews with system leaders in education from an earlier LKMco/CfBT report on London schools' success (Baars et al., 2014) and also drew on a set of hypotheses compiled by the Department for Education, based on a review of existing studies in this area. A summary of the literature review and hypotheses is presented in Annex 1 of the full Research Report.

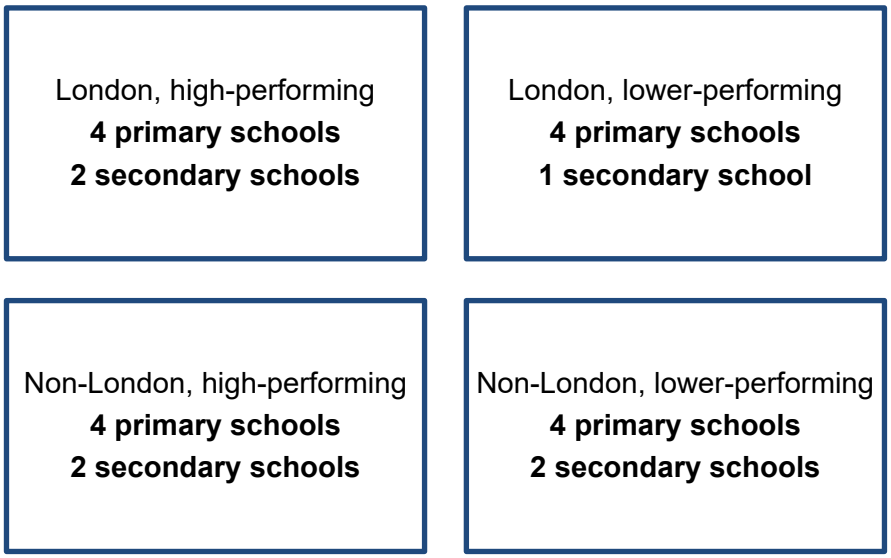
Hypotheses were grouped into overarching themes, as set out in the Introduction, which served two functions in the research. Firstly, as sets of hypotheses, they describe the cultures and practices we expected to be more prevalent in high-performing London schools, based on our existing knowledge. Secondly, they provided broad areas for further exploratory analysis during the case studies, in order to identify cultures and practices whose effects had not been identified in existing research.

We explored the operation of each of these nine hypotheses through a set of 16 comparative case studies of 4 equally-sized groups of primary schools, and an additional set of 7 secondary school case studies.[1] Our sampling strategy was designed to test our hypotheses in schools that had consistently achieved either stronger or weaker results for their disadvantaged pupils, and which were situated both inside and outside the capital. The sample was skewed towards primary schools as existing research into the London Effect has tended to focus on secondary schools, despite some studies suggesting improvements in primary schools have played a significant role in the capital's success. The four-group case study design is summarised in Figure 1.

The sampling process aimed to achieve 'matches' between high- and lower-performing schools, to enable us to compare schools with wide disparities in their results for disadvantaged pupils but with similar levels of per-pupil funding and similar pupil populations in terms of the proportion eligible for free school meals and minority ethnic composition. The aim of 'matching' the samples in this way was to minimise the influence of these factors in interpreting differences in disadvantaged pupils' attainment, relative to the effect of schools' cultures and practices. Further details of the case study design and sampling strategy are presented in Annex 2 of the full Research Report.

[1] Recruitment challenges led to only one lower-performing London secondary school being included in the study.

Figure 1: Sample design



Each school case study commenced with a desk-based background review of school performance data, inspection reports, history, values and ethos, and local area characteristics. Two days of fieldwork followed, consisting of: interviews with teachers, senior leaders and governors; focus groups with pupils and parents; a pupil self-completion diary task; and observations of lessons, senior leadership team (SLT) meetings, playgrounds and corridors.

