

LESSONS FROM LONDON SCHOOLS:



INVESTIGATING THE SUCCESS

Sam Baars, Eleanor Bernardes, Alex Elwick, Abigail Malortie,
Tony McAleavy, Laura McInerney, Loic Menzies and Anna Riggall

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FOREWORDS



STEVE MUNBY

Chief Executive, CfBT Education Trust

The London story is of national and international significance. The remarkable transformation of outcomes in the schools of the capital provides hope for those educators worldwide who are trying to improve learning and life chances, particularly for disadvantaged students. This report analyses the nature and causes of the changes in London schools and demonstrates that it is possible to tackle the link between poverty and underachievement. The methods used in London can be used elsewhere. The key ingredients – data literacy, powerful professional development and intelligent accountability – can be replicated in other towns and cities. The London story is above all about the power of purposeful leadership at every level of the system. From national politicians to headteachers, leaders were responsible for driving the changes. One of the most innovative aspects of the London renaissance is the role of headteachers as system leaders, taking responsibility not just for their own schools but other schools in their communities. London has shown that the theory of system leadership can be turned into an exciting ‘high impact’ reality. I applaud the work of London’s consultant headteachers and advocate this approach to all who are interested in sustainable school reform.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. Munby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Steve Munby

Chief Executive, CfBT Education Trust



BEN ROGERS

Director, Centre for London

Few things matter more to a city than the quality of its public services, including its schools but also its health, social, employment, police and probation services, to mention just some. These services make a direct contribution to the well-being and life opportunities of the city's residents, and, less directly, but no less importantly, to the city's standing and prosperity.

As this report demonstrates, over the last decade London schools have improved dramatically. From being one of the worst-performing regions in the country, London is by some way the best. And it is serving its poorer pupils particularly well, an achievement unequalled by any other world city.

This report set out to understand exactly how this improvement came about. We hope that the insights and lessons offered will be useful to London and national politicians, policymakers and school leaders, as they continue to build on recent success. The approaches that have been so successful in London are also readily applicable to school systems in other cities and nations. I believe, too, that other public services – in London and elsewhere – could helpfully learn from all that has been achieved for London's schools, and we look forward to taking this research into new territory at Centre for London.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'B' followed by a large, sweeping flourish that ends in a small loop.

Ben Rogers

Director, Centre for London

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Informed commentators both in the UK and internationally increasingly reference the remarkable improvement journey of London's schools since the turn of the century. If the claims made for educational improvement in London are true they represent an important case study in urban school reform. There is a need, therefore, for an investigation of the nature and possible causes of the changes in London's schools.

AIMS

This research seeks to investigate the claim that London schools have improved dramatically since 2000. We have reviewed the evidence of transformational change and explored possible reasons for the development in London's schools. The project was guided by three questions:

- Is the success of London's schools as real as has been suggested?
- If the success is real, in what ways have schools improved and for what reasons?
- What can we learn for the future of school improvement, for London and beyond?

The resulting report provides readers – such as teachers, school leaders and policymakers – with a detailed review of what has happened across London. It provides a comprehensive synthesis of previous evaluations of the London schools' journey and of the distinctive elements which are perceived as contributing to improvement. Most importantly, it draws conclusions intended to inform current debates on educational policy reform in a very practical sense, providing an agenda for action.

METHODS AND APPROACH

Focusing on the period between 2000 and 2014, a mixed-methods approach has been used, combining:

- a literature review of academic research, media reporting, online blogs and other website materials
- a review and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on pupil and school performance
- semi-structured interviews with 25 leading experts who have a perspective on the London story, including staff currently or previously involved in the management of key education reforms, academics, headteachers, civil servants and politicians
- focus group interviews with teachers and school leaders in five schools across four key London boroughs
- semi-structured interviews with 25 senior local authority (LA) directors, members and independent consultants.

As ‘policy in action’, none of the major London reforms were planned with a concurrent rigorous evaluative element or any randomised controlled trial (RCT) element. While this limits the ability of any subsequent review to make firm claims for cause and effect, our approach allows us to present the most detailed analysis to date of the London story. In-depth interviews with all the key stakeholders in this transformation provide a greater level of understanding than has previously been possible, while detailed counterfactual quantitative analysis provides compelling support for the impact of these initiatives.

KEY FINDINGS

Our research has generated five key findings:

1. London schools have improved dramatically since 2000.
2. The improvement cannot be explained in terms of the advantages that London has over the rest of England.
3. The improvement was assisted by a set of factors that we describe as ‘enabling’, these include issues relating to resourcing: finance, teacher recruitment and school building quality. Improvement in these areas enabled improvements to flourish but London’s success was not fundamentally caused by these factors.
4. Four key school improvement interventions provided the impetus for improvement – London Challenge, Teach First, the academies programme and improved support from local authorities. Our research identifies common features that link together all of these interventions.
5. The improvement of London schools depended upon effective leadership at every level of the system.

LONDON SCHOOLS HAVE IMPROVED DRAMATICALLY

We conclude that there has indeed been a marked shift in the quality of provision in London schools using the best data available. Judged by relative performance in examinations and in Ofsted inspections, London schools now outperform schools in the rest of England and achieve the highest proportion of students obtaining five good GCSEs, the highest percentage of schools rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted, and the highest GCSE attainment for pupils from poorer backgrounds. The superior performance of London schools is apparent using both government-imposed key indicators and other metrics that are less susceptible to 'gaming' by schools. Ofsted considers that the quality of both teaching and leadership in London schools is substantially above the level found in England as a whole. London is the top-performing region in England using other measurements, such as the percentage of students leaving school and remaining in further or higher education. The pattern of improvement has been particularly marked in inner London, which is impressive, as it has a higher level of deprivation than outer London.

Our interviews with expert witnesses confirmed this picture of improvement and high performance. The great majority of interviewees spoke in highly positive terms about the 'turnaround' in the fortunes of London schools and the current high level of performance. For many of our interviewees, issues of culture, leadership and expectations constituted key areas of weakness at the beginning of the century. Several confirmed low-level expectations in some schools, particularly those serving deprived communities, as a major barrier to better outcomes. Interviewees repeatedly spoke of the prevalence of a lazy and pessimistic assumption that radical improvement was not possible in the outcomes for students from deprived backgrounds.

Many interviewees believed that the weakness of London schools in 2000 was sometimes overstated but that there was a public perception of school crisis at the start of the century, linked to a political and media discourse about the universally appalling nature of the schools of London at that time. As a result there was a crisis of parental confidence in state schools, particularly those of inner London. This led many parents to send their children on very lengthy journeys across London to escape from local schools with poor reputations and some of those with sufficient means to choose private schools.

In the years between 2003 and 2010 the perception of crisis abated. Teacher recruitment and retention improved. Although problems remain, several of our interviewees shared a view of the characteristics of London schools today which included the following features:

- schools that were self-confident institutions, with well-motivated staff
- highly effective leadership with less 'firefighting' and crisis management
- schools as data-driven organisations, with high levels of data literacy at leadership level
- strong networks linking schools with one another for purposes of improvement and joint practice development
- a new culture of high expectations and 'no excuses' for underperformance
- optimism that challenged the inevitability of the connection between poverty and low outcomes.

THE IMPROVEMENT CANNOT BE EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF 'CONTEXTUAL' ADVANTAGES THAT LONDON HAS OVER THE REST OF ENGLAND

To what extent can the London transformation be attributed to wider contextual issues? We explored the concept of a 'London advantage' based on the idea that there may be distinctive and beneficial contextual features of the situation in the capital that explain the improvement. We assessed three areas of potential advantage:

- **Gentrification** – Have changes to the socio-economic profile of the London population contributed to the transformation?
- **Ethnicity** – Can the distinctive ethnic mix of London explain the improvement in London schools?
- **Opportunity** – Do greater levels of economic and cultural opportunity in London, compared to the rest of England, provide an important stimulus for learning and achievement?

The data and research evidence does not support any of these explanations as being sufficient to explain the improvement in quality.

Gentrification

The improvement in educational performance results from the better performance of all students, including poor students, and not the displacement of deprived students by more advantaged groups. Compared to the rest of England, London did not in fact gentrify more than other regions as a whole between 2001 and 2011. While particular boroughs in London did change in terms of the local socio-economic profile of the population, there is no strong correlation between gentrification levels and rates of GCSE improvement (based upon the percentage of pupils gaining five A*-C over the same time period).

Ethnicity

The improved educational outcomes have been shared across all the major ethnic groups within the London population, including students from a white ethnic background. At borough level there is no strong correlation between the level of ethnic diversity and educational performance.

Opportunity

London has been the most economically successful and culturally rich part of England for centuries, including those years in the 1980s and 1990s when London schools performed much less well. While recognising the beneficial impact of London's economy and cultural assets, and noting that pupil aspirations in London are higher than elsewhere in the country, these factors cannot explain the transformation of London schools between 2000 and 2014.

THE EXCEPTIONAL IMPROVEMENT WAS ASSISTED BY, BUT NOT FUNDAMENTALLY CAUSED BY, RESOURCING ISSUES RELATING TO FINANCE, TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND SCHOOL BUILDING STOCK

Finance

The financial resources available to London schools increased significantly during the first decade of the century, and London schools were funded more generously than others. However, London schools have always received more money than schools in other regions including during the years when London performed poorly relative to other regions. While increased funding may well have been an enabling factor in driving school improvement it was certainly not a substantive causal factor in London's remarkable transformation.

The recruitment of teachers and headteachers

London schools struggled to attract teachers and headteachers at the start of the century. These problems were particularly acute in inner London. Recruitment subsequently improved but vacancy rates in London have generally remained higher than the national average and so the capital does not enjoy an advantage in the 'absolute supply' of teacher and leaders. However, the recruitment situation has moved from crisis point to one where the challenges are more in line with those faced elsewhere.

School buildings

There was a substantial investment in the rebuilding and refurbishment of London secondary schools from 2003 onwards under the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) and academies programmes. For some London teachers and headteachers such investment does appear to have been a positive motivating factor and improved the environment for learning but there is no conclusive evidence that this raised educational standards and it cannot account directly for the London transformation as it was a national programme.

These factors almost certainly played some part in creating the enabling conditions for transformation. Changes in funding, teacher and headteacher recruitment and the quality of school buildings all contributed to creating an environment in which change could flourish. These changes may have been necessary but they were not by themselves sufficient to explain the transformation.

FOUR KEY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTIONS PROVIDED THE IMPETUS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Several significant reforms and initiatives took place in London between 2000 and 2014. These included four key interventions: London Challenge (2003–2011), the replacement of failing schools with new schools known as 'academies' in London (2002–present), the Teach First programme (2003–present), and improvements in the quality of support and challenge provided by local authorities (throughout).

We conclude that each of these interventions played a significant role in driving improvement. Evaluations of each of these interventions have overall been positive, although the absence of RCT evidence makes it impossible to identify the precise gains from each set of activities. The exact causal mix also varied from borough to borough because there were variations in the level of involvement in London Challenge, variations in the effectiveness of local authority activity, variations in the level of 'academisation' and variations in the level of input from Teach First.

The different reforms appear to have acted in combination: there was no single ‘magic bullet’. London Challenge was viewed very positively but engaged some schools and local authorities more than others. Some reforms – such as Teach First and the introduction of academies – were relatively small in scale between 2003 and 2010, but may have had an indirect effect beyond those directly involved.

Although the interventions are sometimes perceived as rival solutions they shared certain school improvement features and collectively transmitted some common messages about school improvement. These are discussed below.

The importance of data and data literacy

One of the most important developments in London since 2000 has been the growth in data use and data literacy. In our interviews with stakeholders there was virtual unanimity in the identification of data analysis and data literacy as key both to powerful accountability and well-targeted school improvement support. This preoccupation was not the exclusive property of any particular group and all the major initiatives seemed to have strong foundations in the use of educational metrics. The different actors in the London story are therefore linked by a common preoccupation with the effective use of educational data as an instrument for transformation.

The need for a new culture of accountability

According to our expert witnesses and teacher focus groups, today’s London schools are characterised by a high degree of accountability through performance management. Our key witnesses talked in favourable terms about the way that underperformance by leaders or teachers is now challenged. The new culture of accountability is made possible by the data revolution. The ‘forensic’ analysis of performance metrics makes possible a new professional dialogue about effectiveness at every level: classroom, school, local authority or academy chain.

The power of highly effective practitioner-led professional development

While the schools of London are more accountable places than ever, and professionals are subject to significant external and internal scrutiny, there have also been interesting developments in the field of professional support. High support through effective professional development characterised London Challenge, Teach First and the work of the best local authorities and high-performing academy chains. Some of the forms of professional development that arose from London Challenge represented a paradigm shift in the way that professional learning is conceived. Outstanding practitioners – such as National Leaders of Education and outstanding schools, for example through Teaching School status – were given an opportunity to improve performance levels across a community of schools. In this way the theory of ‘sector-led improvement’ (the idea that school improvement should be driven by the system itself rather than imposed top-down) was made a reality.

THE IMPROVEMENT OF LONDON SCHOOLS DEPENDED UPON EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AT EVERY LEVEL OF THE SYSTEM

Our expert witnesses and focus groups of teachers revealed evidence of leadership effectiveness throughout the education system: national government, regional agencies and initiatives, ‘middle tier’ organisations such as local authorities, and academy chains and schools. There was a virtually unanimous view that this was a key factor in the transformation of London schools.

Political leadership

One major lesson from the London school improvement story is the importance of high-level sponsorship from policymakers. Under the Labour governments of 1997-2010 the reform of London schools was supported by politicians at Cabinet level and their key advisers. London also benefitted from having an education minister with a specific brief for London schools. London Challenge was highly unusual as an intervention because it was sustained for eight years. Current initiatives by the office of the Mayor of London explicitly build upon the achievements of London Challenge. Other policies, such as Teach First and the use of academies, have received even more sustained political support and, unusually, the political sponsorship continued after a change of government in 2010.

A shared concept of leadership

Our expert witnesses came from different leadership constituencies. At the same time they demonstrated a leadership concept based on ideas of ‘possibility’ and ‘coherence’. The key components of this concept were as follows:

- Transformational leadership was driven by moral purpose, and a strong sense that leaders’ first responsibility was to optimise outcomes for learners and not to promote the ‘provider interest’. This moral purpose and sense of advocacy meant that leaders needed at times to challenge or confront a provider interest, represented by underperforming groups of professionals either at school or local authority level.
- Moral purpose is not enough; it requires leverage. Our group of leaders believed that moral purpose could be translated into effective leadership action through the ‘relentless’ and ‘forensic’ use of data: potentially powerful management information about the performance of students could be used to identify and challenge local authorities, schools and individual teachers whose performance was sub-optimal.
- Challenge must be combined with support and recognition that while accountability was essential, simply ‘demonising’ others through, for example, a name and shame approach could be counter-productive.
- Support was typically based on a coherent ‘theory of change’. Effective leaders went far beyond criticism and exhortation. The leaders we interviewed typically possessed a set of ideas about how schools and classrooms could be organised differently, and how the performance of teachers could be enhanced through effective professional learning. These leaders had a theory of change that could be applied to specific examples of underperformance.

Exceptional personal leadership

Many of the individuals who were involved in the London story were considered by their peers to be exceptional leaders. The person who attracted the greatest number of comments about his individual contribution and distinctive leadership style was Tim Brighouse. He was closely followed by the senior civil servant, and now academy chain leader, Jon Coles. Other agencies were characterised by personal excellence and commitment. The study of Tower Hamlets as a high-performing local authority identified the contributions of Christine Gilbert and Kevan Collins. Teach First has been led energetically and successfully from the beginning by Brett Wigdortz, and he has given the organisation a distinctive character, particularly in terms of its moral purpose. Key academy chains with a strong London profile, such as ARK Schools and the Harris Federation, have benefitted from leadership of a high order and, like Teach First, a substantial measure of leadership continuity over the last decade. The evidence suggests that exceptional leaders at all levels in the system were critical to the success of particular initiatives in London.

The role of the expert headteacher as a system leader

Developments in London, particularly via London Challenge, have contributed to new thinking about leadership in the context of 'sector-led improvement' and the role of outstanding headteachers as system leaders. London provided a context for the development of thinking about National Leaders of Education and teaching schools which, from as early as 2006 and 2010 respectively, became national government policy. Exceptional individuals demonstrated the need for consultant leaders to be supported through quality assurance and careful training.

Within and outside London Challenge there was a widespread view that 'system leaders' had a responsibility that went beyond the individual institution where they were currently working. Successful system leadership, therefore, required a change in the mindset of the best school leaders. In addition to a professional responsibility for the life chances of students at their own school, system leaders accepted that they had a shared and collective responsibility with other school leaders for the well-being of all students in their community.



CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Our study confirms that London schools have made extraordinary progress over the last decade. From appearing to be one of the worst-performing regions in England, the capital is now the best, with the highest proportion of students obtaining five good GCSEs, the highest percentage of schools rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, and the highest GCSE attainment for pupils from poorer backgrounds. There is growing national and international interest in the journey taken by London schools and various explanations have been advanced to explain their improvement.

With public figures increasingly calling for the successes in London to be replicated across other regions and cities, understanding the reasons for London school improvement is of urgent importance.

Methodologically, the approach we have taken uses the best data and evidence available to review the nature and causes of the changes in London schools. We conclude that there has indeed been a dramatic shift in the quality of provision in London schools and we identify the most likely causes of these changes.

The methods offer insightful analysis of the London story, although there are limitations associated with the evidence that circumscribe this study and the extent to which definitive claims can be made about cause and effect. A key question is the extent to which we really understand the effect of the different policies and educational interventions that contributed to this remarkable transformation.

When asked to explain the change in London schools one of our interviewees replied that we simply do not understand the relative effect of different interventions: 'The honest answer is we don't know the reasons. Because we did no randomised controlled trials, we didn't say, "This group will be part of this, this group will be part of this, this group will have both interventions", so it's very hard to know.'

Another interviewee made a similar point when asked for any evidence to support her strongly-held belief that the use of data was central to the transformation of London schools. She replied that the only evidence was highly qualitative and she talked about the absence of 'real evidence':

'I think it's quite difficult to talk about it in terms of real evidence, because I don't think there's a lot of hard evidence. I don't think there were any RCTs [randomised controlled trials] done at the time, so I don't think you're going to get anything other than qualitative issues happening in relation to all of that.'

