



Department
for Education

Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils: articulating success and good practice

Research brief

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Executive Summary

Introduction, aims and objectives

The performance gap between pupils from more and less advantaged backgrounds in England is one of the largest among OECD countries. The pupil premium was introduced by the coalition government in 2011 to increase social mobility and reduce the gap in performance between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Schools receive funding for each disadvantaged pupil and can use the funding flexibly, in the best interests of eligible pupils.

In November 2014, the Department for Education commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to investigate the differences between schools in the performance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study aimed to identify:

1. Whether there are any common features of schools that have narrowed the gap successfully.
2. Whether there are any possible groups/clusters of schools that have narrowed the gap, and why this is the case.
3. What are schools that have narrowed the gap doing compared to other schools? What leads to them doing well? What lessons can be learnt from them?

For the purpose of this study, disadvantaged pupils are identified in the national school datasets used in this analysis based on their eligibility for the Pupil Premium. This includes pupils eligible for free school meals at any point within the past six years (Ever 6 FSM) and pupils looked after by the local authority¹.

Key findings

What are schools doing to improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils?

The survey found that schools had used a large number of strategies (18 per school, on average) in order to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils since 2011. The most popular strategies, and those that schools considered to be the most effective, focused on teaching and learning, especially: paired or small group additional teaching; improving feedback; and one-to-one tuition. These strategies are all supported by evidence of effectiveness in the Sutton Trust/Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit².

¹ This definition of disadvantaged pupils was used to define pupil premium eligibility prior to April 2014 and includes pupils looked after by the local authority for more than six months. In April 2014, eligibility for the pupil premium changed to include pupils who have been in local authority care for one day or more and pupils who have left local authority care because of one of the following: adoption; a special guardianship order; a child arrangements order.

² See: [The Sutton Trust/Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\) Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#).

Most schools (93.1 per cent) had received support from governors for their plans to improve disadvantaged pupils' performance and over half (54.2 per cent) had received such support from local authorities.

Although schools tended to be using similar strategies, more successful schools³ had introduced the strategy they identified as their 'most effective' strategy earlier than less successful schools (before 2011 – though they were still using it in 2014). Further analysis found that schools were using certain groups of strategies overall, and that these were related to success in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

- More successful schools were more likely to be using metacognitive⁴/independent learning and peer learning strategies (although this relationship was only statistically significant in secondary schools).

Metacognitive and peer learning strategies have independent evidence of effectiveness (see the Sutton Trust/EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit).

The research found some statistically significant relationships between primary schools with less success in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and the strategies they adopted.

- Less successful primary schools were more likely to be using strategies to improve attendance, behaviour or pupil engagement in the curriculum, or to have made improvements to the classroom/school environment.
- Less successful primary schools more likely to: employ additional teaching assistants (TAs) or increase TA hours to work specifically with disadvantaged pupils; introduce new literacy and numeracy programmes; and use paired/small group additional teaching.

However, rather than suggesting that these strategies are ineffective, these findings may be a reflection of differences in schools' stages of development. It is possible that more successful schools had already embedded these approaches in their practice and therefore did not identify them as specific strategies for raising disadvantaged pupils' attainment introduced after 2011.

How are schools raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils?

Leaders in schools that were more successful in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils emphasised that there was no single intervention that had led to success. Rather, more successful schools appeared to be implementing their strategies in greater depth

³ More successful schools are those where the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals or looked after by the local authority was better than expected, after taking account of the characteristics of the school and the pupil cohort.

⁴ Metacognitive strategies are designed to help pupils to learn how to learn, by encouraging them to think about their own learning more explicitly. This can be achieved by teaching pupils specific strategies to set goals, and monitor and evaluate their own academic development.

and with more attention to detail. By comparing more and less successful schools, the study identified seven building blocks for success.