All of the data gathered from the case studies was analysed line-by-line and tagged with themes, based on the hypotheses outlined above. We then analysed all of the data relating to individual themes and produced ‘maps’ of the sub-themes within each theme. These maps also identified how many times, and in how many schools, a particular sub-theme had occurred in the data. This allowed us to firstly identify the extent to which particular sub-themes were observed amongst our case study schools (in order to identify if particular cultures or practices appeared to be more prevalent in particular types of school), and then to conduct an in-depth analysis of these sub-themes by returning to the sections of data in which they had occurred.

Given that primary schools accounted for more than two-thirds of our total sample, we have given priority to the findings from the primary phase of the fieldwork in our analysis. The secondary school analysis was led by the themes and sub-themes identified in the primary phase of the research, and we draw attention to cultures and practices within secondary schools which appeared to diverge notably from those we identified in primary schools. We extended the thematic framework where necessary to capture the detail of cultures and practices that appeared to be distinct to secondary schools.

Further details of our approach to data collection and analysis are provided in Annex 2 of the full Research Report.

Summary of findings

Five key cross-cutting findings emerged from our analysis:

1. School cultures and practices varied more by a school's performance than by location

Some features of school culture were recognisable across all the schools involved in the research. For instance, leaders and staff shared common motivations across all schools, and believed that they were able to have a positive impact on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes. Many common practices were also recognisable, such as the way data were collected and analysed and the day-to-day systems used for managing behaviour and attendance. However, other cultures and practices did appear to vary with school performance. In general, high-performing schools inside and outside London resembled each other closely. Sometimes these common cultures and practices spanned high-performing primaries and secondaries, while in other cases they appeared to be more phase specific.

In relation to cultures:

High-performing primaries appeared to be particularly attentive to raising disadvantaged pupils' attainment, and displayed particularly high levels of shared staff purpose, compared to lower-performing primaries. Meanwhile, high-performing schools across both phases tended to:

- hold particularly high expectations that tended to have a more tangible influence on teacher practice,
- engender particularly positive relationships between staff, parents and pupils,
- have greater conviction that their practices were enough to 'make a difference' with disadvantaged pupils, and
- respond positively to pupils' aspirational goals and clearly structure their practice around them.

While some lower-performing schools exhibited these cultures, they did so less frequently than high-peforming schools, and tended not to state their culture in the specific terms that high-performing schools used. Moreover, cultures were less often linked explicitly to practice in lower-performing schools.

In relation to practices:

Some distinctive practices were evident in both high-performing primary and secondary schools. For instance, high-performing schools in both phases appeared to make more use of very early support for pupils falling behind in key curriculum areas. Other practices of high-performing schools appeared to be distinctive to primary schools. High-performing primary schools appeared to be more likely than lower-performing primary schools to tailor teaching to individual pupils such as by setting more challenging work for pupils who were progressing well. They also made more extensive use of extra-curricular opportunities for philosophy, oracy and debating.

Often, where lower-performing schools demonstrated similar practices to high-performing schools, they nonetheless used a narrower range of strategies or were in earlier stages of implementing their approaches. This was particularly evident in lower-performing primary schools' efforts to engage parents, and the confidence with which teachers and governors in lower-performing primary schools handled data.

2. Lower-performing primary schools outside London were most different from other schools

Lower-performing primary schools outside London were often furthest from the rest of the field in terms of their cultures and practices.

In relation to cultures:

Certain cultures in lower-performing primary schools outside the capital appeared to differ considerably from those in other schools. These schools:

- were less likely to believe that disadvantaged pupils could achieve in line with, or above national average attainment for all pupils, and
- were less likely to believe that data could be used for the benefit of individual pupils, rather than serving a wider system of accountability.

In relation to practices:

In some cases, lower-performing primary schools outside the capital appeared not to share some of the practices that were evident in other schools. For example, they:

- appeared to be less likely to provide early and rapid support for pupils who were falling behind in key curriculum areas,
- reported weaker teaching more often than other primary schools,

- were less likely to use peer-to-peer support amongst pupils in lessons; made fewer references to instilling a love of learning amongst pupils (such as making lessons enioyable so that pupils looked forward to coming to school); and, placed less emphasis on support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) than was the case in other primary schools,
- had less developed strategies for engaging and helping parents support disadvantaged pupils at home, and
- were less likely than other schools to extend high expectations for pupil behaviour to the 'small things' such as behaviour in corridors and at mealtimes.