At a time when the Cabinet Office is recommending that policy should be based on hard evidence, these observations are important. This stance is open to criticism; such evidence can identify what works but cannot always explain how or why. On the positive side, all of the major London ‘reforms’ have been retrospectively evaluated by highly competent experts but in no case can we speak with complete confidence about cause and effect. It is important to note that even if such research methods had been conducted, the pattern of national and local reform was so complex that controlling for effects would be unreliable. Clearly impact assessment needs to address the ‘counterfactual’ question: what would have happened if the intervention had not taken place. The best method in social science research for answering that counterfactual question is the use of a randomly allocated control group identical to those who receive the so-called ‘treatment’. In the absence of full RCTs, weaker evidence can be based on ‘quasi-experimental’ data that retrospectively matches subjects of the intervention with similar subjects who were not part of the intervention. The best evidence from London is of this quasi-experimental nature, supplemented by some insightful qualitative research.

As a result, one of the key lessons from the London success story is the importance of giving impact assessment – through the use of robust quantitative and qualitative methods – more initial prominence in the design of education reforms and reforms in other important areas of social policy.

AIMS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This research sought to investigate, using the best evidence, the contextual, enabling and causal factors underpinning London’s success. The project was guided by three questions:

- Is the success of London’s schools as real as has been suggested?
- If the success is real, in what ways have schools improved and for what reasons?
- What can we learn for the future of school improvement, for London and beyond?

This research has adopted a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative semi-structured interviews with experts on the London story, analysis of existing data of both a quantitative and qualitative nature, focus groups with staff in schools and interviews with individuals in local authorities (LAs). Gathering and analysing the views of expert witnesses was an important part of the research design and the report draws heavily upon the insights of this ‘elite’ group of professionals who brought a range of specialist perspectives and standpoints. (Further details about the methods used are included in Appendix A.)

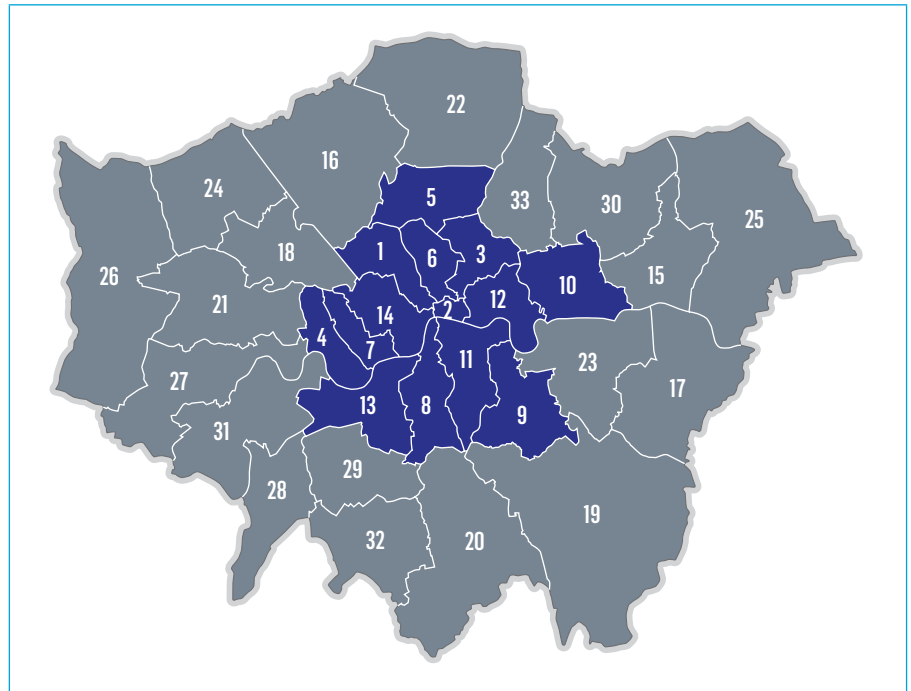
We are particularly indebted to Chris Cook for allowing us access to his analyses – scrutiny of which enabled careful consideration of some possible explanatory factors often mentioned in the context of the changes seen in London. The work of Cook has been drawn upon several times in this report.

...ONE OF THE KEY LESSONS FROM THE LONDON SUCCESS STORY IS THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT – THROUGH THE USE OF ROBUST QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS.

A CHRONOLOGY OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN LONDON

Since the end of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1990, London's educational governance has been arranged as 33 geographically small LAs. This report refers to inner and outer London boroughs and the figure below shows the categorisation of these LAs.

Figure 1.1: Inner and outer London boroughs



Source: DfE, 2013a

1	Camden	12	Tower Hamlets	23	Greenwich
2	City of London	13	Wandsworth	24	Harrow
3	Hackney	14	Westminster	25	Havering
4	Hammersmith and Fulham	15	Barking and Dagenham	26	Hillingdon
5	Haringey	16	Barnet	27	Hounslow
6	Islington	17	Bexley	28	Kingston upon Thames
7	Kensington and Chelsea	18	Brent	29	Merton
8	Lambeth	19	Bromley	30	Redbridge
9	Lewisham	20	Croydon	31	Richmond upon Thames
10	Newham	21	Ealing	32	Sutton
11	Southwark	22	Enfield	33	Waltham Forest

London Challenge has been widely credited for London's educational success. The London Challenge programme began in 2002 and was implemented fully in 2003 after the appointment of Tim Brighouse to the position of Chief Advisor for London Schools in September 2002. The first policy document relating to the London Challenge programme was published in April 2003, which set out the key elements of the scheme and its priorities for action across the capital. London Challenge was not one single programme or set of actions, but rather a combination of approaches – including many which existed before the creation of the policy – which together focused on school improvement in London (Ogden, 2013: 22). The approach was rolled out in two phases, with the first (2003–2008) focusing on secondary schools, particularly in five key boroughs, and the second (2008–2011) including primary schools.

Other key milestones in the story of London include the launch of Teach First in 2002 (with its first cohort starting to teach in London schools in 2003); the expansion of the London Challenge programme to the Black Country and Manchester in 2008 (under the rebranded 'City Challenge' title); and ultimately the announcement in December 2010 that the Challenge programme would end under the new coalition government.

In addition to these specific interventions, the creation of city academies from 2002 (allowed for in the Learning and Skills Act 2000), and the change in the academies programme from 2010 (when the Academies Act enabled all maintained schools to convert to academy status) as well as initiatives which pre-date the period this report will focus on (such as the Excellence in Cities programme, launched in 1999), were all key aspects of the school improvement reforms in London.



WHAT FOLLOWS

The next chapter takes a critical look at the success story assessing the degree to which London has improved. It presents the evidence for the remarkable journey of pupil attainment and the quality of schools, leadership and teaching. It also examines in detail the perceptions of the expert witnesses who were interviewed and offers new insight into what those who experienced the changes view as the most remarkable.

Chapter 3 discusses some contextual and enabling factors often causally associated with London's educational achievements and considers the extent to which these do offer explanations for the improvement. For example, gentrification, ethnicity, the wealth of opportunity in London, funding, teacher recruitment and new school buildings have all been associated with the transformation that has taken place in London. Closer analysis suggests that there is no strong evidence to support such hypotheses. Instead, such factors are either contextually interesting or played an enabling role in the changes that have taken place.

Chapter 4 considers the nature of the key education 'reforms' that took place in London, particularly in the years 2003–2014. This chapter considers several key interventions, programmes and policies that the evidence does suggest offer explanation of the London success. Chapter 5 considers the system and school level changes relating to leadership that contributed to supporting the improvement journey in the capital.

The report offers concluding remarks which comment on the factors that appear to have driven the success in London, a discussion about the transferable elements of the story in London and the key lessons that come out of this work that may be applied anywhere – in the UK or beyond.



CHAPTER 2:

THE IMPROVEMENT IN LONDON SCHOOLS

London's schools have shown exceptional improvement. Up-to-date evidence shows that pupils in London do better at GCSE than they do elsewhere in England, this is markedly so for pupils receiving free school meals. Ofsted data shows that there have been important developments in the quality of teaching and leadership too.

It has become the received wisdom that London schools improved dramatically between 2000 and 2014. Is this a justifiable view? This chapter tests the evidence for the claim of transformation.

It draws upon:

- data which shows, quantitatively, the changes that have taken place in some key educational inputs and outcomes
- qualitative data collected from interviews with 25 key individuals who have worked in high-level positions related to London schools since the early 2000s and focus group interviews with teachers in London schools.

Using these sources we conclude that there has indeed been a dramatic improvement in London schools. Our interviews allowed us to reflect, qualitatively, on some of characteristics of this change which include improvements not only in outcomes but also in school culture and critically the extent to which education professionals became more determined and more confident about ensuring that poverty did not necessarily lead to underachievement.

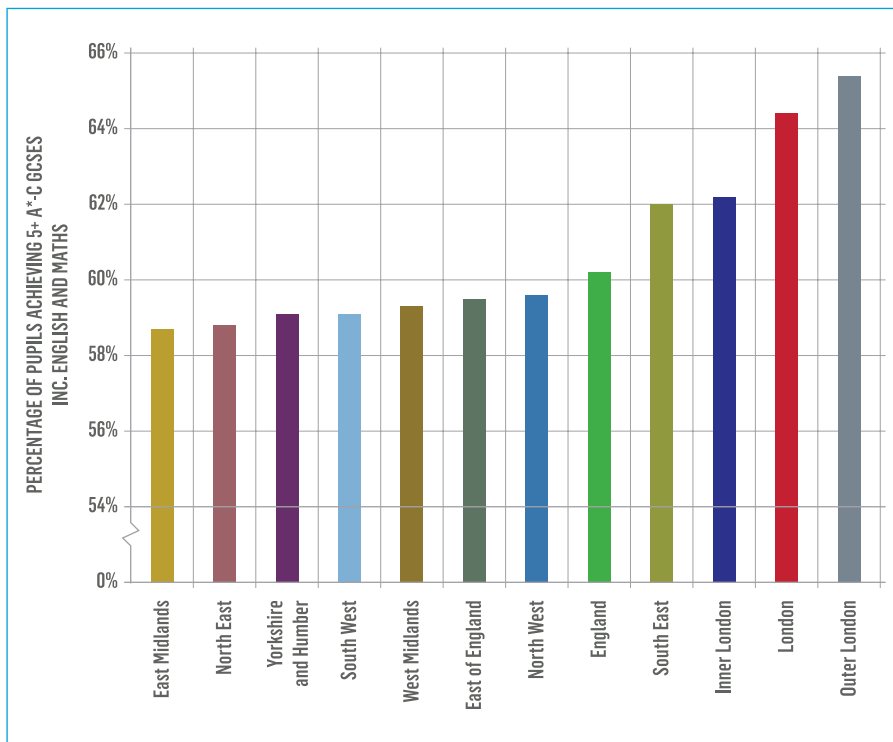
THE PERFORMANCE OF LONDON'S SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS TODAY

The most up-to-date evidence paints a compelling picture of educational success in London's schools now. Pupils in London do better at GCSE than they do elsewhere in England; this is particularly the case for pupils receiving free school meals (FSM) especially in inner London. A greater number of London's pupils progress to higher education (HE) than in the rest of England (HEFCE, 2012: 3).

Data from 2013 suggests that London's state secondary school pupils were the best performing in the country. Across the capital, 64.4 per cent of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and mathematics, compared to a national average of 60.2 per cent. Attainment was highest in the outer London boroughs – where over 65 per cent of pupils achieved five or more A*-C grades including mathematics and English. Inner London was also above the national average despite the fact that it is an area of relative socio-economic disadvantage.

DATA FROM 2013 SUGGESTS THAT LONDON'S STATE SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS WERE THE BEST PERFORMING IN THE COUNTRY.

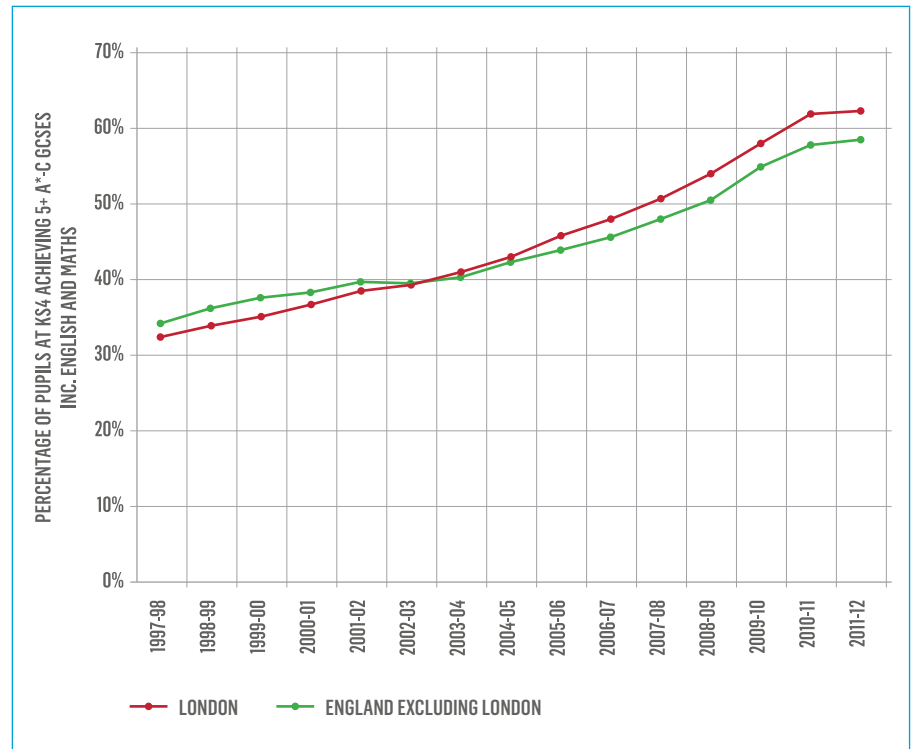
Figure 2.1: 2013 GCSE attainment by region



Source: DfE, 2013a

In terms of attainment, changes in the available measures make tracking progress difficult, but in the late 1990s London schools were outperformed by those in the rest of England. In 1997/98, 32.4 per cent of pupils in London achieved five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, compared to 34.2 per cent of pupils in the rest of England. London schools closed the gap, and since 2003/04 have consistently achieved better results than the rest of the country, continuing to improve at a faster rate.

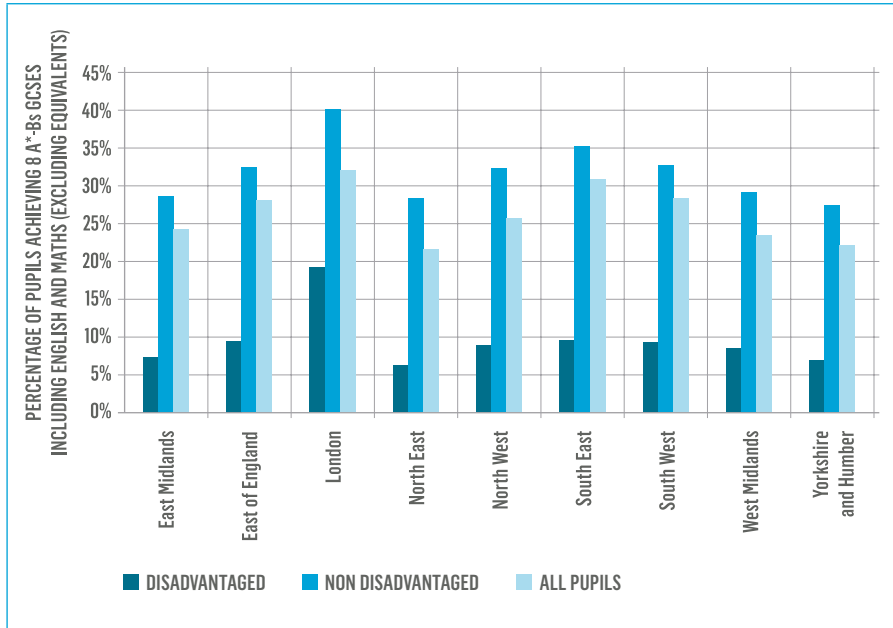
Figure 2.2: London compared to the rest of England



Source: Hansard, 2013

In today's world of league tables and high accountability, schools are sometimes accused of 'gaming', for example focusing their resources on 'borderline students' to push them over the Grade C threshold at the expense of the educational needs of other students who are not near the C-D borderline. This claim clearly raises important ethical issues. For some it also casts suspicion over the London 'success story' by raising doubts about the validity of the metrics as a true measure of student outcomes. This accusation was considered and rejected by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report (2013) which used a slightly different measure to 'factor out' C-D borderline gaming. The Commission calculated the proportion of pupils achieving eight A*-Bs in London, and concluded that performance was higher than other regions for all pupils, including those from both economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This appears to show that even controlling for gaming, London's pupils are exceeding expectations.