1. Promote an ethos of attainment for all pupils, rather than stereotyping disadvantaged pupils as a group with less potential to succeed.
2. Have an individualised approach to addressing barriers to learning and emotional support, at an early stage, rather than providing access to generic support and focusing on pupils nearing their end-of-key-stage assessments.
3. Focus on high quality teaching first rather than on bolt-on strategies and activities outside school hours.
4. Focus on outcomes for individual pupils rather than on providing strategies.
5. Deploy the best staff to support disadvantaged pupils; develop skills and roles of teachers and TAs rather than using additional staff who do not know the pupils well.
6. Make decisions based on data and respond to evidence, using frequent, rather than one-off assessment and decision points.
7. Have clear, responsive leadership: setting ever higher aspirations and devolving responsibility for raising attainment to all staff, rather than accepting low aspirations and variable performance.

More successful schools saw raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils as part of their commitment to help all pupils achieve their full potential. They prioritised quality teaching for all, seeing attendance, behaviour and emotional support as necessary but not sufficient for academic success. They made every effort to understand every pupil as an individual and tailored their programmes accordingly. They linked teaching and learning interventions to classroom work, monitored attainment and intervened quickly to address learning needs. They ensured TAs had the necessary training and expertise to deliver interventions, provide feedback and monitor progress.

Senior leaders in less successful schools identified a number of barriers to success. Some had low expectations for what it was possible for these pupils to achieve. They felt it would be impractical to develop individual plans to meet pupils' learning needs. Leaders in schools with fewer disadvantaged pupils pointed out that they had less funding and could therefore not afford to introduce more expensive changes, and some leaders felt constrained by the need to demonstrate they had spent the funding exclusively on eligible pupils.

How do school characteristics relate to success for disadvantaged pupils?

The study identified several common features of schools where disadvantaged pupils (identified in the national datasets used in the analysis as those eligible for free school

meals (FSM) or looked after by the local authority⁵) have achieved better or less well than expected, in relation to the performance of disadvantaged pupils nationally. There was considerable consistency between the characteristics associated with a school's level of success in the most recent year and improvement in schools' results over time. (But note that these are correlations and do not necessarily imply causal relationships.)

- Schools with higher levels of pupil absence had lower performance among disadvantaged pupils than schools with otherwise similar characteristics.
- Primary schools with disadvantaged pupils who had previously achieved higher results at Key Stage 1 had higher results for disadvantaged pupils at Key Stage 2. Similarly, secondary schools with disadvantaged pupils who had achieved higher results at Key Stage 2 performed better at Key Stage 4.
- Schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils were associated with higher performance among disadvantaged pupils (and schools with a lower proportion of disadvantaged pupils were associated with lower performance among disadvantaged pupils).
- Schools with larger year groups overall (including both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils) were associated with lower performance among disadvantaged pupils.
- Primary schools with higher proportions of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) were associated with lower performance among disadvantaged pupils.
- Schools with a higher proportion of pupils from white British ethnic backgrounds were associated with lower performance among disadvantaged pupils.
- Schools located in certain areas (especially the South East, South West, East of England and North West) had poorer results, compared with schools in London or the North East⁶.
- Rural secondary schools⁷ had lower results among disadvantaged pupils, compared with schools with otherwise similar characteristics.

In relation to school type, the study found that:

- Converter academies⁸ were associated with higher attainment among disadvantaged pupils at both primary and secondary level, and greater improvement over time at primary level.

⁵ This is the definition of eligibility for the pupil premium that was used prior to April 2014

⁶ The research allocated schools to one of nine areas, based on the former Government Office Regions – see [The Office for National Statistics Administrative Geography Maps](#)

⁷ Note that a large number of rural primary schools could not be included in the analysis due to the small numbers of disadvantaged pupils in each school.

⁸ A school formerly maintained by the local authority, which has voluntarily converted to academy status.

- There were mixed findings for sponsored⁹ academies, which were associated with poorer performance at primary level, but better performance and improvement at secondary level.
- Selective schools and Teaching Schools were associated with higher performance among disadvantaged pupils even after taking account of the influence of a high-performing intake and other characteristics that were associated with pupil progress.

The study found no evidence of a statistically significant relationship between positive performance among disadvantaged pupils and being a member of a Teaching School Alliance (TSA). Being a member of an academy group was not associated with performance at primary level, but there was a small positive relationship between disadvantaged pupils' performance among secondary schools that were members of a small academy group. (Please note that the analysis did not take account of the length of time a school had been a member of a TSA or part of an academy group.)

