“We want your child to go to university”
Raising aspirations in difficult circumstances in London

Research paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting 2021 in Orlando (USA)

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The FWF project ‘School Quality and Teacher Education’ (SQTE) conducts research on the historico-political, social and pedagogical factors of successful school quality development and school turnaround in England (1990-2020). Which policies and initiatives enabled school development? Which measures contributed to the compensation of social disadvantage in London and other regions of England, which received worldwide attention?

The project focuses particularly on schools in difficult circumstances that attain excellent learning outcomes despite a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged home backgrounds; specifically, the research looks at schools in deprived areas of London that have improved considerably over the last 15 years in the context of the „London effect“. Funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), the project is based at the universities of Salzburg and Oxford.

In the SQTE research papers, we regularly inform about the project’s progress and insights and we publish papers we have presented at international conferences.

PEER REVIEW
This paper has been peer-reviewed by the American Educational Research Association.

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**Objectives**

Outcomes for school students in London, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have improved dramatically over the last two decades (Baars, Shaw, Mulcahy & Menzies, 2018; Greaves, Macmillan & Sibieta, 2014), giving rise to an academic debate around the factors behind these improvements, also termed the “London effect” (e.g. Baars et al., 2014; Macdougall & Lupton, 2018). There is consensus on the decisive influence of “effective leadership at every level of the system” (Baars et al., 2014, p.12; see also Sammons, Matthews, Day & Gu, 2007). Leadership at the level of individual schools appears to have been a particularly crucial driver of these improvement processes (Baars et al., 2014). One element of this effective leadership, argued to have been significant in boosting disadvantaged students’ outcomes, entailed raising the aspirations and expectations of students, parents and staff (Baars et al., 2018; Day et al., 2009).

The objective of this paper is to further explore this element of effective leadership in highly effective schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students in deprived areas of London. We will provide insights into the views of leaders in such schools, exploring their approaches to raising aspirations and expectations. In so doing, we aim to increase understanding of effective practices in this field, alongside providing impetus for reflection on headteacher training, teacher education and continuous professional development.

**Theoretical framework**

This paper is informed by educational effectiveness and improvement research (EEIR), particularly the work of Sammons, Davis & Gray (2016), Sammons, Kington, Lindorff-Vijayendran & Ortega (2014) and Creemers & Kyriakides (2010). We draw specifically on the Dynamic Model and the more recent Dynamic Approach to School Improvement (DASI) which stresses the inter-relationships between four different levels within the education context that impact on student outcomes: the levels of the student, the classroom, the school and the system (Creemers, Kyriakides & Antoniou 2013).
A key finding about “inspiring teachers” in England, of significance to our work, is the role of such teachers, in relation to their students, as “strong motivators for future aspirations, not just immediate effort or engagement” (Sammons et al., 2014, p. 9). Drawing on this insight in the interpretation of our data, we focus within the Dynamic Model on a specific school-level factor: its “policy on creating a learning environment at the school” (Creemers & Kyriakides 2010, p. 264). Using this focus as a lens through which to analyze the interview data, we look particularly at the “values in favor of learning” which are “concerned with the strategies that the school has developed in order to encourage teachers and students to develop positive attitudes towards learning” (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010, p. 268).

Having identified these schools, we subsequently contacted those with the highest Progress 8 scores, a national benchmark for the measurement of students’ progress. Of the 14 London schools we contacted, eight agreed to participate in our research. We visited these schools and conducted eleven face-to-face expert interviews (Bogner & Menz, 2009) with headteachers and other senior leaders, exploring their conceptions of and action on school quality and their views of what works in raising outcomes, especially for disadvantaged students. We worded the interview questions in an open manner as possible, so as to avoid pre-imposing particular topics (Gläser & Laudel, 2004). The project received the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford (CUREC).

Data

Full transcriptions of all interviews underwent content analysis (Dresing & Pehl, 2011), from which “raising the aspirations of students” emerged as a central aspect of the data. This paper explores three London schools from the sample which appeared from the data to place particular emphasis on “raising aspirations” as a dimension of school quality improvement. School 1 is a highly effective inner-city school; over 65 % of the student body come from disadvantaged home backgrounds (as measured by the Free School Meal score) and more than 80 % have a first language other than English. Approximately a decade ago, the school experienced a radical trajectory of improvement within three years, improving its Ofsted rating from “inadequate” to “outstanding” in all categories. Its Progress 8 score is well above average. We conducted interviews with four different senior leadership team (SLT) members in the school in February 2019. School 2 is a highly effective school in another inner-city local authority, with the proportion of disadvantaged students standing at almost 50 %.