Figure 2.3: Pupils achieving eight or more A*-Bs at GCSE (excluding equivalents), 2011/12



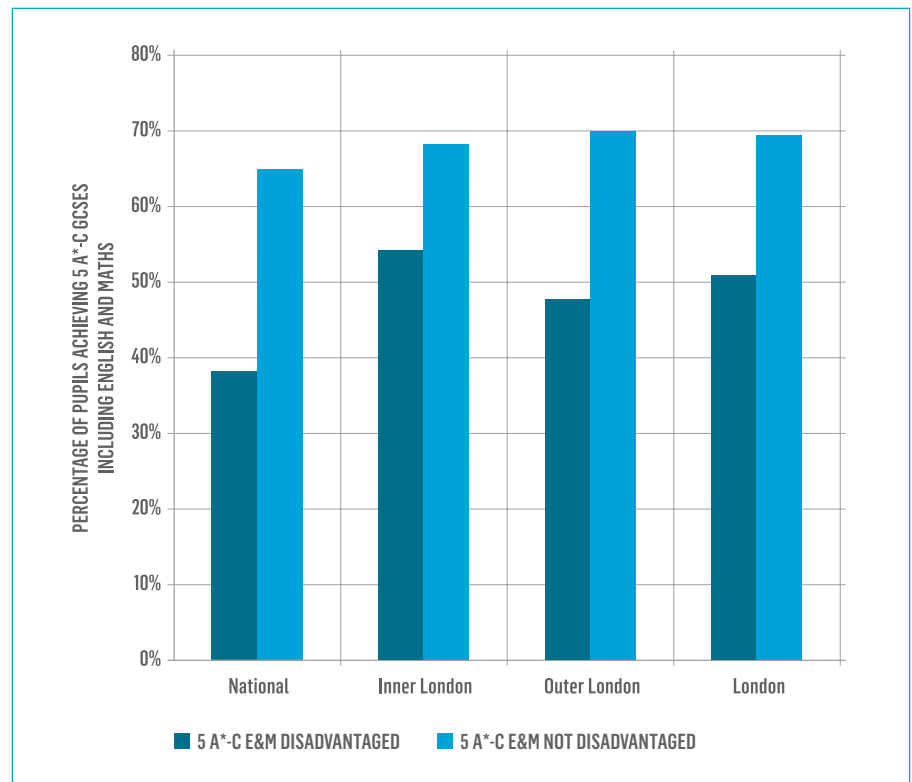
Source: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013: 191

The UK has been criticised for having education systems that are inequitable because outcomes are strongly linked to parental socio-economic status – the passive acceptance of the negative correlation between poverty and educational attainment has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Figure 2.3 above suggests that the performance of London pupils goes against this particular grain. Disadvantaged students in London do almost as well as all students in the North East or in Yorkshire and Humber. Further analysis shows that the success of London’s pupils extends across the continuum of wealth and poverty. Nationally, the performance of pupils on FSM is typically lower than for pupils who do not receive FSM; this is true for pupils in London too but not to the same extent. In some regions (like the South East), pupils who receive FSM are only half as likely as their peers to secure five or more A*-C grades including English and mathematics at GCSE. London has a far higher proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM (24 per cent in London rising to 34 per cent in inner London) but the gap between pupils receiving FSM and those that do not is narrower in London than elsewhere in the country (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013: 191).

The trend is exaggerated in inner London where the attainment of pupils receiving FSM is even closer to that of non-London pupils who do not receive FSM.

PUPILS FROM MOST DIFFERENT ETHNIC HERITAGE GROUPS PERFORM BETTER IN LONDON THAN IN THE NATION AS A WHOLE.

Figure 2.4: Attainment gaps in 2013



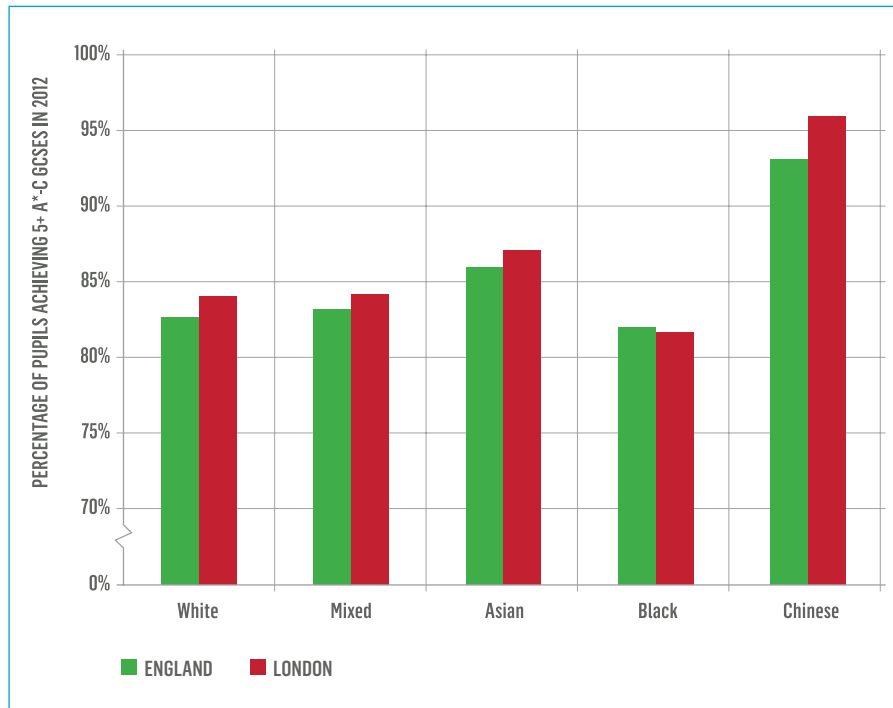
(NB: 'Disadvantaged' is defined as those children in receipt of free school meals.)

Source: DfE, 2013a

The good performance of London's more disadvantaged pupils is also borne out by other statistics. Young people's attainment at Key Stage 4 was shown to be affected by area-level deprivation (DCSF, 2009a: 17). The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) ranks postcodes based upon the proportion of children under 16 living in 'income-deprived families'. In each of England's regions there was a gulf between the attainment of young people from the most and least deprived IDACI deciles. This difference is smallest in London, where the performance of young people from deprived areas is markedly better than in the rest of the country. Analysis by Cook which compares the performance of London's most deprived pupils (as defined by their IDACI rankings) suggests that the attainment of such pupils in London who enter secondary education with low attainment at Key Stage 2 do relatively well at secondary school (Cook, 2013a: 9).

Pupils from most different ethnic heritage groups perform better in London than in the nation as a whole. The graph below demonstrates that attainment varies between ethnic groups but that white, mixed, Asian and Chinese pupils attain more in London than pupils nationally.

Figure 2.5: Attainment by ethnic group in 2012



Source: DfE, 2013a

The performance of higher and lower performing schools shows some interesting nuances in performance and success. It also illustrates some of the complexities of the London data because the pattern that emerges is more positive for the relatively weaker schools and less positive for the academically stronger schools. The following table (figure 2.6) summarises how the performance of schools has changed since 2001 (broken down by percentiles of performance) – it gives the percentage point increase in the performance of different percentiles and compares the percentage point change in London to the national change. Column A gives the percentage point change for each percentile based on national figures. Column B shows the same but for London and column C shows the percentage point difference – if the number is zero there is no difference between the change in the national performance of schools and those in London at this performance level. If the number is negative this shows that London has in fact improved less than the national average and if the number is positive this indicates that London has improved beyond the national figure.

The change in outcomes of the lower-performing schools in London during the period 2001–2013 has improved more than the national figures; however, the rate at which top-performing schools in London have improved appears to have been slower than the rate of top-performing schools elsewhere in the country.

THE CHANGE IN OUTCOMES OF THE LOWER-PERFORMING SCHOOLS IN LONDON DURING THE PERIOD 2001–2013 HAS IMPROVED MORE THAN THE NATIONAL FIGURES.



Figure 2.6: Percentage point increases over time nationally and in London

Percentile of A*-C performance	Column A Percentage point change in performance (five A*-C) of the nth percentile 2001-2013 (National)	Column B Percentage point change in performance of the nth percentile 2001-2013 (London)	Column C Percentage point difference in change (London-National)
100th	0	0	0
90th	5	1	-4
80th	19	16	-3
70th	29	28	-1
60th	33	33	0
50th	36	39	3
40th	38	43	5
30th	41	45	4
20th	43	46	3
10th	44	46	2

Source: DfE performance tables

NB: This data was compiled from individual performance tables spanning the period 2000-2013. The table summarises how the performance of schools has changed at different levels of the distribution in school performance. It gives the percentage point increase in the performance of different percentiles and compares the percentage point change in London schools to the national change.

ACCESS TO FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

A positive picture emerges when one considers the destinations of London school students. Based on the most recent government data, which follows the 2008/09 Key Stage 4 cohort, London has the highest rate of progression to post-16 education, with 87.6 per cent of pupils going on to, or remaining in education after completing Key Stage 4, compared to a national average of 84.7 per cent (DfE, 2012). Young people in London – particularly outer London boroughs – are also more likely to progress to higher education (HE) than young people from any other region. The most recent data indicates a dramatic gap: an HE participation rate for London of 43 per cent, rising to 45 per cent in outer London, against a national average of 35 per cent. London also experienced the largest increase in HE participation rates between 2000/01 and 2005/06 (HEFCE, 2012: 3). More recent data from HEFCE documenting the gap between HE participation rates in London and other regions shows: ‘the gap [in participation rates] between London and the other regions has widened – for example the gap between London and the South East [the next closest region] widened from two percentage points to eight percentage points.’ (HEFCE, 2013: 20)

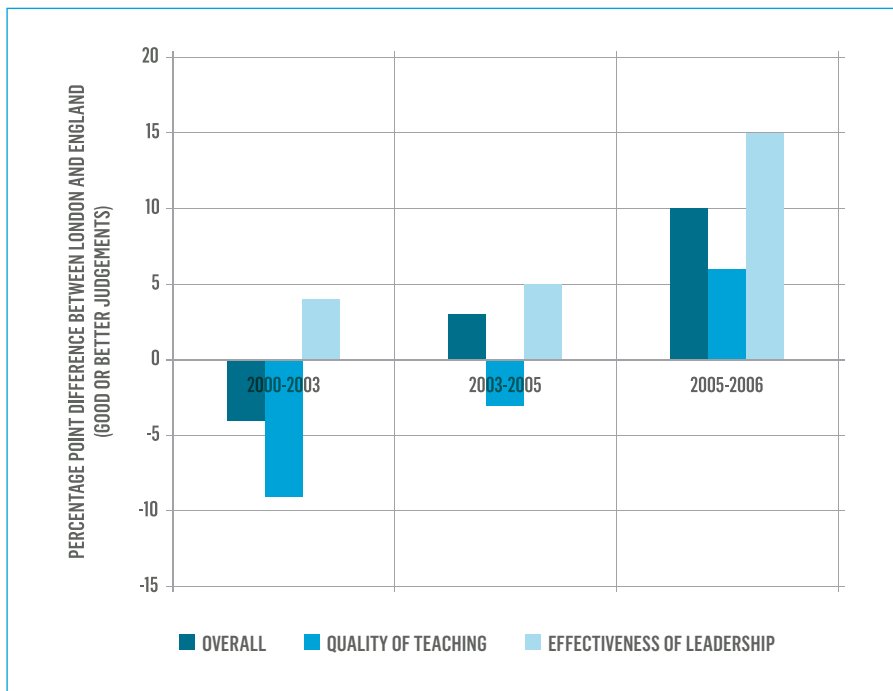
THE PERFORMANCE OF LONDON'S EDUCATION WORKFORCE AND SCHOOLS

While judgements about teaching quality are notoriously difficult to make and can be unreliable (Coe, 2014), Ofsted data suggests important developments in the quality of teaching and leadership in London.

At the turn of the century inspectors reported relative weaknesses in the quality of teaching in London schools, compared to the national picture: nine per cent fewer secondary schools in London than England as a whole were judged to be good or better in terms of quality of teaching between 2000 and 2003 (Ofsted, 2006).

Figures 2.7 and 2.8 below show the difference between Ofsted judgements on overall school quality, quality of teaching and leadership 2000–2013. The available data for the years 2000–2003 through to 2005–2006 (figure 2.7) is based upon only those schools inspected within each individual time period. The data in the 2009–2013 bar chart (figure 2.8) is based on the Ofsted judgement for all schools at each time-point. Due to the changing nature of how Ofsted reported their data, the charts need to be approached with some caution; however, what these show is that at the beginning of the first decade of the century London schools were not performing well compared to schools nationally. What followed was a dramatic improvement – particularly in the years 2005 and 2006. Since then, based on inspection data from all London schools, the evidence indicates steady improvements from 2009 to 2013.

Figure 2.7: Difference between percentages of secondary schools judged good or better in London and England (2000–2006)

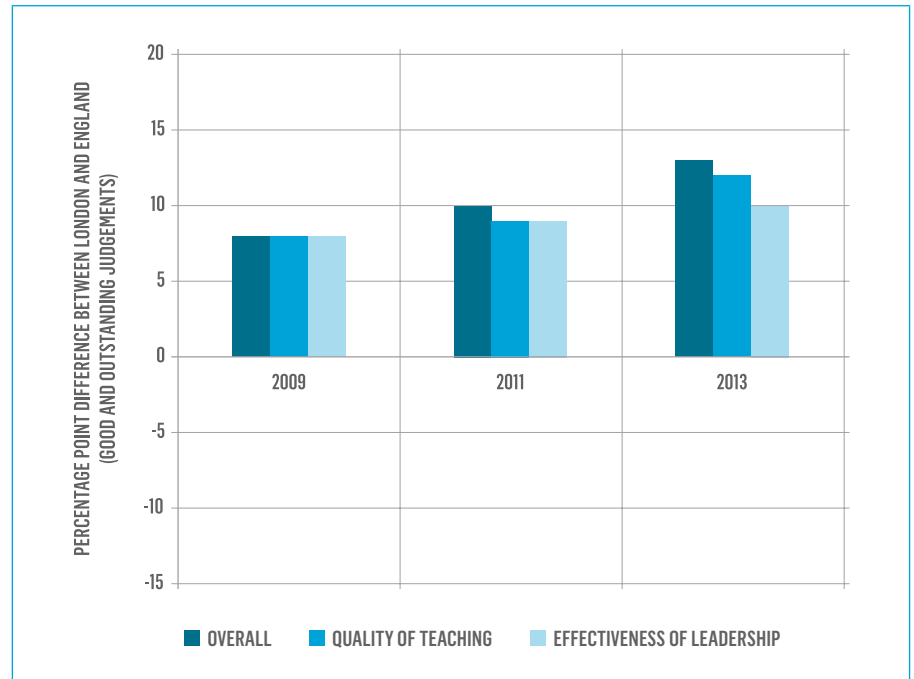


Source: Ofsted, 2006

...LONDON SCHOOLS WERE NOT PERFORMING WELL COMPARED TO SCHOOLS NATIONALLY. WHAT FOLLOWED WAS A DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT.



Figure 2.8: Difference between percentages of secondary schools judged good or outstanding in London and England (2009–2013)

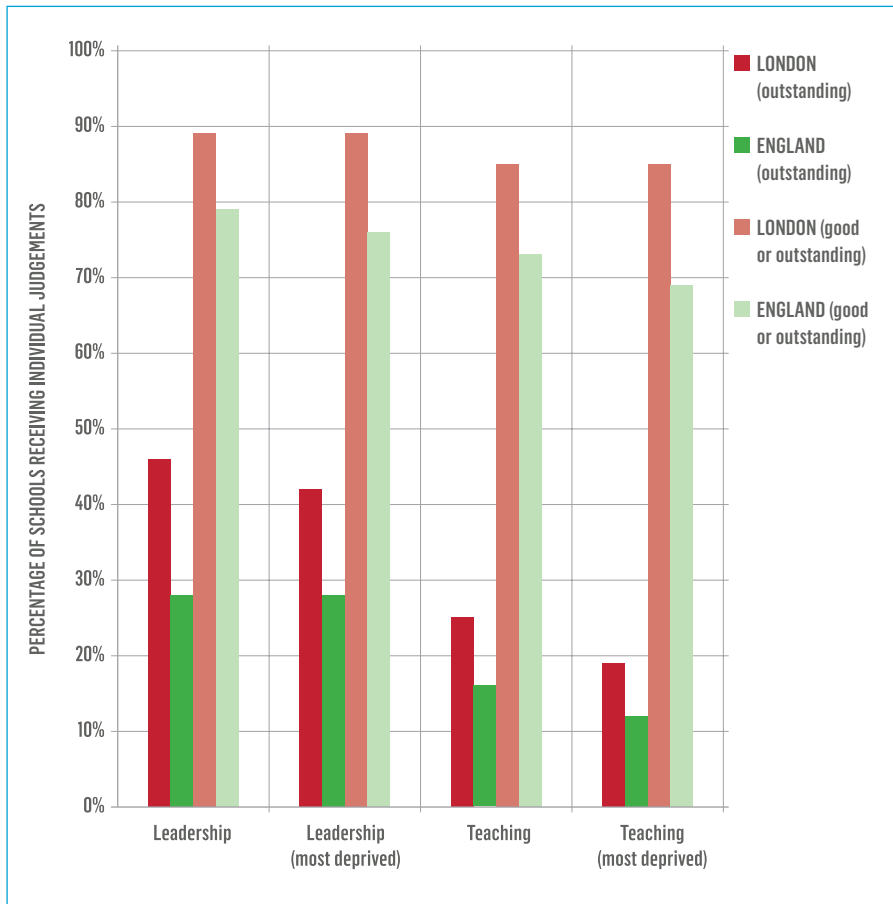


Source: Ofsted, 2014

The Ofsted data above suggests that there were improvements in teacher quality, the effectiveness of leadership and management and overall effectiveness. By the end of the period, teaching in London was judged good or outstanding in 85 per cent of secondary schools (73 per cent nationally), leadership was judged good or outstanding in 89 per cent of secondary schools (79 per cent nationally) and overall 85 per cent of schools were judged good or outstanding (72 per cent nationally).¹

¹ All figures are correct as of 31 August 2013 (Ofsted, 2014).

Figure 2.9: 2013 Ofsted judgements about teaching and leadership quality



(NB Data is for all secondary schools as of 31 August 2013)
 Source: Ofsted, 2014

The figure above gives an impressive snapshot of Ofsted’s view of the performance of schools in London compared to England, in terms of the proportion of good or outstanding provision. London outperforms the national pattern using every measure. The performance gap is considerable for both all schools and those schools that were the most economically deprived (Ofsted, 2014).

... IF YOU ARE A PUPIL FROM A DEPRIVED BACKGROUND IN SCHOOL IN LONDON IN 2012 YOU ARE LIKELY TO ATTAIN BETTER RESULTS THAN A SIMILAR NON-LONDON PUPIL, AND YOUR CHANCES ARE EVEN BETTER THAN THEY WERE IN 2004.

IMPROVEMENT AT SCHOOL LEVEL IN LONDON

The analysis reveals a narrative of improvement for London schools and also demonstrates that London had a substantial proportion of excellent schools at the turn of the century – the beginning of the period of transformation (Bradon *et al.*, 2002). At this point London was characterised by variability – in 2001 London had greater proportions of weak schools than the country as a whole but also impressive numbers of strong schools compared to the rest of the country. This pattern of variability was particularly marked in inner London (*ibid.*).

The school improvement capacity of London schools has been particularly impressive. Ofsted inspections reveal that on average in England overall, 49 per cent of schools judged less than good between 2005 and 2013 were successful in raising their grade to good or above when re-inspected (Menzies, 2013); in London the figure is 64 per cent. This difference of 15 percentage points is remarkable.