Some of the differences in the cultures and practices of lower-performing primary schools outside the capital appeared to be due, at least in part, to contextual factors. In these schools:

- Recruitment, retention and staff turnover appeared to be more challenging, and there were more frequent issues with staff performance. Lower-performing secondary schools outside London also reported recruitment difficulties
- Teachers and governors cited funding cuts[2] and lack of take-up as reasons why they had in some cases reduced their offer of extra-curricular opportunities
- Parents appeared to have lower expectations for their children than those in other schools

3. High-performing schools, regardless of location, adopted a wide range of approaches to supporting disadvantaged pupils

High-performing schools, both inside and outside London, demonstrated a wider range of strategies to support disadvantaged pupils than lower-performing schools. In many cases the difference between high- and lower-performing schools lay in the extent to which strategies were used consistently within each school, how frequently and regularly strategies were employed, and how embedded they had become.

Amongst high-performing primary schools these strategies included:

- subsidising trips and extra-curricular activities for disadvantaged pupils;
- directing resources towards the Early Years Foundation Stage;

[2] Given the broad focus of the research, when teachers and senior leaders mentioned school funding in their interviews we were unable to clarify if they were referring to specific funding streams such as the Pupil Premium, or the school's General Annual Grant or Dedicated Schools Grant, unless this was stated up front.

- evaluating the value for money of interventions to support disadvantaged pupils;
- placing emphasis on the quality of support staff;
- recruiting staff that shared the school's ethos, and
- working with local secondary schools to address the potentially negative impact of poorly-managed transitions.

Meanwhile high-performing schools across both phases tended to:

- engage in a variety of community partnerships to deliver extra-curricular activities (and work experience opportunities in the case of secondary schools);
- evaluate the impact (but not necessarily value for money) of interventions to support disadvantaged pupils, and
- ensure all staff are confident in handling data and using data to inform their practice.

4. High-performing schools, regardless of location, were positive and solutions-focused

The culture in high-performing schools was notably positive, both inside and outside the capital. Although high-performing schools recognised barriers to disadvantaged pupils' achievement, they generally focused on strategies for overcoming them rather than treating barriers as immutable. While lower-performing secondary schools appeared to share the broadly positive culture of high-performing schools, the culture in lower-performing primary schools tended to be notably less positive.

Amongst high-performing primaries, positivity was evident in the way schools:

- appeared to use pupils' more idealistic aspirations (such as to become footballers or astronauts) as a 'hook' for other aspirations rather than seeing them as problematic,
- used 'aspirational' comparisons, such as comparing the attainment of a school's disadvantaged pupils with the national average for all pupils, to drive improvement (particularly evident in schools outside London), and
- celebrated pupil success and achievements at every opportunity, building such celebrations into their weekly timetable and actively including parents.

Across both phases, high-performing schools:

- saw hiring newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) as a positive opportunity, whereas lower-performing schools sometimes felt they were unable to provide the support that inexperienced teachers needed;
- believed unanimously that their behaviour management systems worked effectively, or that the school had the capacity to resolve persistent behaviour problems;
- emphasised the importance of supporting teachers' career development, regardless of any potential impact on retention;
- reported high morale amongst staff, driven by team relationships and positive relationships with pupils, and
- believed that they were able to shift parents' aspirations and expectations of their children.

5. A subtle but discernible 'London culture'

To the extent to which we found distinctive features of high-performing London schools, these tended to relate specifically to primary rather than secondary schools:

- High-performing primary schools in London went further than other primary schools in developing partnerships between staff and parents and to build parental expectations of their children's future academic and career pathways.
- High-performing primary schools in London were more likely to report intervening when staff did not share their high expectations than other schools.
- High-performing primary schools in London seemed to involve pupils in behaviour management to a greater degree than other schools.
- High-performing schools in London, both primary and secondary, reported a number of ways in which their location in the capital helped build a sense of purpose, for example through a shared vision with other schools and drawing their teachers from the local community.
- High-performing primary and secondary schools in London appeared to go further than other schools in their attempts to engage parents with their ethos and vision.

