

Leading to Success:

Judging success in primary schools
in challenging contexts

“Schools in disadvantaged areas...face real and serious challenges. The link between social disadvantage and educational attainment is complex and longstanding. However, schools make a difference and can achieve relatively good results against the odds”

OFSTED, NCSL evidence base, www.ncsl.org.uk

Stephen Englefield, NCSL Research Associate, Headteacher
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Context

These findings are drawn from interviews with headteachers in 14 primary schools working in challenging contexts that are recognised as being successful. The schools were based in three LEAs: Brent, Leeds and Lincolnshire.

They represented different challenging contexts, including inner city deprivation, rural isolation and a diverse community cultural mix. Senior representatives of the three LEAs were also questioned about the schools and the work of the headteachers interviewed.

Background

Primary schools in challenging contexts are more likely to have lower academic achievement levels than other primary schools. They are usually characterised by some combination of the following factors:

- social deprivation and the related lack of educational opportunities for pupils outside of the school
- a high crime rate in the neighbourhood
- very challenging behaviour of significant numbers of pupils
- variations of parental expectation that impact on pupil performance
- inconsistent attendance and punctuality
- high pupil mobility
- diverse cultures represented in the pupil population
- staff recruitment difficulties

Strategies for Success

The key features of these headteachers' leadership and management are consistent with those outlined by the Hay McBer model of excellence. In addition, these headteachers intensively emphasise distinctive leadership activities in their schools, including:

- creating a positive environment for learning, by emphasising outcomes in a 'we can do this' culture
- building a culture where there is a belief that all children can learn and succeed, displaying a concern for the welfare and educational experiences of all the pupils in their care

- building in the school a strong sense of community, as well as a strong knowledge and awareness of the community in which the school is placed
- ensuring rigorous and accurate assessments of pupils' progress in order to set challenging tasks and targets
- finding additional success indicators to academic outcomes in order to celebrate pupils' progress and the school's successes
- developing strategies to rigorously control and improve pupil behaviour

Headteachers in the study were clear that primary schools in challenging contexts are disadvantaged by the present emphasis on competitive league tables of national test results based on the aggregated academic achievement of pupils. They considered it crucial for the continuing success of their schools that there should be a recognition of alternative criteria for judging success.

The headteachers interviewed were unanimous in the opinion that league tables do not provide a realistic statement of the excellence of many primary schools in challenging contexts.

Success Criteria

Beyond academic outcomes, there are several criteria that are used to judge success in these schools.

The leadership strategies emphasised by the headteachers of the schools in this study ensured that their pupils made appropriate progress in their learning, irrespective of original base levels. These strategies can be summarised to create four indicators that substantiate the school's work with their pupils.

- **Pupil progress** Successful schools have rigorous procedures to measure pupil progress, procedures that take into account age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic (FSM) and mobility factors. Teachers use analyses of pupil performance in their planning. Schools celebrate successful steps by individual pupils.
- **School ethos** The school is safe and happy for everyone. There is a positive ethos that encompasses high expectations. Staff and pupils work well together.

- **Pupil participation** There are effective policies for encouraging good attendance and punctuality that utilise the knowledge and skills of all appropriate external agencies. There are incentives for all pupils to learn. Homework strategies are appropriate and informative to all.
- **Community participation** The school personnel have a good knowledge of the community in which the school resides. The school deliberately caters for the social and cultural needs of the pupils. The school works hard to encourage all parents to play an important part in their child's learning.

Conclusions

"In an era when schools appear to be in competition through the league tables, we need to remind ourselves that in many aspects of life...it makes more sense to cooperate and work together..."

(Richard Greenhalgh, Chair of Unilever, UK)

Schools are distinctive and one school's effectiveness cannot be simplistically compared with another's. A disservice is done to all schools, but particularly schools in challenging contexts, when communities are asked to judge their schools' effectiveness on academic outcomes alone.

Schools must ensure that their successes are well advertised and understood. Policy makers need to be more honest about what test results mean and support school leadership in their demand for the recognition of other indicators that represent success for their school.

Many schools working in challenging contexts are well run and achieve success in spite of a considerable intake of pupils from homes suffering from various kinds of social disadvantage. Understanding the factors operating in successful schools in challenging circumstances and transferring the lessons is more likely to encourage improvement than an approach that involves unfair comparison.

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