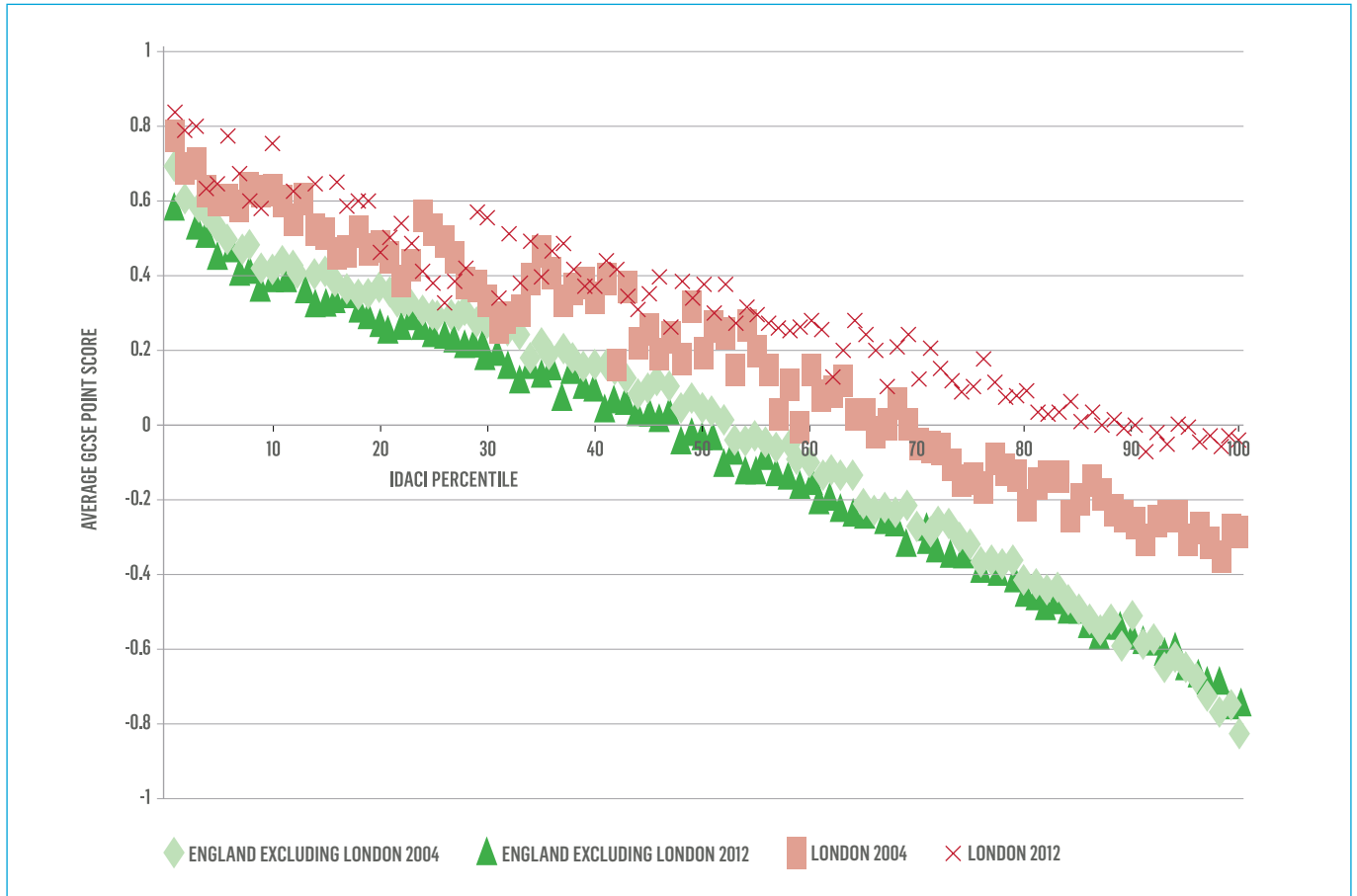
CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

As well as enjoying success on broad measures of effectiveness, the ‘tail’ of underperforming schools and schools in more deprived areas has reduced over the past ten years in London.

When context is taken into account, equivalent measures excluded and incremental scores² applied to each GCSE, it looks as though much of the country has stalled while London has pulled further ahead in terms of pupils’ performance. The figure below plots results for each percentile of IDACI, so for increasing levels of deprivation and for pupil performance. This is shown at two points in time – 2004 and 2012. It clearly shows that high levels of deprivation and low levels of educational performance are correlated. Even in 2004 the link between poverty and achievement in London was much weaker than in the rest of the country – so London was a more ‘equitable’ place to be educated. Put simply, if you were a pupil from a deprived socio-economic background you were likely to perform better than someone from outside London with a background like yours. The 2012 data shows a pattern of greater equity in London schools but it also shows that between 2004 and 2012 there has been a marked improvement for pupils in the more deprived half of the population. This move towards greater equity is not seen in the figures for the rest of the country. So again, put simply, if you are a pupil from a deprived background in school in London in 2012 you are likely to attain better results than a similar non-London pupil, and your chances are even better than they were in 2004.

² Each grade is worth one more ‘point’ than the grade below it, rather than there being a ‘C’ grade ‘cliff edge’ as is the case with the A*-C measure.

Figure 2.10: London and England excluding London performance by IDACI percentile in 2004 and 2012

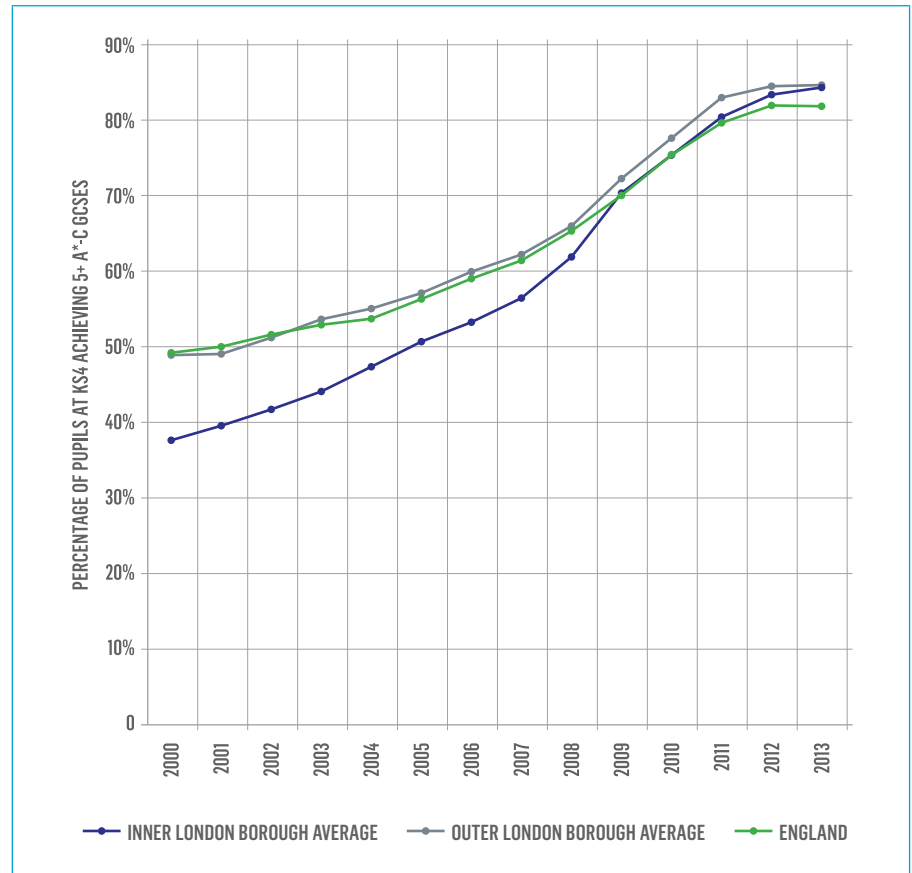


(NB Based on GCSE points, excluding equivalents and controlling for background factors)
 Source: Cook, 2014

Some of the data presented thus far has suggested a difference in performance between inner and outer London, indicating more marked improvement in inner London. Using borough level figures to calculate the average proportion of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades in inner and outer London boroughs we see that at the turn of the century, inner London boroughs performed dramatically below the national average. Even in 2008 they were still 3.4 percentage points behind the rest of the country. Since then they have drawn level with the national average, and in 2009 they overtook the rest of the country for the first time – a lead they have since extended.

IT WAS NOT ENTIRELY SURPRISING THAT INNER LONDON PERFORMED **RELATIVELY POORLY** IN THE LATE 1990S GIVEN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT.

Figure 2.11: Performance of inner and outer London compared to England overall (2000–2013)



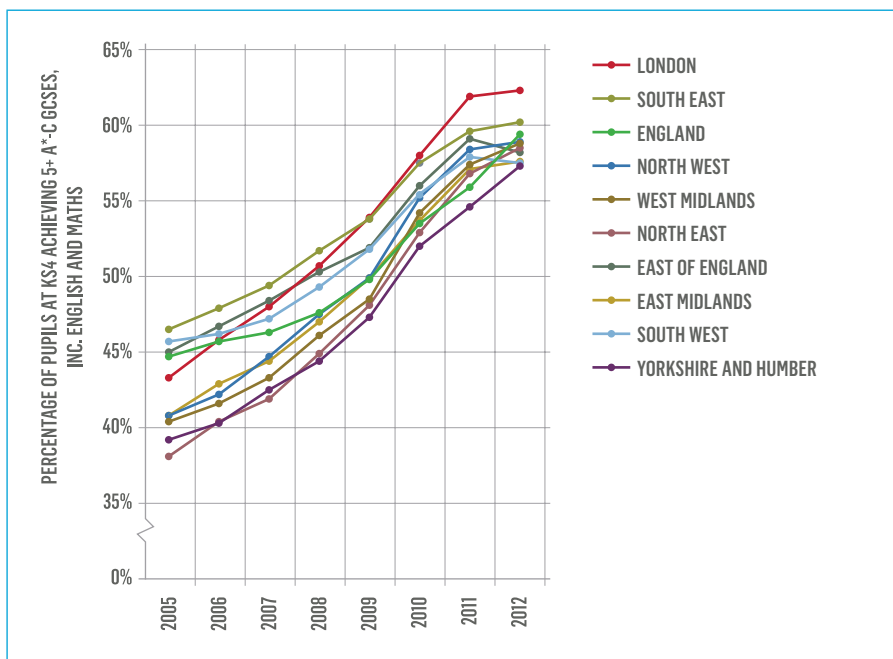
Source: DfE performance tables

As Bradon *et al.* noted, ‘Students attending inner London schools do better than might otherwise be expected, given that they often start with at least two strikes against them (poverty and mobility)’ (2002: 28). What is particularly interesting to note is that a pattern of improvement was already emerging by the late 1990s. Several years before such reforms as London Challenge and the introduction of academies and Teach First, inner London had begun to close the gap. This was noted by the Government at the time of the start of London Challenge in 2003:

‘Performance in London schools is improving. In 1987, just under 11 per cent of inner London pupils achieved five good O-levels (compared to 26.4 per cent nationally); today 41 per cent achieve five good GCSEs (compared to 49.5 per cent nationally) narrowing the gap between inner London and national performance’ (DfES, 2003: 18).

By 2002, over 30 per cent of pupils receiving FSM in London achieved five A*-C at GCSE, compared to around 26 per cent nationally – and FSM pupils in inner London did particularly well (DfES, 2003: 18). So even in the early 2000s, before London Challenge and academies and despite high levels of deprivation, the capital’s schools were demonstrating capacity to improve. The sustained and accelerating improvement since then has meant they have subsequently outperformed the rest of the country. While all regions in figure 2.12 below show a trend of improvement, London’s rise through the regional ranks since 2005 is particularly impressive.

Figure 2.12: London’s performance between 2005 and 2012 compared to other regions

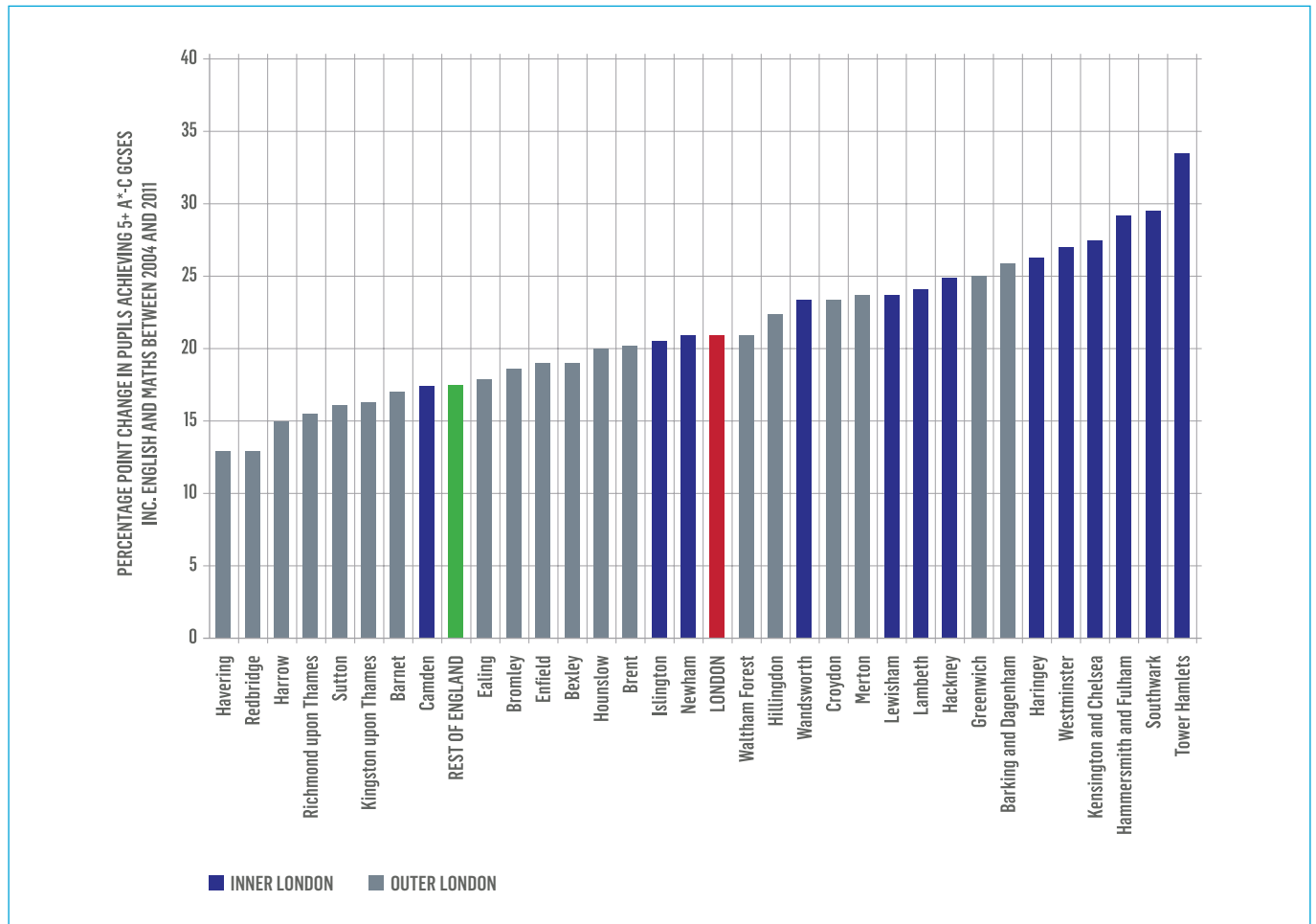


Source: DfE, 2013a

While the overall picture is that inner London improved more markedly than outer London, there were significant variations at borough level in both areas of the city. The performance of schools within some outer London boroughs improved relatively rapidly: Barking and Dagenham saw improvements in GCSE attainment between 2004 and 2011 of above 25 percentage points, compared to a London average of 21 percentage points. Meanwhile some inner London boroughs improved relatively slowly over the same time period: for example Camden improved by 17.4 percentage points, marginally behind the average improvement in the rest of England (outside London) of 17.5 percentage points (see figure 2.13).

WHILE THE OVERALL PICTURE IS THAT INNER LONDON IMPROVED MORE MARKEDLY THAN OUTER LONDON, THERE WERE SIGNIFICANT VARIATIONS AT BOROUGH LEVEL IN BOTH AREAS OF THE CITY.

Figure 2.13: 2004–2011 improvement by London borough

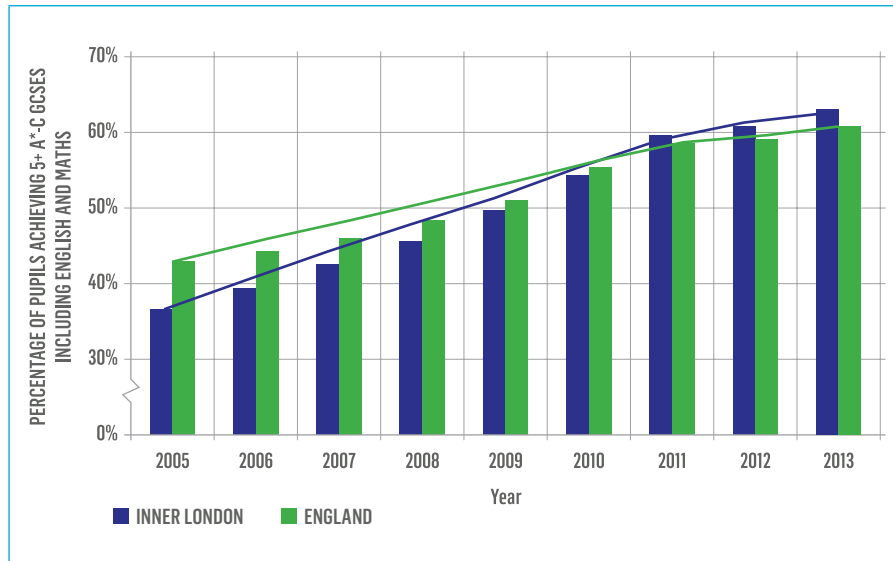


Source: DfE, 2013a

Despite these anomalies the figure above shows that borough level school improvement was typically greater in inner London boroughs.