Furthermore, we found evidence of a subtle but distinctive set of cultures and practices amongst both high- and lower-performing London schools. Again, these tended to be more evident amongst the primary schools we visited.

- In London we found a greater depth and strength to schools' networks, both in terms of the opportunities for 'horizon broadening' trips and visits that schools

were able to offer pupils, and in relation to teachers' own professional networks.

- London primary schools appeared to place more emphasis on parental engagement than primary schools outside the capital, although this was a subtle difference; some high-performing primary schools outside London also made use of a wide variety of strategies to engage parents.
- Leaders of London primary schools appeared to prioritise parental engagement in their own roles in a way that was not always the case in primary schools outside the capital.
- Primary schools in the capital appeared to focus more attention on developing pupils' non-cognitive skills such as confidence and resilience than those outside the capital. While primary schools outside London also recognised the importance of developing the 'whole child', high-performing primary schools outside the capital appeared to place a slightly greater emphasis on academic achievement.

In general, we found more stark variation between the cultures and practices of high- and lower-performing primary schools, compared to secondary schools. We also tended to find clearer or more widespread evidence of distinctive practice amongst high-performing primaries compared to high-performing secondaries. However, this may be due in part to the larger sample of primary schools we visited, and our findings are not a sufficient basis either for concluding that there is more variation in primary schools' cultures and practices, or that high-performing primary schools are distinctive in the extent to which they exhibit cultures and practices that support the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

While we did identify some distinctive cultures and practices in high-performing schools in the capital, we are nonetheless cautious about claiming that these are necessary or sufficient conditions for the 'London Effect'. Firstly, the design of the research focuses on providing a rich description and comparison of different cultures and practices, rather than looking to provide a full causal account of how these cultures and practices shape pupil outcomes. Secondly, our approach focussed on depth rather than breadth, and our relatively small sample of schools, particularly secondaries, is insufficient to support general claims of causality between particular cultures and practices and pupil outcomes.

Our comparative design does however suggest areas in which particular cultures and practices appear to be associated with positive outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. The particular strength of this research is its ability to provide a detailed description of these cultures and practices and the ways in which they, often subtly, differed from those we found in other schools. We are also able to suggest potential avenues for further research, and draw implications for policy where the existing literature supports our findings.

Implications and recommendations

This report does not set out to make causal claims about the relationship between schools' cultures and practices and their outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Accordingly, our recommendations stop short of directing schools to implement a particular culture or set of practices. Instead, we identify a number of areas in which the findings from our case studies relate to the wider literature on the ways in which school culture and practices influence outcomes, in particular for disadvantaged pupils.

Shared sense of purpose

The high-performing schools in our sample demonstrated greater cohesiveness, sense of shared purpose and values that were shared amongst all staff, pupils and parents, as well as high staff morale. This observation corroborates the existing literature, which suggests that these aspects of school culture can influence school effectiveness (Sammons et al., 1995; Stewart, 2008; Yu and Yeung, 2003).

Recommendations

- The Department for Education could consider commissioning research on causal pathways linking shared staff purpose and school performance: what are more or less successful strategies? How does a shared sense of purpose impact on teacher performance? Is there a link to pupil outcomes?
- Future research should collate and disseminate approaches to building a shared sense of purpose in schools, drawing on the concrete examples we have drawn on in our research.

Using data

High-performing primary schools appeared to be more consistent in their engagement with data, and were more likely to use evidence-informed support strategies than lower-performing primary schools. Meanwhile, some staff and governors in lower-performing primary schools reported difficulties understanding and using data. Our findings in this area align with existing research which suggests that effective use of data can underpin school performance (Sharples, 2011; Ofsted, 2013; Macleod et al., 2015; Demie and Maclean, 2015).