Methods

Working within a funded project analyzing quality development in English schools, we drew a sample of non-selective, highly effective and improving secondary schools in London. We sought to identify schools that serve a very high proportion of disadvantaged students (more than 40 % of the student body, as measured by the Free School Meal score) and that achieved a rating of “outstanding” in their last inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), England’s national inspection agency.
This school's dramatic improvement took place within four years, at about the same time as School 1's. Its Progress 8 score is well above average. We interviewed three of its leaders in March 2019. School 3 belongs to a highly successful academy chain specializing in “school turnaround” in London and located in a third local authority. Ofsted had rated it “inadequate” before the academy chain took over in 2014. Despite a Free School Meal score indicating a disadvantaged student population of over 70%, the school attained one of the highest Progress 8 scores in England in the 2017/2018 academic year. We conducted an interview with the headteacher from this school in June 2019.

Results

The data show that these three schools made considerable efforts to encourage their students, particularly those from disadvantaged home backgrounds, to aspire to higher education. From the perspective of senior leaders in these schools, these efforts were about instilling in students a belief that they could take any career path they chose.

One Senior Leadership Team member in School 1 described having co-organized an event at a well-known university for students about to choose their GCSE options, for the purpose of conveying the subliminal message that this university could be their future if they wanted. Another senior teacher reported that their school builds partnerships with universities which involve visits to campus and scholarships as well as undergraduate students coming into the school to deliver workshops on the skills needed for university applications.

In School 2, a headteacher described regularly inviting highly successful people originally from disadvantaged backgrounds to visit the school and speak to students.

She had, for instance, recently issued such an invitation to a friend of hers from a working-class background, who had been the first in her family to go to university and had risen to become a partner in a London law firm. This teacher considered such visits as opportunities for students to identify and engage with potential role models. Similarly, the headteacher of School 3 stressed that it is a school's responsibility to develop a “careers framework” for the students, enabling them to recognize that “every opportunity is possible and every avenue is vital”.

Headteacher S3_L_H3_m from School 1 reported success for his school's efforts to encourage students to pursue higher education, stating that in 2017, 96% of leavers had progressed to university and 60% to the prestigious Russell Group institutions. Confirming this assertion, headteacher S3_L_H4_f emphasized the level of achievement for female students, who are often from backgrounds that do not generally encourage girls to leave home to study in other cities. This observation is of particular relevance in view of the crucial importance ascribed by the interviewees to including students' families in their efforts to raise aspirations: “so when a teacher, a professional says this [...] to the parent, that WE want YOUR child to go to university, the parent gets shocked.” (S3_L_H5_m)

“If you are really going to make a difference to disadvantaged students, it is showing them how they can actually achieve their potential and making them believe that they can do that by getting people in who[m] they can recognise that: actually he is just like me, she is just like me, if they have done it then I can do it.” (S4_L_H7_f)*

Female headteacher in a highly effective school in difficult circumstances in London.

* In this paper we use the original abbreviations for the larger sample of interviews. S4_L_H7_f stands for School 4, London, Headteacher 7, female.
The interviewees described the initiation of partnerships with businesses as another means of showing students potential next steps after leaving school. Senior teachers from School 1 described these partnerships as involving offers of work experience for students, workplace visits, speakers visiting the school and staff members delivering workshops on skills needed for job applications. School 2 also offers enrichment opportunities that aim at giving students cultural experiences they may otherwise struggle to access. In this context, the interviewees mentioned business partnerships, visits to museums, theatres or the Bank of England, and trips to places such as Rome and New York.

When building partnerships, School 3 specifically considers whether the businesses in question are genuinely committed and willing to provide students with work experience, due to the deleterious effects that one senior leader ascribed to a lack of commitment to student support and enrichment.

"Lots of curriculum trips, trips to the theatre, trips to museums, trips to businesses, trips to universities, very much saying to them that there is so much on your doorstep and we are going to help you access that. And with the university trips, this could be you, you know, in a few years’ time, so we are going to start you early on that.” (S3_L_H3_m)

Male headteacher in a highly effective school in difficult circumstances in London.

Significance

This research gives qualitative insights into the strategies deployed for raising the aspirations of students and families from disadvantaged backgrounds in strongly improving London schools. The schools’ experiences serve as exemplary models of harnessing schools’ proximity to a social, cultural and economic hub, such as London. The results of this study support a key dimension of leadership behavior identified in a previous study of effective leadership in London, noted by Baars et al. (2018) who found that high-performing London schools deploy a variety of strategies for raising and broadening the aspirations of their students and their families. These insights have given rise to the argument that teachers need to learn about measures which can help overcome factors that limit students’ achievement, such as low aspirations related to students’ home backgrounds (Gomendio, 2017).

Our findings also suggest that leadership teams and staff of schools with high proportions of disadvantaged students might benefit from training on how to use a broad range of extra-curricular activities for the purpose of raising aspirations in the school community. In the London schools, it seems that bringing parents on board increases the effectiveness of such efforts.
Literatur