It is interesting to consider the improvement trajectory of London schools before and after the change of government in 2010. The figure overleaf (figure 2.14) shows the proportion of pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and mathematics from 2005 to 2013 in inner London compared to the national picture for all state-funded schools in England. Since eclipsing performance across England in 2010, the rate of improvement in inner London schools has continued to exceed the national rate in 2012 and 2013.

Figure 2.14: Inner London GCSE performance compared to national performance between 2005 and 2013



Source: DfE, 2013a

PERCEPTIONS OF THE LONDON TRANSFORMATION

Our research involved interviews with 25 expert witnesses with experience relevant to the story of London schools. The group consisted of academics, politicians, government advisers, school leaders, programme leaders and educationalists who were either active during the period in driving the changes in London or have been key figures in the debate around the changes in more recent years. The interviews are sources of rich qualitative data that illuminate the story of London's transformation. In this section they add interesting qualitative insight into the changes that have been documented quantitatively thus far in this chapter. In interviews this group of experts were asked to reflect on the way London schools have changed over the last 10 to 15 years. They were unanimous that there had been dramatic improvements in school quality, although some were keen to qualify this analysis with reference either to remaining problems today or to the complexity of the improvement narrative. Most had a very positive view of the strength today of the London school system. The following comments are typical of their assessment of change over time:



‘From being the worst performing region in England to the best performing region in England in a period of not much more than ten years is a very considerable achievement.’ (Former headteacher)

‘London schools are, I think, pretty undisputedly the best in the country now, which was not the case ten years ago [...] I think most of our best schools, although not all of them [...] [our] world class schools, are in London.’ (Political adviser)

‘The [...] 2011 data showed that the poorest one per cent of children by postcode do as well as children in the average postcode by wealth in the rest of the country. That’s a pretty stunning statistic.’ (Political adviser)

‘[London has] exceptional density of outstanding schools and very effective schools, some exceptional leaders and systems leaders, architects of new developments across London and nationally. [London has had the] biggest rate of improvement and highest outcomes for children. [It’s] the only global city in the world where that’s the case.’ (Policy specialist)

Our interviewees confirmed, broadly speaking, the patterns derived from the data described in the first half of this chapter in such areas as:

- London moving over time from being the educational ‘poor relation’ of the English regions to ‘best in class’
- substantial improvements in teaching quality and outcomes as measured by exam results
- a particularly beneficial impact of London schools on the performance of relatively disadvantaged students
- a differential rate of improvement between inner and outer London, with the greater gains seen in inner London.

THE BAD OLD DAYS?

Although our interview structure invited comment on the situation since 2002/03, several of the interviewees went further back and spoke about London schools in the 1980s. These experts typically saw the situation in the 1980s as worse than at the turn of the century and supported the proposition that aspects of the London improvement process were already under way by the year 2000. One highly experienced participant described the schools of 2000–2003 as, ‘a lot better than they were in the seventies and eighties’. Another mentioned how the ILEA of the 1980s was seen by many as ‘a basket case’ and the inner London schools of the time were perceived by some as ‘hopeless’. One participant described her own experience as a teacher in London schools in the 1980s in graphic terms and identified a prevalent culture of low expectations and poor leadership: ‘Two of them were quite frankly awful, and had no links with any other school [...] Staff didn’t talk about education, headteacher hid in the office because too frightened that there might be a disruption! And people just said, well [...] what can you expect?’

Some interviewees expressed a belief that there had been ‘green shoots’ of improvement in the late 1990s, which predated the reforms of 2003: London Challenge, Teach First and the first sponsored academies. Several interviewees spoke positively of the Excellence in Cities initiative of the new Labour government and other changes, such as the beginnings of the transformation of some local authorities, all of which predated the reforms of the years 2003–2010.

A DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOL CULTURE

For many of our interviewees, issues of culture, leadership and expectations constituted key areas of weakness at the beginning of the century. Several confirmed the existence in some schools, particularly those serving deprived communities, of low level expectations as a major barrier to better outcomes. Interviewees repeatedly spoke of the prevalence of a lazy and pessimistic assumption that radical improvement was not possible in the outcomes for students from deprived backgrounds. One described schools at the time as being organised in the ‘producer interest’ rather than as places that put the interest of learners first, commenting that they were ‘group[s] of independent organisations whose principal purpose was the promotion and protection of employment of staff, with outcomes in performance of children in most but not all schools being secondary to the benefits and the interests and issues of staff’.

An experienced director of children’s services talked about the ‘gross underachievement’ of the time. For her, and for many other respondents, a fundamental problem was a professional culture of complacency: ‘There were too many people who accepted the fact that poverty [...] and initial underachievement of children was something that couldn’t be turned around’.

Another interviewee, who was a former senior civil servant, described some of the schools of the early 2000s as seriously dysfunctional institutions: ‘You wouldn’t feel safe in the corridor necessarily. You would find a huge amount of disruption in lessons [...] learning environments which were depressing and unpleasant to be in’.



A PERIOD OF PROFESSIONAL ISOLATION

In addition to cultural problems linked to questions of expectations, the expert witnesses frequently identified two barriers to improvement when reflecting on the situation in London schools in the early 2000s:

- difficulties in teacher recruitment
- the professional isolation of schools.

The experts identified the difficulties in the recruitment of good teachers as one of the chronic problems that beset school leaders at the turn of the century. Some described the daily grind of trying to ensure that pupils had teachers, which had a corrosive effect on the work of leaders and distracted them from efforts to secure organisational improvement. For others, dealing with recruitment difficulties was seen as an essential first step towards transformation. As one interviewee said: 'If you've got the right people, then you've got a chance. If you haven't, you've got no chance'.

The period 2000–2003 was seen as a time of low collaboration by school leaders – the interviewees who had been headteachers felt isolated. Although headteacher networks existed they were not a place for the discussion of educational issues. Interviewees repeatedly talked about the fragmentation and isolation that they thought typified the period. There were many effective school leaders but there was an absence of collegiality and of the practical mechanisms needed for joint professional learning and the mobilisation of knowledge.

Our interviewees said that schools in the early 2000s had, in some cases, a weak professional culture – practitioners at all levels in education were not effectively working together either in schools or between schools, there was a complacency about underperformance and there was little focus on pupil outcomes. They also lacked some of the technical skills needed for high performance, the skills that they referred to as undeveloped related to pedagogical expertise, understanding about how children learn and data literacy. One interviewee summed this up as a combined weakness of skill and will: 'They didn't have the [...] forensic understanding of how different children were performing and they didn't have the real hunger to make the difference in terms of turning that around for those young people'.

THE EXPERTS IDENTIFIED THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE RECRUITMENT OF GOOD TEACHERS AS ONE OF THE CHRONIC PROBLEMS THAT BESET SCHOOL LEADERS AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY.

A COMPLEX STORY

While some interviewees portrayed a stark picture of spectacular underachievement in about 2000, others were keen to give what they saw as a more balanced picture and to emphasise that there was in fact a great range of performance at the turn of century. Some commented on the variability in school effectiveness, the context of severe disadvantage that faced many London schools and the complexity in the changes that took place between 2003 and 2014. They described as common a view that the nuances were ignored 10–15 years ago and the same nuances were in danger of being ignored today. A respected educationalist commented that: 'Schools... were probably unfairly maligned at the beginning of the century. I mean, I think they were considered to be very bad, but they were, probably, not doing that much worse, or even slightly better than the rest of the country, it's just they have very high disadvantaged populations'.

A PUBLIC DISCOURSE OF CRISIS

While the statistical evidence presented alongside the views of experts suggests that the quality of London schools was mixed and the reality complex, the media, politicians and many ordinary Londoners took a different view: London schools were bad. Some interviewees drew attention to the existence of a political and media opinion about the universally appalling nature of the schools of London at the start of the century. Some suggested that many parents, particularly middle-class parents, accepted the common media image of unmitigated failure, and that as a result there was a crisis of parental confidence in state schools, particularly those of inner London. This, they said, led many parents to send their children on very lengthy journeys across London to escape from local schools with poor reputations and some to choose private schools. Two interviewees talked about how the Conservative politician, Oliver Letwin, spoke publicly, and in the view of one interviewee outrageously, about how he would ‘rather beg on the streets’ than send a child of his to his local comprehensive school in Lambeth. Another talked about how Tony Blair and the media, particularly the Evening Standard, accepted and promoted a somewhat simplistic concept of London schools in difficulty:

‘Well, again I don’t think they were ever as bad as Tony Blair and the Evening Standard made out, because I think he listened a lot to the chattering classes [...] However, there’s absolutely no doubt that some [...] it’s hard to score it, but I would say some 20 per cent of them [...] were in a pretty bad state’. (Senior educationalist)

LONDON SCHOOLS TODAY

Interviewees described how many of the barriers to improvement had been dismantled since the early 2000s. The teacher recruitment challenge had receded, ensuring both better teachers and more time for school leaders to focus on school improvement. The attitude of ‘what can you expect with these kids?’ had been replaced by a ‘no excuses’ culture in many schools and local authorities. Schools were now more likely to have a strong professional culture and a commitment to continuous improvement. A senior figure in the management of the London Challenge programme commented: ‘Well I would characterise them as outward-looking on the whole; wanting to find out what works; and endlessly seeking to improve what they’re up to’.

One issue that occurred repeatedly in discussions with this group of interviewees was a sense of how a degree of collegiality and collective responsibility had replaced the fragmentation and isolation of the past. Some schools at the turn of the century were characterised as ‘ghettoes’. The schools of 2014 were described contrastingly by one headteacher as part of a ‘movement’ with a strong ‘esprit de corps’.

A SENSE OF COLLEGIALLY AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY REPLACED THE FRAGMENTATION AND ISOLATION OF THE PAST.



When describing London schools today the themes that emerged from many of the interviews related to strengthened organisational capacity and a self-confidence about how to ensure school effectiveness. This organisational confidence was fundamentally attributable to more self-confidence on the part of school leaders. Often interviewees linked this to an increase in 'pride': an educationalist commented that 'There's been a massive shift with how London schools feel about themselves [...] and I think there's a pride in the education system in London that just wasn't there in 2003'. This professional pride derived from a sense of professional effectiveness or efficacy. This in turn generated a grounded optimism and a belief that improvement and beneficial change was within the control of professionals. One experienced headteacher expressed this view strongly; comparing his current practice to his experience in 1999, he said: 'It's such a feeling of a lot more optimism. There seems to be a lot more possible and there's a lot more in our control'.

In summary, several of our interviewees shared a view of the characteristics of London schools today which included the following features:

- schools that were self-confident institutions, with well-motivated staff
- highly effective leadership, with less 'firefighting' and crisis management
- strong networks linking schools with other schools for purposes of improvement and joint practice development
- a new culture of high expectations and 'no excuses' for underperformance
- optimism that challenged the inevitability of the connection between poverty and low outcomes.

A POLITICIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

One of our interviewees was a senior politician who, in a ministerial capacity, had oversight of aspects of the London story. It is perhaps instructive to look in some detail at his account of the context and the changes to London schools over the past 10–15 years.

'Well, I think the reality is that there was huge variety – and I think that was one of the problems that led to a sort of loss of faith in a lot of London schools. There was a lot of variety between different schools so there were some schools that were doing fantastic things and there were boroughs in London where performance was high. So some of the boroughs that are cited as very successful, like Camden for example, to be fair the schools there, by and large, were doing well prior to London Challenge. So the position wasn't the same everywhere but undoubtedly it's the case that there were schools that were letting down communities in many parts of London with very significant underperformance, that resulted in parents in those areas not having faith in those schools. So either opting to go to schools way away from where they lived because they were the schools they had faith in. Or in some cases, choosing to go privately because they felt they didn't have faith in the state schools. That included parents of quite modest means who might go privately because they didn't have that faith.'

'I think the biggest change is that London is now seen as a very attractive place for teachers to come and teach. So whether that's new young teachers or whether it's people who are already in teaching, whether it's people coming into teaching later on in life. You know, I remember simply as a constituency MP in London and then as the minister, that there were huge challenges recruiting and retaining good teachers in London. Partly because of the cost of living in London but a lot because of pupil behaviour, the sense that London schools were very, very difficult places to work. I think that what London Challenge and other things created was a situation where it was seen as positively a good thing to come and teach in London and to be a leader in London. So I think the big, big change is that, which has then contributed to the improvement in performance in the schools.'



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There were some dissenting voices among the interviewees who suggested that caution was needed as the situation is as complex today as it was in 2000–2003. As the head of one academy chain said, ‘London schools are a huge mix and I’m not sure I think there’s a unified story.’ Others pointed out that the transformation was quite localised: ‘It’s focused on some key boroughs – Tower Hamlets, Newham, Lewisham, Hackney, Westminster – that have seen really dramatic improvements’. One of our interviewees was anxious that the story of transformation should not be overstated. This head of an academy chain emphasised the weakness of some schools today:

‘We are still finding, although there are fewer of them, we are still finding completely dysfunctional schools [...] badly failing their young people. So in the midst of this area which no question has improved significantly I think it would be very hard to say it is world class or anyone is satisfied with it because there are still some really poor failing schools.’

Interviewees commented on the momentum for further improvement. Some were worried that there was a fragility to the improvements, and were concerned that some forms of assistance to schools, such as London Challenge and local authority school improvement services were no longer available. One interviewee who had played a major role in the management of London Challenge described the way the gap between London and the rest of the country was widening over two years after the end of London Challenge in 2011. For him this was evidence of the ‘legacy’ of London Challenge, with an implication that the ‘afterglow’ of London Challenge would not last forever. Others saw the same phenomenon differently and speculated about the extent to which London had in effect achieved ‘take-off’ as a self-improving system: ‘The London school improvement system is self-sustaining. In 2012, London was the only region of the country whose GCSE results improved’. Another interviewee, an ex-senior Ofsted figure, commented: ‘I think there’s a vibrancy now, and a self-belief within the London schools that they can continue to improve.’

THERE’S A VIBRANCY NOW, AND A SELF-BELIEF WITHIN THE LONDON SCHOOLS THAT THEY CAN CONTINUE TO IMPROVE.

SUMMARY

This chapter has taken a critical look at the quantitative evidence and concluded that education and outcomes in London have undergone dramatic improvement since the early 2000s. The testimony of the experts adds to this picture illuminating the changes and transformation from inside the schools and the education system. The following chapters turn their attention to scrutinising the quantitative and qualitative data to establish reasons for the success and draw out the lessons that may potentially translate to school improvement policy on a different stage.



CHAPTER 3:

THE LONDON ADVANTAGE

This chapter is in two parts. The first explores the extent to which gentrification, ethnicity and opportunity have played a role in the improvements. Part 2 considers the three other factors that go beyond the organisational effectiveness of the schools of London: education funding, investments in school buildings and recruitment of teachers.

Performance data suggests that London schools have been transformed since 2000 in terms of outcomes for students. So the more difficult to answer question is: why?

Broadly speaking there are two types of potential cause:

- changes in the external context within which London schools operated
- changes in the internal effectiveness of London schools.

Part 1 of this chapter considers the extent to which the London transformation can be attributed to wider contextual issues. We explore the idea that London experienced some kind of ‘advantage’: that there may be distinctive and beneficial contextual features of the situation in the capital that explain the improvement, for example the gentrification of some London boroughs; the different ethnic make-up of the capital’s schools; and the relative wealth of opportunity that London boasts. Collectively these ideas are referred as the ‘London advantage’. Based on an analysis of contextual data, we have assessed these components of the ‘London advantage’:

- **Gentrification** – have changes to the socio-economic profile of the London population contributed to the transformation? School performance worldwide is heavily influenced by the economic and parental background of students. If these factors have changed in London, that could constitute a major causal factor.
- **Ethnicity** – London is different from much of the rest of England in terms of the ethnic background of its population. For example, nationally, approximately 80 per cent of secondary pupils are white, whereas in inner London the figure is nearer 30 per cent, and 50 per cent in outer London (DfE, 2013b). Student outcomes for different ethnic groups vary and some commentators have identified cultural differences in attitudes to education across ethnic groups. Can the distinctive ethnic mix of London explain the improvement in London schools?
- **Opportunity** – do greater levels of economic and cultural dynamism in London, compared to the rest of England, provide an important stimulus for learning and achievement?

We conclude that these factors do not offer a convincing causal explanation for the disproportionate success of the capital's schools over the last decade compared to the rest of England. We conclude that, based upon the available evidence, neither gentrification nor ethnicity nor better opportunities constitute explanations for the London improvement.

Part 2 of this chapter considers three other factors that go beyond the organisational effectiveness of the schools of London:

- education funding
- investment in school buildings
- teacher recruitment.

In areas such as funding or teacher recruitment a 'threshold of sufficiency' was achieved that created a favourable context for change but these changes did not guarantee transformation. Addressing these matters helped London schools but they did not directly cause the dramatic improvement in London schools. At best addressing these issues provided a benign context for school improvement; these factors had an enabling quality but did not constitute key levers for school improvement.

PART 1: THE LONDON CONTEXT AND ITS LINK TO THE SUCCESS STORY

THE IMPACT OF GENTRIFICATION

Although some districts in London have changed their socio-economic character in recent years this cannot explain the better outcomes of London schools. The London improvement is a story of achievement on the part of disadvantaged students in London rather than a narrative about the displacement of disadvantaged students by higher-performing, more advantaged students. As chapter 2 showed, poor pupils are likely to do better in school in London than they are elsewhere in the country. Evidence from the international literature suggests that social background factors are often powerful determinants of variation in pupil achievement (Harris *et al.*, 2006: 410; Hamnett and Butler, 2013: 317). Other studies have identified the significance of parental occupation, income and qualifications (Perry and Francis, 2010: 5). Overall London does not have a particularly privileged population. According to government statistics, deprivation in London in 2013, as measured by the proportion of pupils receiving FSM, was higher than the national average (24 per cent compared to 15 per cent nationally; and in inner London this difference was even more marked, with 36 per cent of pupils receiving FSM) (DfE, 2014a). This gap has remained relatively stable since at least 2003 (when 24 per cent of London pupils were eligible for FSM compared to 14 per cent nationally) (DfE, 2013c). These figures suggest that a greater proportion of London's children and young people experience disadvantage than is the case nationally; this makes the success of London's schools particularly impressive (as shown in chapter 2).