Recommendations

- Teacher training providers, especially in the primary phase, should ensure that initial teacher training (ITT) programmes introduce new teachers to how they can

use a combination of data sources to inform classroom practice, for example by informing planning and monitoring pupils' individual support needs.

- Schools should ensure that NQTs and recently-qualified-teachers (RQTs) have access to training that builds their data literacy.
- The Department for Education should consider how to improve governors' data literacy, ensuring that its governance training and development providers provide sufficient data literacy training as part of their programmes.
- Schools and local authorities should encourage their governors to attend training and development programmes linked to data literacy.
- Schools should set up and provide login details for governors to the Department's Analysing School Performance service.

Engaging parents

London schools went further than other schools to work with parents to develop their expectations for their children. High-performing primary schools, in particular, employed a dedicated member of staff to provide outreach and support for parents and families, rather than assigning this function to existing teaching staff. This aligns with existing research which suggests an association between schools' engagement with parents and their performance (Sharples et al., 2011).

Recommendation

- The Department for Education should collate examples of effective practice in engaging parents to share with schools. This could include insights into the ways in which schools have made use of dedicated members of staff to engage with and support parents and families.

High quality teaching

The high-performing schools we visited prioritised individualised staff training, and paid particular attention to the deployment and training of support staff. Lower-performing primary schools appeared to be less likely to target continuous professional development (CPD) at individual staff and respond to their individual training and development needs. Meanwhile, lower-performing schools outside London were particularly constrained by recruitment and retention difficulties. These findings corroborate existing literature which draws strong links between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their access to high quality teaching (Ofsted, 2013; Macleod et al., 2015; Demie and Maclean, 2015).

Recommendations

- Any moves to support recruitment and retention across the country should pay particular attention to the needs of lower-performing schools in disadvantaged areas outside London. In accordance with DfE's plan for improving social mobility (DfE, 2017), the Department should ensure that factors affecting teacher supply and retention, such as the availability of affordable housing, good transport links and quality of life are addressed across government.
- The Department for Education should build on the 2016 Standards for Teachers' Professional Development and continue to work with bodies such as the Chartered College of Teaching and high-quality CPD providers, to ensure that lower-performing schools in areas that have fallen behind have access to good quality CPD.

Strong and visionary leadership

Our research identified a number of cultures and practices relating to school leadership, corroborating existing literature linking school effectiveness to strong and visionary leadership (Ofsted, 2013; Demie and Maclean, 2015).

Recommendation

- The Department for Education should share examples of strong and visionary leadership practices revealed in this research, in order to provide tangible examples of practice for leaders in schools across the country.
- Schools should prioritise development of middle leaders, in order to enhance the quality of teaching in classrooms, as well as to nuture the next generation of senior leaders (Baars et al., 2016; Small et al., 2017). To do so, schools should:
    - Provide clear development pathways and mentorship opportunities for staff.
    - Provide opportunities for aspiring middle leaders to engage with research and policy and use this as a basis to drive innovation within their departments.

- To support schools' development of middle leaders, the Department for Education should issue guidance to schools on the factors that shape effective middle leadership, as well as signposting to existing organisations that support and train middle leaders.

- To support schools' efforts in recruiting high-quality governors/trustees, particularly in areas outside London where recruitment may be more difficult,

the Department for Education should work with organisations such as the National Governors Association and Governors for Schools (SGOSS) in order to promote the range of existing programmes to recruit and support governors, such as National Leaders of Governance.

Further research

This research has sought depth of insight and comparison rather than seeking to draw generalisable or causal conclusions befitting of a larger-scale study. We recommend, therefore, that our conclusions be tested using a large-scale national survey of schools.

Recommendation

- The Department for Education should consider commissioning a large-scale national survey of schools, or including questions in an existing survey, such as DfE's School Snapshot Survey, to test the generalisability of the conclusions of this research, alongside additional analysis of any relevant data already held by the Department.

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