Discussion and conclusion

This study found that between one- and two-thirds of the variance between schools in disadvantaged pupils' attainment can be explained by a number of school-level characteristics. This suggests that schools' intake and circumstance are influential but they do not totally determine pupils' outcomes. It therefore implies that schools have meaningful scope to make a difference. The research went on to identify a number of actions associated with schools that were more successful in raising disadvantaged pupils' attainment – both in what they do and the way they do it.

More successful schools have been focusing on disadvantaged pupils' performance for longer and appear to have developed more sophisticated responses over time. Leaders in more successful schools said it had taken a period of around three to five years to see the impact of changes they had introduced feed through to pupils' results.

Taken together, the findings suggest that schools which have been more successful in raising the performance of disadvantaged pupils have put the basics in place (especially addressing attendance and behaviour, setting high expectations, focusing on the quality of teaching and developing the role of TAs) and have moved on to more specific improvement strategies. These schools were 'early adopters'. Schools that are earlier in the improvement journey are more likely to have smaller proportions of disadvantaged pupils and/or to have larger year groups. In order to make further progress, the research indicates that they need to support pupils' social and emotional needs, address individual pupils' learning needs; help all staff to use data effectively and improve engagement with families. Once these strategies are in place, the next steps on the improvement journey include focusing on early intervention, introducing metacognitive and peer learning

⁹ A school formerly maintained by the local authority, which has been transferred to academy status as part of a government intervention strategy.

strategies and improving their effectiveness in response to data on individual pupils' progress. Schools which have made the greatest progress in improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils are in a position to set even higher expectations and to spread good practice through working with neighbouring schools and well as continuing to learn from and contribute to national networks.

Overall, this research suggests that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to closing the attainment gap. Instead, a number of measures are required, tailored to each school's circumstances and stage on the improvement journey. These measures include setting a culture of high expectations for all pupils, understanding how schools can make a difference, selecting a range of evidence-based strategies tailored to meet the needs of individual schools and pupils, and implementing them well.

Further research

The research identified several associations which would benefit from further investigation. The research team has selected three areas where further research would have the greatest value.

1. Further research into the relationship between absence and attainment for disadvantaged pupils, to investigate the reasons underlying the association and understand whether improving attendance for all pupils is likely to be an effective strategy for closing the attainment gap.
2. Further research into the relationships between disadvantaged pupils' performance and geographical regions, including investigating the relationships at pupil level.
3. Further research investigating the utility of the 'pathway to success'. Does this have resonance with schools? If less successful schools are supported to move to the next step on the pathway, does this result in improved outcomes for disadvantaged pupils?

Research design

The research took place in three phases between December 2014 and April 2015.

Phase 1 investigated the relationship between school characteristics and outcomes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It used school-level data from school performance tables (available on the Department for Education website¹⁰) to construct a number of quantitative models which included school descriptors (such as its type and region) and the characteristics of the cohort of pupils who were assessed in the relevant years (such as their prior attainment, cohort size, proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, SEN and ethnic composition). By estimating the relationship between these characteristics and the outcome variable (i.e. the school-level performance of pupils from

¹⁰ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/>

disadvantaged backgrounds) it was possible to account for some of the differences between schools in the performance of disadvantaged pupils. The statistical models used in this research were able to account for between 30.5 and 62.3 per cent of the variance between schools in disadvantaged pupils' performance.

Phase 2 focused on the strategies schools were using to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. It comprised a survey of 759 primary and 570 secondary schools in England (the response rate was 21.9 per cent). The survey was sent to a sample of schools selected from Phase 1 to represent those where disadvantaged pupils had attained higher or lower results than expected, given the characteristics of the school.

Phase 3 focused on how schools were implementing their strategies and approaches. It comprised telephone interviews with senior leaders in 49 schools (eight special schools, 20 primary schools and 21 secondary schools). The interview sample was chosen to represent schools where disadvantaged pupils had attained higher or lower results than expected, given the characteristics of the school. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted about an hour. Interviewers wrote up notes into a template, using audio recordings to check the accuracy of verbatim quotes.



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