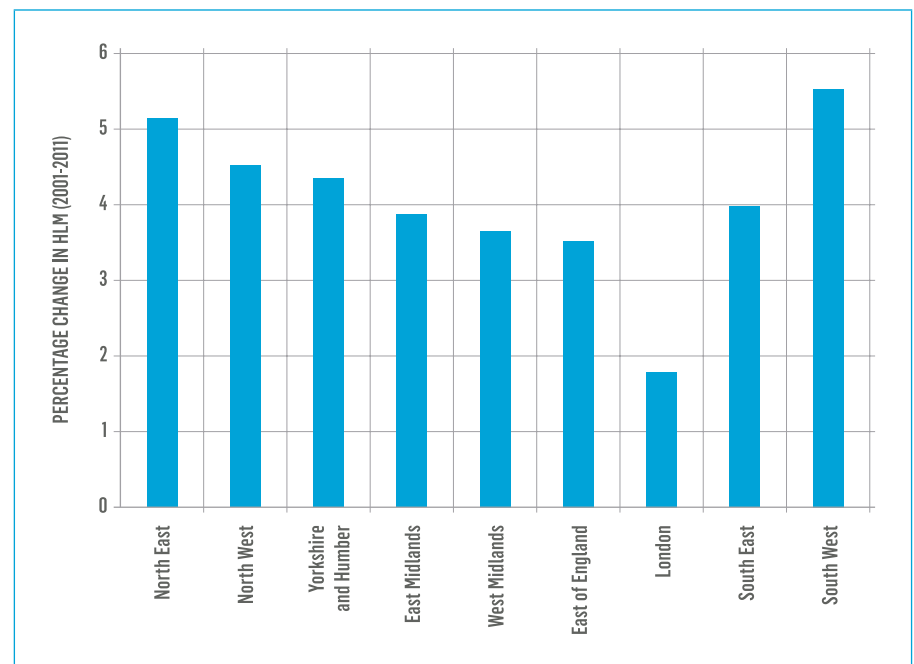
IN AREAS SUCH AS FUNDING OR TEACHER RECRUITMENT A 'THRESHOLD OF SUFFICIENCY' WAS ACHIEVED THAT CREATED A FAVOURABLE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE BUT THESE CHANGES DID NOT GUARANTEE TRANSFORMATION.



Compared to the rest of England London did not in fact gentrify³ more than other regions as a whole between 2001 and 2011. At the same time, particular boroughs in London did change in terms of the local socio-economic profile of the population. The rate of gentrification was overall greater in inner London rather than outer London. Few researchers have looked closely at the impact of gentrification in London.

The following chart shows the rate of gentrification in the regions of England between 2001 and 2011 based on census data. It shows that London was not, in relative terms, a region that gentrified more than other regions.

Figure 3.1: Gentrification by region, 2001–2011

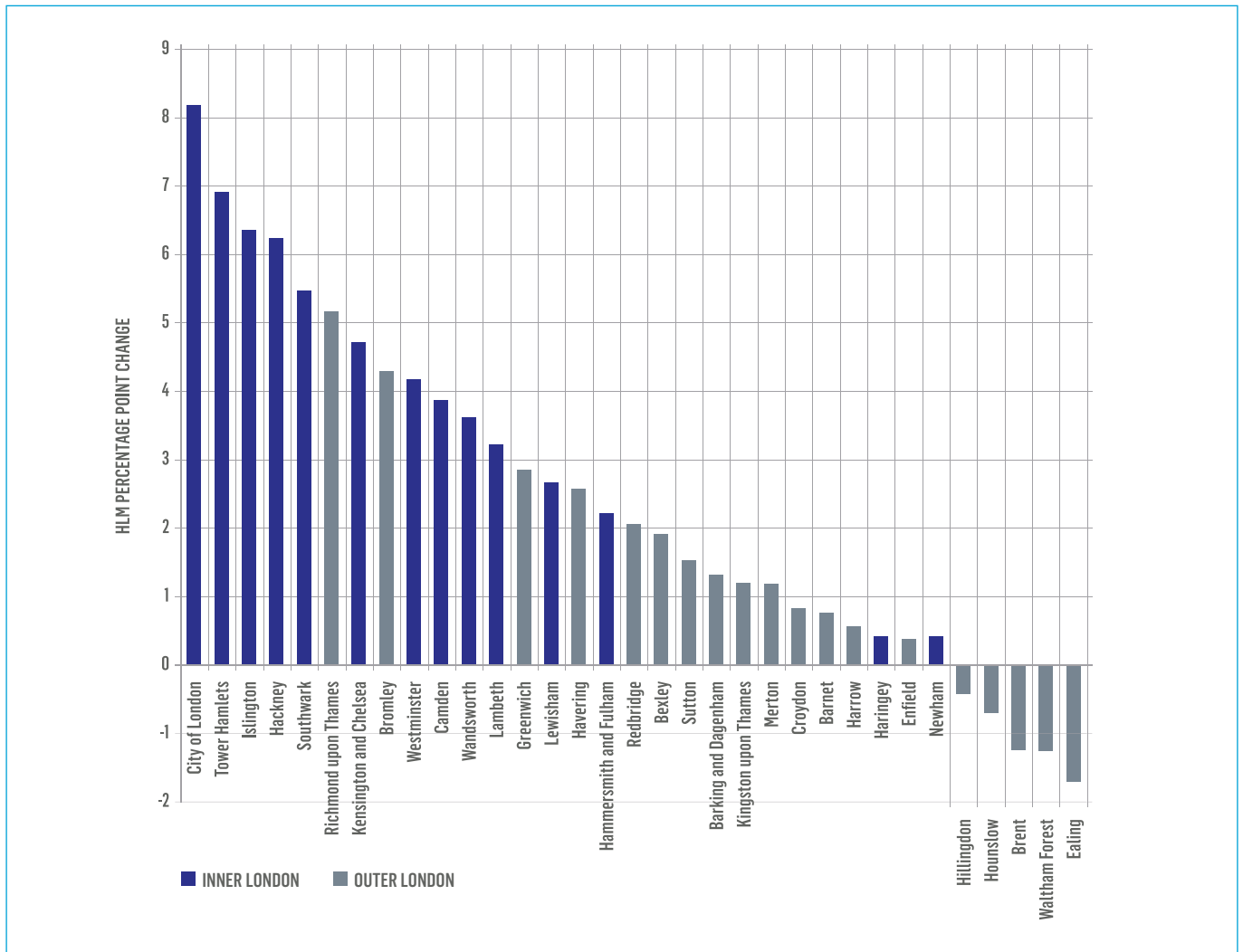


Source: ONS, 2013

The next figure (figure 3.2) uses census data to plot the rate of gentrification across the London boroughs. There is dramatic variability in terms of the rate of gentrification, from places like Tower Hamlets and Islington, that have witnessed a change in population profile to many outer London boroughs that have been relatively unaffected by gentrification.

³ Gentrification is defined here as the change in the percentage of people (from the total population of the geographic region) belonging to the two highest socio-economic classes (higher managerial and professional, and lower managerial and professional) between 2001 and 2011. Higher and Lower Managerial occupations (HLM) are the top two categories in the National Statistics Socio-economic classification.

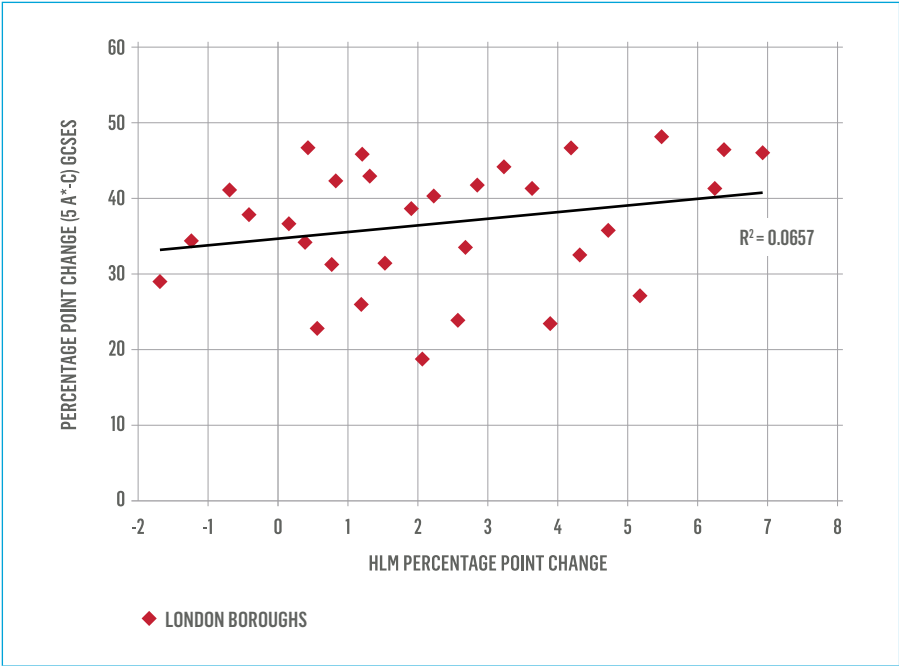
Figure 3.2: Gentrification in London, 2001–2011



Source: ONS, 2013

As can be seen from figure 3.3 there is no significant correlation between the varying levels of gentrification and the rates of improvement in the achievement of five good GCSEs in the individual London boroughs. Comparing, for example, two boroughs from either end of the spectrum in terms of gentrification (Tower Hamlets and Merton) it is possible to see that although Tower Hamlets experienced a 6.9 percentage point increase in HLM (indicating considerable gentrification) and Merton has increased by 1.2 percentage points, their improvement in terms of GCSE performance (students achieving five+ A*-C) has been almost identical (46.0 percentage points versus 45.8 percentage points). A senior figure in Tower Hamlets put the improvement in the borough down to a great drive in the 1990s in primary education – particularly in reading and English language, and not to the gentrification of the borough. She argued that this had a knock-on effect years later as these children progressed to secondary school literate: ‘If you chart the real improvement it’s because the kids going to secondary school x number of years later could read, in my view.’ Meanwhile an education director from Southwark said: ‘I don’t think we improve the schools in Southwark by getting middle-class kids in. I think the middle class realised what a good deal the schools were after we’d improved them.’

Figure 3.3: Change in GCSE results (2001–2011) and gentrification



Source: ONS, 2013 and DfE, 2013a

For many of our interviewees it was poverty rather than gentrification that was a driver for change. Some research participants were vocal about the way in which the relative prevalence of poverty in London had been a catalyst for improvement during the last 10 years. They articulated a determination to tackle the link between poverty and outcomes that they said characterised the decade. One senior figure behind the London Challenge programme commented that what happened in London was proof ‘that poverty is not an excuse for failure’ and the policies and programmes of the day promoted ‘a no-excuses culture’ which was a direct challenge to what had gone before.

ETHNICITY

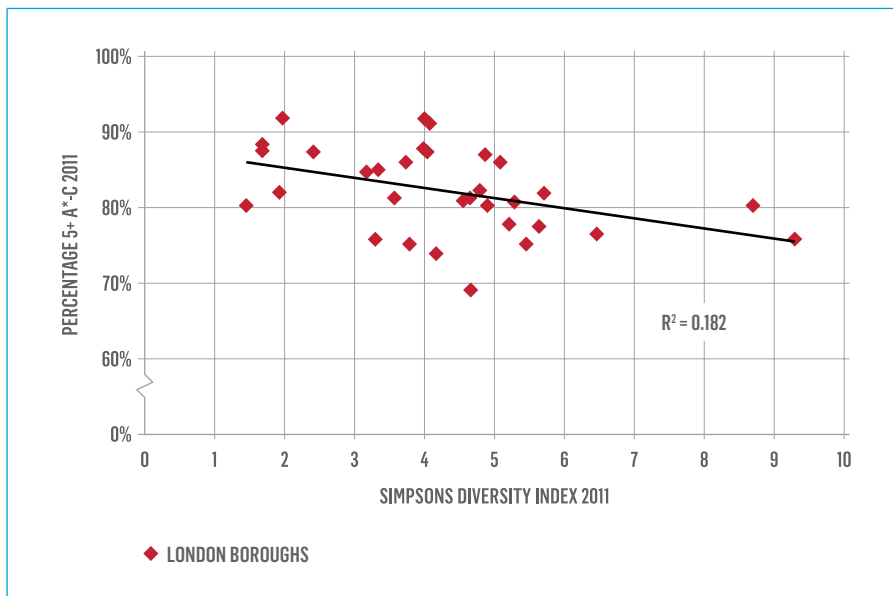
Another potential explanatory contextual factor concerns the ethnicity of pupils in London schools. There are proportionally fewer white pupils in London than in the rest of England – in inner London the figure is about 30 per cent and in outer London around 50 per cent (DfE, 2013b).

London’s ethnic mix makes it a highly diverse and complex city – there is a greater range of ethnicities in the city than elsewhere in the country and the concentration of these ethnic groups varies across different areas of the city. In addition to this there have been higher levels of pupil mobility in London (Machin *et al.*, 2006), which in part are due to the inward flow of migrants.

There is an extremely limited connection between levels of ethnic diversity and educational performance from borough to borough. Plotting borough level diversity against five A*-C performance shows that boroughs that differ widely in terms of their diversity are performing similarly well educationally. Simply ‘being diverse’ therefore does not explain London’s recent success. The following chart shows the GCSE performance of pupils in different boroughs mapped against an index of diversity, from boroughs with little ethnic diversity to those with high levels of ethnic diversity. There is no strong association between performance levels and diversity levels.



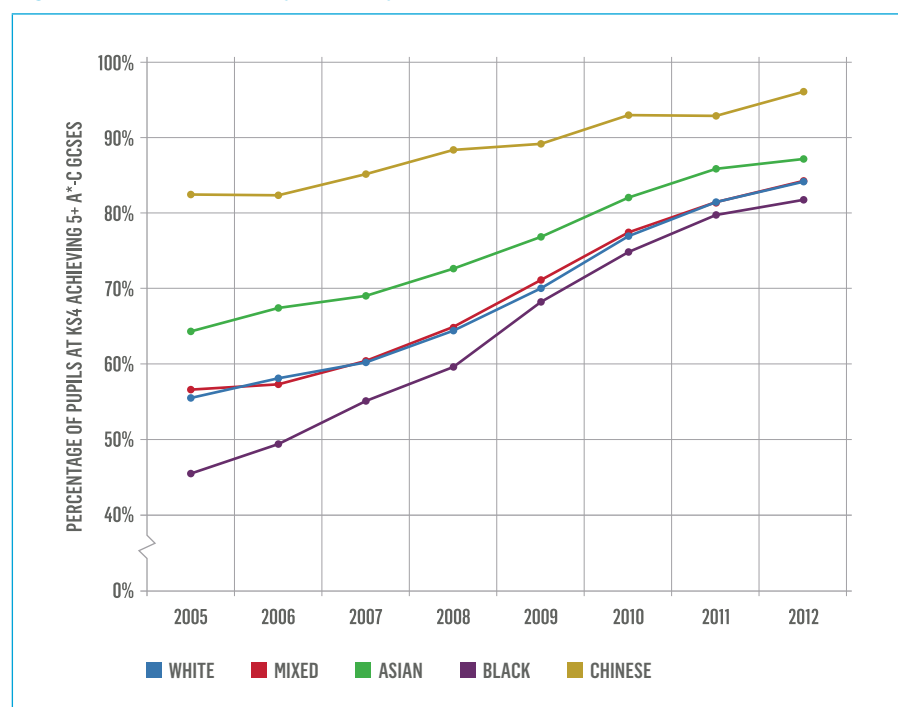
Figure 3.4: Borough level diversity and attainment in 2011



Source: DfE, 2013a; Tower Hamlets Council, 2013: 14

Analysis of trend data in GCSE performance for different ethnic groups reveals an interesting pattern. All ethnic groups have improved their performance in London considerably and in addition gaps have closed between them. Between 2004 and 2012 the attainment of black pupils in London increased by 36 percentage points, white pupils by 29 percentage points, and pupils of mixed ethnicity by 28 percentage points. As a result, gaps between different groups have shrunk: while Chinese and black pupils still make up the top and bottom of the distribution, the difference in their attainment has narrowed from 37 percentage points to 14 percentage points. The London improvement cannot be attributed to specific ethnic groups. The performance of all large ethnic groups, including white pupils, has improved. The figure below (figure 3.5) shows that Chinese, black, Asian, mixed ethnic groups and white pupils have all improved (ONS, 2014).

Figure 3.5: Attainment by ethnicity in London between 2004 and 2012



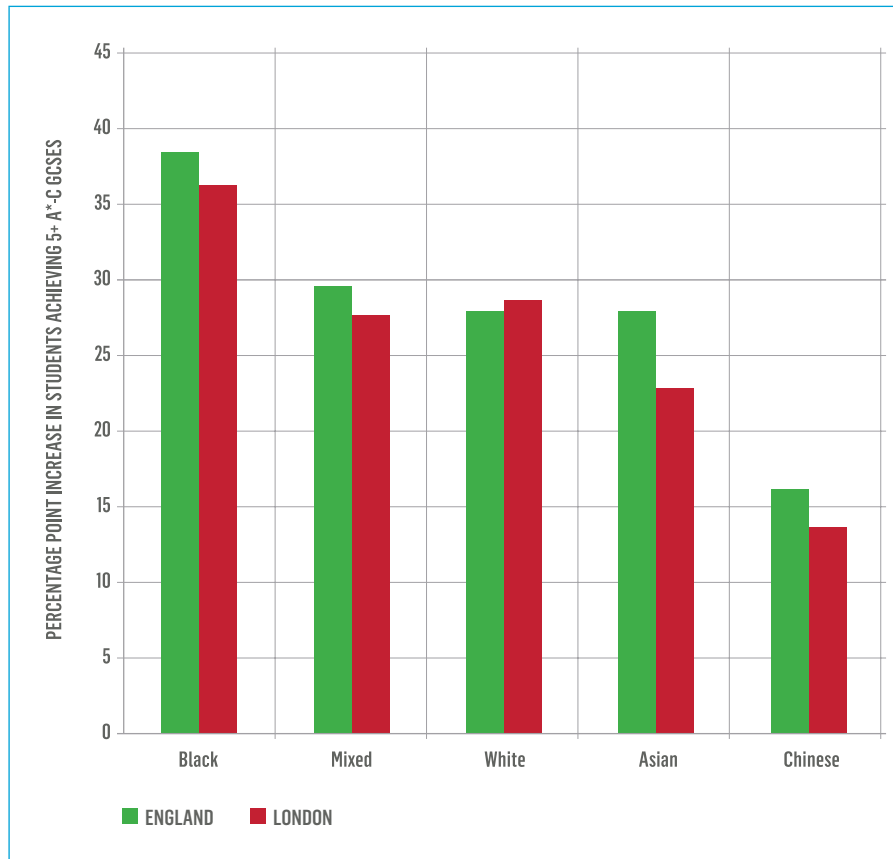
Source: ONS 2014

WHITE PUPILS HAVE NARROWED THE GAP BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND THE TWO HIGHEST-PERFORMING GROUPS – PUPILS OF CHINESE AND ASIAN HERITAGE

White pupils constitute one of the significantly improved groups. White pupils have narrowed the gap between themselves and the two highest-performing groups – pupils of Chinese and Asian heritage.

Similarly, figure 3.6 shows that London's white pupils were the only group that actually improved attainment levels, beyond the national average level of improvement, between 2004 and 2012. This is evidence again that the improved outcomes for London schools have involved better outcomes for white students, and cannot be simplistically attributed to the contribution of non-white ethnic groups.

Figure 3.6: Change in attainment 2004–2012 by ethnic group



Source: ONS, 2014

The data suggests that something extraordinary has taken place in London, not just for some ethnic groups but for all ethnic groups. This is an important point, and one that indicates (whilst recognising that London's overall improvement rate has benefitted from enormous gains made by minority groups concentrated there) that London's success is not a consequence of the difference in cultural educational values displayed by different ethnic groups in the capital.

OPPORTUNITY

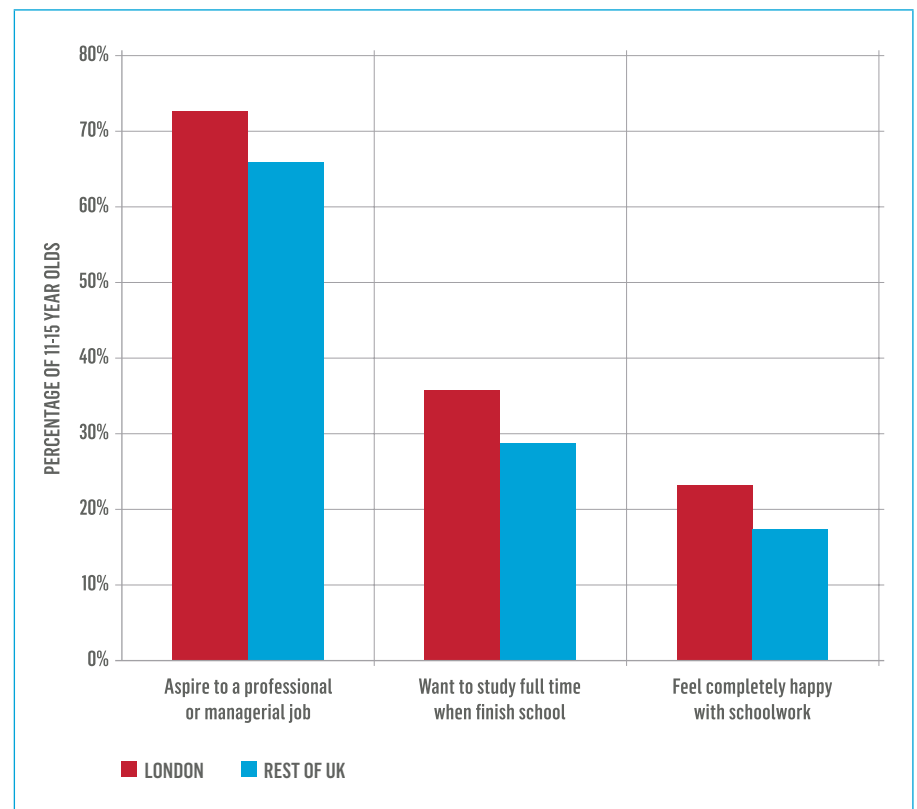
Do London pupils benefit from the economic and cultural dynamism of the city? While London may be a city where large numbers of pupils live in poverty and experience disadvantage, it is also a place of employment opportunities and higher-than-average salaries. London has higher job density than any other region (ONS, 2014) and almost 25 per cent more businesses per head compared to the national average (Centre for Cities, 2014: 33). Could it be that as a consequence of this dynamic environment, London's pupils, regardless of ethnicity, aspire higher than their non-London counterparts (Kintrea *et al.*, 2011)? The two factors could in theory reinforce each other – simply by living in London young people have access to a centre of economic, social and cultural opportunity and possess a greater drive to succeed. In the words of one interviewee: 'aspiration is higher in London because it is where people come to change their futures'. This is a contextual feature that some of the interviewees said London had capitalised upon: 'London has this opportunity to present to children a much clearer sense of the relationship between what they are doing and a life of opportunity'.

WHILE LONDON MAY BE A CITY WHERE LARGE NUMBERS OF PUPILS LIVE IN POVERTY AND EXPERIENCE DISADVANTAGE, IT IS ALSO A PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND HIGHER-THAN-AVERAGE SALARIES.



Can the vibrancy of an economy influence attitudes towards education? Lupton suggests that the context of local economic opportunities may feed into educational attainment via its role in shaping young people's educational aspirations and expectations (Lupton, 2004: 16). Pupil aspirations in London do appear to differ significantly from elsewhere. Data from the large-scale Understanding Society survey reveals statistically significant differences in the occupational and educational aspirations of 11–15 year olds from London and the rest of the UK (Understanding Society, 2014). The tendency of pupils in London to have high aspirations is also supported by the findings from a large-scale longitudinal study of young people in England which found that 12 year olds were more likely to strongly agree with the statement 'having a job or career in the future is important to me' in London compared to all other regions (APPG on Social Mobility, 2013: 46).

Figure 3.7: Aspirations and attitudes to schoolwork of 11–15 year olds



Source: Understanding Society, 2014

A 'London effect' on aspirations is also suggested by Kintrea *et al.* in their study of 13 and 15 year olds' occupational aspirations in Nottingham, Glasgow and Newham (Kintrea *et al.*, 2011: 42).

In addition to possible links between economic dynamism and aspirations, access to cultural capital might in theory contribute to enhancing pupils' engagement at school. Some studies, such as evaluations of the government-funded Creative Partnership programme, have tentatively suggested that schools and cultural agencies working together could produce tangible improvements to pupils' educational attainment (Durbin *et al.*, 2010: i; Davies, 2011: 7). An Ipsos MORI poll in 2010 also found that teachers in London were more likely to take their pupils on school-arranged trips than those from other areas of the country: 'Two-thirds of teachers in London schools (65 per cent) say their pupils will visit an archive or library, which is twice the proportion of teachers in the East Midlands (34 per cent) and the East of England (33 per cent)' (Ipsos MORI, 2010: 9).

The fact that these cultural resources are unusually available in London does not mean that they are accessed by all schools in London. Overall the evidence for a causal link between London's success and its cultural capital is relatively weak and its explanatory power for London's success is limited.

London has been the most economically successful and culturally rich part of England for centuries, including those years in the 1980s and 1990s when London schools were notorious for underachievement. While recognising the beneficial impact of London's economy and cultural assets, these factors do not seem to be a convincing explanation for the transformation of London schools between 2000 and 2013. Our assessment of the question of opportunity leads us to conclude that while the dynamism of London is of value to young people in the city it does not constitute a major cause of the London improvement.

PART 2: ENABLING FACTORS FOR LONDON'S SUCCESS

Part 1 addressed fundamentally non-educational context issues: gentrification, ethnicity and opportunities derived from the economic and cultural dynamism of London. This section, Part 2, considers a set of specifically educational context issues that have been associated with the improvements in London. These include school funding, the supply and quality of the workforce, and school buildings. Collectively, we argue that these constitute a set of benign enabling factors important to the London story but that, alone, they do not explain the success.

FUNDING

At national level both capital and revenue spending on education have increased since the early 1990s – education spending as proportion of GDP increased from 5 to 6.2 per cent of GDP between 1991/92 and 2009/10 with the largest increases taking place between 2001/02 and 2004/05.

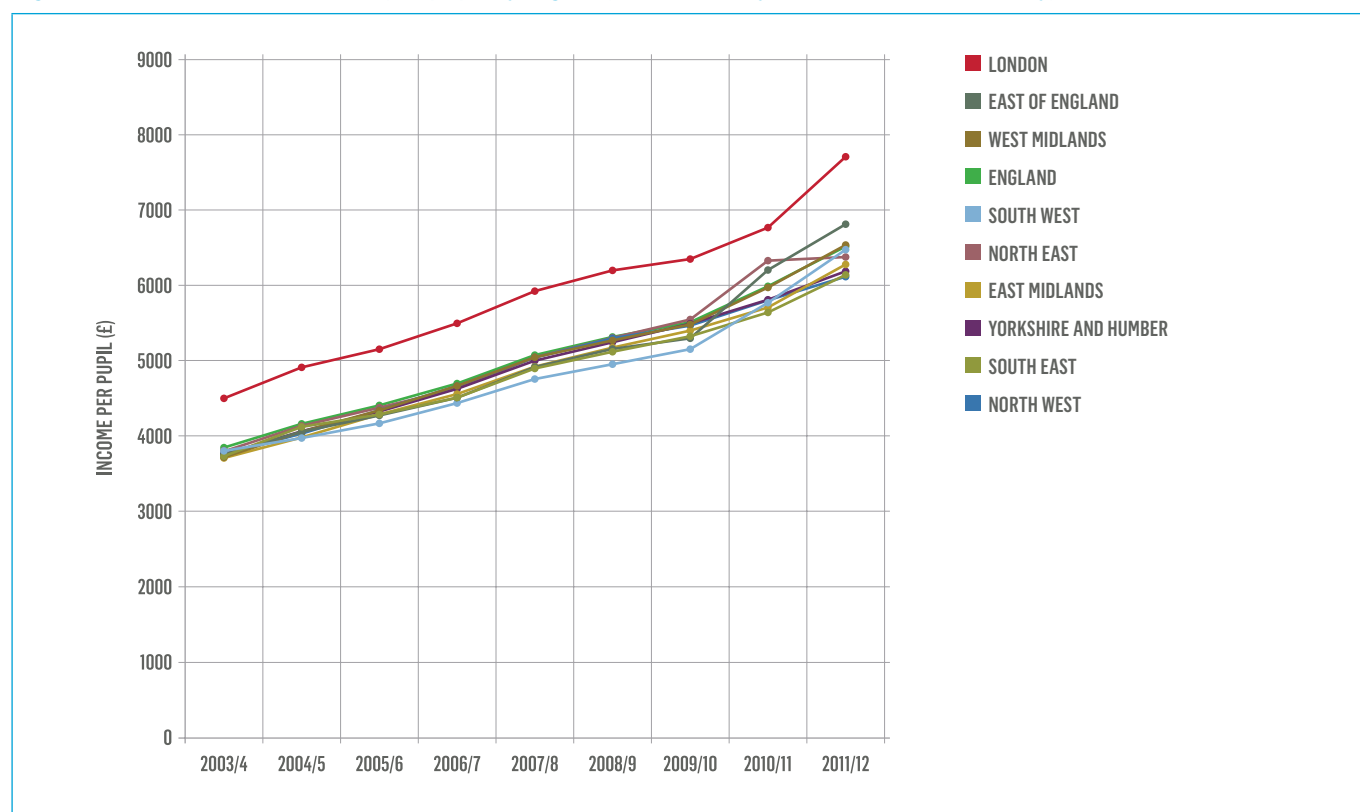
Funding in London varies more widely between the capital's schools than elsewhere (Allen *et al.*, 2012). Gibbons and colleagues (2011) found significant differences in the funding available to very similar schools, for example between Haringey and Hackney.

**FOR THOSE SCHOOLS THAT DO
MAKE FULL USE OF LONDON'S
CULTURAL CAPITAL THERE IS NO
STRONG EVIDENCE OF OVERALL
IMPACT.**

Chowdry and Sibieta (2011) have described the complexities involved in the formulae for school funding. In this context, simply comparing local authorities' basic per-pupil funding therefore does not provide a very reliable measure of relative funding levels. We therefore use data from local authority Outturn Statements and the schools' annual returns to compare total funding, surpluses and deficits over time in London and other regions. In this way it is possible to see how London schools' position has changed over the last decade.

Funding per pupil has increased dramatically in the last decade and has been consistently higher in London compared to other regions. London has received consistently more revenue income per pupil than other regions but there has not been a consistent trend of divergence between the capital and other regions.

Figure 3.8: Total revenue income per pupil by region (local authority maintained schools only)



Source: DfE, 2013d

This higher level of funding cannot of itself explain the improvement in London schools. London has always been funded at a higher level than other regions, and of course costs have been higher in the capital than elsewhere (Allen 2012) so it would be wrong to assume a mechanistic relationship between funding and London schools' performance. Researchers differ in the importance they accord to funding as an influence on pupil achievement: Gibbons *et al.* (2011) and Levačić *et al.* (2005) reported modest gains in pupil achievement in response to increases in funding. Others remain sceptical and consider there to be little compelling evidence that spending by itself leads to improved outcomes (see for example Hanushek, 1986, 1989, 1996, 2003 and Allen *et al.*, 2012).

One feature that has attracted little attention is the level of deficits for state-funded schools. Widespread deficit funding suggests a sense of crisis. In reality the cause of a deficit might be financial mismanagement rather than an objective shortage of resources. Nevertheless, if many schools are running a substantial deficit this might indicate a sense among headteachers of the insufficiency of funding. Our analysis of school deficits suggests that the 'deficit crisis' appears to have decreased over time. At the turn of the century the proportion of London schools with deficits was in line with the national average but London schools' deficits were on average 40 per cent higher than outside London (DfE, 2013d). Between 2000 and 2010 the proportion of schools in deficit dropped across the country and in London. In London the size of the deficits also dropped markedly – from 68 per cent above national average in 2001/02 to 27 per cent above in 2011/12.

The evidence suggests that the financial resources available to London schools increased significantly during the first decade of the century, and London schools were funded more generously than others. The 'deficit crisis' receded during these years. While it is wrong to claim a direct causal link between increased spending and educational outcomes, the sense that schools were sufficiently funded constitutes an important threshold point or precondition for transformation.

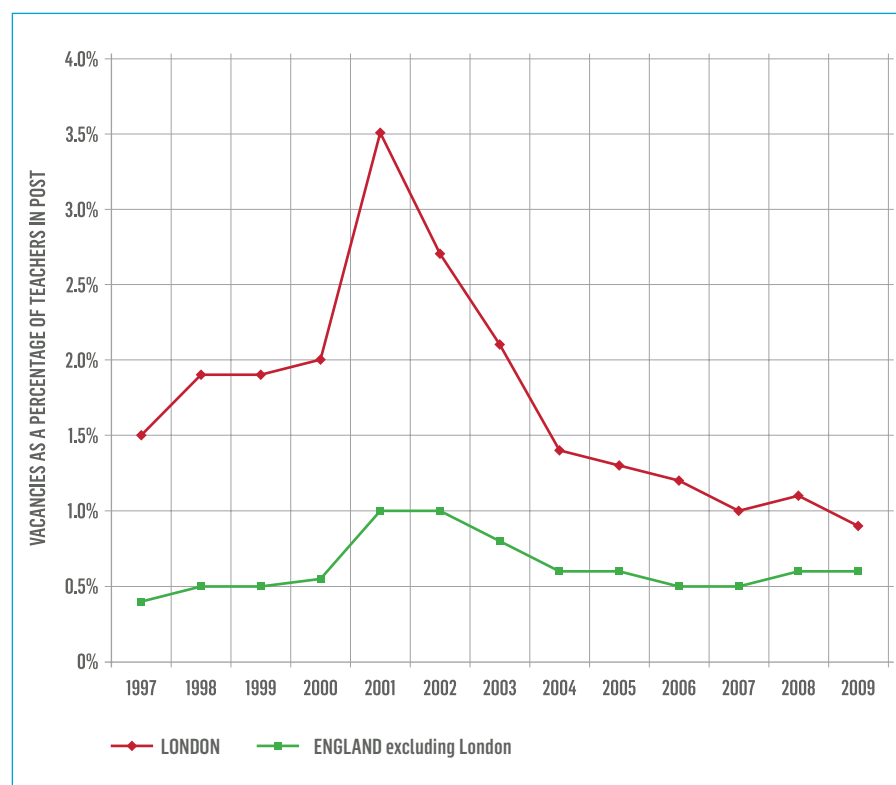
RECRUITMENT OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Filling teacher vacancies has been a problem in London for many years. The issue reached critical proportions by 2001, when the vacancy rate hit a peak of 3.5 per cent (5.2 per cent in inner London), significantly above the rate for the rest of England (1.0 per cent) (DCSF, 2009b). The problem was most acute in those underperforming schools most in need of good teachers. One of our interviewees recalled this sense of crisis at the turn of the century:

'When I think back to one or two of them, Phoenix High School, when it was in special measures, and William Atkinson [was the headteacher], it was a nightmare school. He couldn't attract enough staff to even put one person in front of every class, but he was determined that he knew how to turn it round [...] Now of course he can recruit teachers without any problem, because they want to come to a successful school.'

BY 2004 VACANCY RATES HAD RETURNED TO THE SAME LEVEL AS IN 1999 AND REMAINED AROUND 0.5 PERCENTAGE POINTS LOWER THAN IN THE LATE 1990S THROUGHOUT THE LATE 2000S.

Figure 3.9: Advertised vacancy rates in school 1997–2009



Source: DCSF, 2009b

The problems at the turn of the century were particularly acute in inner London. In 2001 a Greater London Assembly Report suggested that the inner London vacancy rate was more than double the outer London rate (2001: 17), confirmed by DCSF figures which show that the rate was 5.2 per cent in inner London and 2.6 per cent in outer London (DCSF, 2009b). For headteachers at the time this was a source of considerable frustration. As Ross and Hutchings note, only two-thirds of posts at the turn of the century were filled at the first round of recruitment and schools reported that about half of the posts were 'difficult to fill' (that is three or fewer applications), and a fifth 'very difficult' (Ross and Hutchings, 2003: 22-33). Many of the recruited teachers were hired on a temporary basis: seven per cent of secondary posts were filled by supply teachers (*ibid.*). The situation was worse in the schools and boroughs that served the most disadvantaged pupils, with a statistically significant correlation between secondary schools' GCSE performance and the ease of recruitment (Hutchings *et al.*, 2000: 82-89). A Strategy Unit report in 2001 stated that vacancy rates were seven times the national average in the most deprived London boroughs (Strategy Unit, 2001: 92).

The problem at the turn of the century was extreme, but it was also short-lived. By 2004 vacancy rates had returned to the same level as in 1999 and remained around 0.5 percentage points lower than in the late 1990s throughout the late 2000s.

Figure 3.10: Teacher turnover rates 2002–2009



Source: DCSF, 2010

Not only was recruitment challenging at the turn of the century, but retention was also problematic. The retention situation improved over the following years. In 2004 London had a 21.4 per cent turnover rate⁴ compared to 18.3 per cent nationally (DCSF, 2006). As with recruitment, the turnover problem in inner London was more marked than in outer London; for example in 1997/98, inner London teacher turnover was 2.5 percentage points higher than the equivalent figure for outer London (Bradon *et al.*, 2002). Teacher turnover rates improved during the second half of the decade. By 2007 the level of teacher turnover in London was broadly in line with the national average.

CRISIS IN RECRUITMENT OF SCHOOL LEADERS

London schools have long found it harder to recruit headteachers compared to other regions in terms of the supply of school leaders (as measured by re-advertisement rates). One of our interviewees, who had studied leader shortages as part of a Teacher Training Agency project at the end of the 1990s described the situation at the start of the century:

'There was a shortage of leadership: [and a] big shortage of teachers in the middle. If you just look at the age range of teachers in London, then although the age profile of teachers all together at that time was sort of humped like that: you had more younger and more older and a gap in the middle, but London had an extreme gap in the middle.' (Academic)

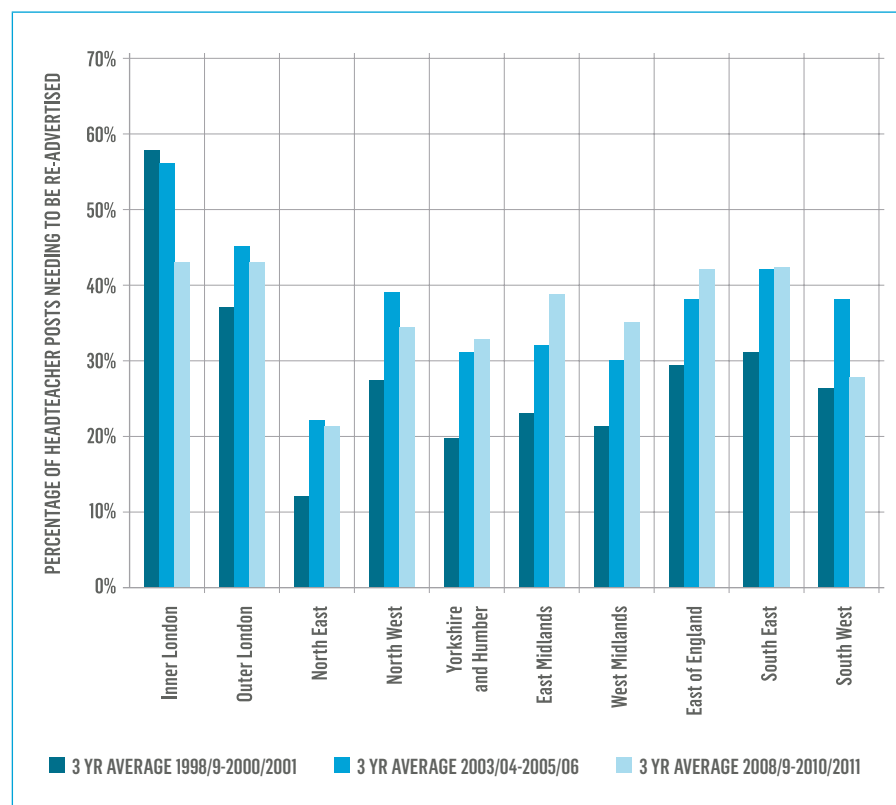
NOT ONLY WAS RECRUITMENT CHALLENGING AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, BUT RETENTION WAS ALSO PROBLEMATIC.

⁴ The number of full-time teachers in the region who leave their job and move to another job in another school or industry



Her view, echoed by several other interviewees, was that talented young teachers often began their working lives in London but then left to pursue their careers elsewhere creating the 'extreme gap in the middle' and thereby contributing to a long-term leadership succession challenge.

Figure 3.11: Headteacher posts needing to be re-advertised 1998-2011



Source: Howson and Sprigade, 2012: 13

Our analysis of data from Howson and Sprigade, as seen in figure 3.11, demonstrates an interesting trend in headteacher recruitment. As with the supply of teachers, differences in the supply of leaders between London and other regions have narrowed in recent years – while recruitment of leaders has become more difficult elsewhere in most of England, it has become easier in inner London (and the percentage increase in re-advertising in outer London has been smaller than in other regions). Re-advertising rates in inner London were previously up to three times the rate of other regions but although inner and outer London continue to have the highest re-advertisement rates, they are now almost on a par with the South East and East of England.

The evidence for both teachers and school leaders is consistent: there was a crisis in the recruitment of both teachers and headteachers at the start of the century. This was particularly acute in inner London. The problem was a barrier to the transformation of quality: it would have been hard for London schools to improve as much as they have if the vacancy rate had remained at its early 2000s peak. The teacher shortage problem has now been dramatically reduced which makes it easier for schools in inner London to succeed.

Vacancy rates in London have generally remained higher than the national average and so the capital does not enjoy an advantage in the ‘absolute supply’ of teacher and leaders. It would therefore be wrong to argue that London schools are blessed with a particularly ample supply of school leaders and teachers. However, the recruitment situation has moved from crisis point to one where the challenges are more in line with those faced elsewhere. The achievement of a degree of control and stability in the field of recruitment constituted another ‘threshold point’ that created an environment conducive to transformation. By itself this does not explain the transformation – London’s vacancy rates are no better than those throughout England, but the end of the recruitment problem was an important enabling factor in the London story.



SCHOOL BUILDINGS

Many of London’s secondary school buildings were in a poor state by the late 1990s. This was part of a national problem across the state school estate. In 2000, 80 per cent of school buildings had exceeded their design life (Strategy Unit, 2001) and substantial capital funding was needed. In 2003 the government announced the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme with an aspiration to rebuild half of the secondary schools of England and to remodel or refurbish the rest between 2005 and 2020. The programme was axed by the new coalition government in 2010. London schools were significant beneficiaries of the programme. In 2005 the DfES stated that £1.3 billion was being invested in rebuilding London schools (DfES, 2005a: 1). Capital investment was also a key feature of the early academies programme, with sponsors making contributions of around £2million per school, much of which was devoted to enhancing the school environment.

There is no conclusive evidence from the wider literature that investment in school buildings will lead to better educational outcomes (Higgins *et al.*, 2005). Opinion is divided on the impact of BSF and other initiatives to improve the physical environment, and there is certainly no compelling evidence that the new school buildings were a direct cause of better outcomes. The NAO stated in 2009 that it was ‘too early to measure BSF’s effectiveness in improving the quality of education’ (NAO, 2009: 9). Following on from the controversial decision to stop BSF in 2010 there has been a fierce debate about the effectiveness of the programme. When Michael Gove scrapped the scheme in July 2010, he told Parliament that BSF had been characterised by ‘massive overspends, tragic delays, botched construction projects and needless bureaucracy.’ He added that there was ‘no firm evidence’ of improved results as a result of school renovation (Vasagar, 2012). A report commissioned by Partnership for Schools – the agency that managed BSF – told a much more positive story of schools where attendance and GCSE results had improved (PfS, 2010).

This range of opinions was reflected in our interviews with key stakeholders who expressed diametrically opposed views:

'Research that's shown it doesn't make a difference is tosh. You know, categorically. You're far more likely to get a better school in the new building.' (Interviewee)

'You can do this in a cardboard box if you have got great people.' (Interviewee)

Our discussion with London teachers in focus groups elicited unprompted positive comments about the impact of BSF. Teachers saw new buildings not as a mechanistic cause of improvement but as a symbol of renewal and a useful resource for professionals who were keen to transform outcomes for students.

Our view is that the substantial investment in the buildings of London secondary schools, while not a direct cause of the city's transformation, did constitute another enabling factor. For some teachers and headteachers it does appear to have been a positive motivating factor. Put another way, professionals were at the very least less likely to blame the school fabric as a cause of underachievement and this assisted in the development of a new 'no-excuses' culture.

SUMMARY

The remarkable improvement in London schools cannot be explained away with reference to external non-educational factors such as the changing socio-economic profile of the city (or gentrification), the distinctive ethnic profile of the capital or the range of economic and cultural opportunities provided by London. There is some truth to the idea that London has an advantage over other regions, but the London advantage does not explain the dramatically improved outcomes of the last decade.

Some educational factors (not including school effectiveness factors) did play a part in creating the enabling conditions for transformation. Changes in funding, teacher and headteacher recruitment and the quality of school buildings all contributed to the achievement of a 'threshold point' of sufficiency in terms of financial, human and infrastructural resources. These changes may have been necessary but they were not sufficient to explain the transformation. Internal changes to the effectiveness of teaching and leadership were the most likely prime cause of the transformation and we explore this possible explanation in the following chapters.

THERE IS SOME TRUTH TO THE IDEA THAT LONDON HAS AN ADVANTAGE OVER OTHER REGIONS, BUT THE LONDON ADVANTAGE DOES NOT EXPLAIN THE DRAMATICALLY IMPROVED OUTCOMES OF THE LAST DECADE.



CHAPTER 4:

SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE

The first part of this chapter focuses on specific interventions, policies and programmes that took place in London during the 2000s and addresses their impact on the improvement journey of the capital. The second part presents the common themes that link the reforms together – these include the use of data, accountability and professional development.

This chapter explores the nature and impact of the school improvement activities – both support and challenge – that have been provided to London schools over the last decade. It is divided into two parts: a consideration of the impact of different interventions and a reflection on some of the common themes that bind together the distinct interventions.

The first part of the chapter will focus on specific interventions, policies and programmes that took place in London during the 2000s and address their impact on the improvement journey experienced in the capital, specifically:

- London Challenge
- Academisation
- Teach First
- the role of the local authorities.

The second part of the chapter shifts from a focus on individual approaches to question instead whether there are underlying factors which cut across the more clearly defined interventions. Firmly rooted in the evidence gathered from interviewees, the section considers:

- the use of data
- a culture of high accountability
- professional development activities.

This chapter will begin by concentrating on the extent to which different interventions can be assessed given the methodological challenges previously discussed. It will then focus on London Challenge, a complex series of policies that were jointly branded and followed from 2003 until 2011 (extended to Manchester and the Black Country and re-branded as ‘City Challenge’ from 2008 to 2011). In particular this chapter will look at the priority areas and schools (the so-called ‘Keys to Success’ schools) that were targeted as part of London Challenge, the professional development activities that the policy encompassed and the leadership strategies that were integral to the Challenge programme. Part 1 will also consider three other key school improvement factors: the academies programme, the impact of Teach First and the role played by a number of the LAs in London. While these three approaches were all, to a greater or lesser extent, national issues, they affected London disproportionately, especially during the early part of the decade (e.g. Teach First was launched in London at first, and only spread to other areas later).

There was a transformation in both the view of and use of data during the 2000s, with interviewees suggesting that as well as professional bodies such as Ofsted emphasising a need for schools to be data-driven, school leaders themselves began using data to drive school improvement internally. Part 2 of this chapter will concentrate on the use of data, and the shift in perceptions in London that ultimately led to a culture of high accountability among London's schools and targeted support and challenge. This part of the chapter will also consider the professional development activities that were present in all of the reforms discussed in part 1, and take a holistic view (backed up by evidence from the interviewees) as to the impact this had in London.



PART 1: ASSESSING THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT INTERVENTIONS

Identifying the causation for London improvement is complicated by the fact that since 2000, London schools have been subject to both simultaneous 'London reforms' and have been involved in continuing national school improvement programmes – most notably the Excellence in the Cities programme, workforce remodelling (with a dramatic increase in the deployment of teaching assistants), the National Strategies for pedagogical improvement and the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme which involved the rebuilding and substantial refurbishment of secondary schools. Not only did these national reforms introduce further variables into the web of causation but the impact assessment of these reforms was also impaired by an absence of RCT evaluation. Teasing out the specific causal contribution of London reforms to improved outcomes is therefore highly problematic. It is too simplistic to suggest that these wider reforms – as national initiatives – are irrelevant to the London transformation purely because they were available in other parts of England. This ignores the possibility that the interaction between aspects of these national reforms and aspects of the London-specific context contributed to a favourable environment for London transformation.

We saw examples of this interplay between national reform and local context in our interviews both with key stakeholders and teacher focus groups. Our focus group discussions with teachers who had lived through the London transformation elicited, unprompted, several favourable comments about the way Building Schools for the Future provided a catalyst for a sense of renewal, optimism and pride on the part of teachers and students. In a similar fashion, one interviewee was keen to recognise the impact of workforce remodelling in the distinctive context of Tower Hamlets. The reform brought a large new cadre of teaching assistants into schools. In Tower Hamlets, these people were often drawn from the local Bangladeshi community, and this made possible a better connection and sense of common cause between the schools and the community. It should be noted that work by Blatchford and colleagues has questioned the impact of teaching assistants and support staff on pupil outcomes, finding a 'consistent negative relationship between the amount of support a pupil received and the progress they made in English and mathematics' (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009). It is therefore important not to place too much emphasis on this reform measure, either on a national or local (London) level.

Those responsible for evaluating this range of reforms have, for the most part, been fully aware of the limits to the causation claims that can be made based on their research. In her final overview of the London Challenge programme, Hutchings took an extremely positive view of the achievements and progress made. However, she was careful to point out that the assertion that London Challenge had caused improved outcomes was based not on conclusive evidence but 'on the balance of probability' (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a: 38). The NFER evaluation of the London Challenge and City Challenge Leadership strategies was measured in its claims. The overall report expressed very well the anxiety of the academic researchers about the claims that could be made concerning the impact of the reforms. Rudd and his colleagues were keen to point out that while the initiatives were extremely promising and demonstrated 'some statistically significant associations' with improved student performance, the evidence for direct 'causality' was not conclusive (Rudd *et al.*, 2011: 41).

The absence of impact assessment based on the benchmark of an authoritative control group has also characterised the other key London reforms. The academies programme was not designed with a built-in RCT evaluation approach. Similarly, Teach First was not initially subject to rigorous impact evaluation. Teach First began in 2003 but there was for many years no significant quantitative analysis of the programme. More recently both Muijs *et al.* (2010) and Allen and Allnutt (2013) have undertaken retrospective quantitative analysis of links between Teach First participation and improved student achievement. Both studies are encouraging but the researchers have commented on the limits imposed on their studies as a result of the initial design of Teach First. In a blog Rebecca Allen highlighted the policy significance of a lack of attention to quantitative evaluation:

'I think all new education policies should be randomised in their implementation, providing it is possible. Teach First received substantial government funds so has a duty to taxpayers to demonstrate its effectiveness. This was a major failing on the part of civil servants who agreed to fund it [...] Rather than recruit schools from 20 local authorities in London in the first year of the programme, recruitment should have taken place across a randomly drawn lot of deprived schools, or alternatively local authorities should have been randomised into the programme' (Allen, 2013).

THE WHOLE WORLD IS INTERESTED IN THE STORY OF HOW A GREAT CITY SUCH AS LONDON HAS APPARENTLY TRANSFORMED ITS GOVERNMENT-FUNDED SCHOOLS.

Allen's argument is compelling. The evidence of impact for both London Challenge and Teach First is extremely promising. The whole world is interested in the story of how a great city such as London has apparently transformed its government-funded schools. However, the power of the London story on a national and global stage is weakened by the absence of definitive evaluation. Since 2010 the government has encouraged the use of RCTs and other robust quantitative approaches in the assessment of teaching methods. The work, for example, of the Education Endowment Foundation is entirely based on a view that in education we should use teaching methods that are justified by robust RCT-based evidence of effectiveness. If this is appropriate for classroom practice then it must surely be applicable to the assessment of system-level reforms such as those used in London: Keys to Success, National Leaders of Education, academisation and Teach First. One of the major lessons from London is the need for better evaluation design for major interventions of this kind.

TOWARDS AN EXPLANATION OF IMPACT

In the absence of definitive impact data, we can only construct a tentative explanation of impact. As we shall see below, there is some evidence of the positive effect of several interventions, but this has limitations and combination effects are critical. For example, while London Challenge made a big difference in many secondary schools the work of more effective London LAs, the process of academisation and the impact of Teach First all appear to have contributed too.

The sense that there was a complex interplay of interventions was articulated by some of our interviewees:

'It's [...] cumulative [...] [a] combinatory effect of things [...] of which probably London Challenge [...] was the most significant, but there were a range of other factors as well [...] Tower Hamlets [for example] wasn't about London Challenge [...] So it's [...] a combination or it's cumulative, a rolling snowball of interventions and policies.' (Educationalist)

One educationalist identified four 'big strands' that could explain the improvement in London's schools:

'There's one which was the potential demographic change [...] Could this have just happened anyway as a result of an increasingly aspirational population? [...] So that's the first. The second is the [...] peer-to-peer support system leadership stuff that came up from the London Leadership Strategy, with heads and senior leaders and schools working together. The third is Teach First; and the fourth is the academisation programme.' (Educationalist)

The exact causal mix varied from borough to borough because at this level there were variations in the level of involvement in London Challenge, variations in the effectiveness of LA activity, variations in the level of academisation and variations in the level of participation in Teach First.

We interviewed a politician who had played a role in the design of the approach to the reform of London schools. He made it clear that there was no simple blueprint, but rather a pluralistic approach that made, for example, differentiated use of academies.

'We didn't say, even to the five key boroughs that we identified, we didn't say "You have to have lots of academies". Hackney and Southwark did. Lambeth was sort of in the middle and then Islington and Haringey had fewer, certainly in that early period [...] Of course, the Tower Hamlets and Camdens of this world didn't want to touch academies at all. So there was never that sense of one particular policy is the way you're going to bring about improvement.'

While different schools at borough level were being supported in different ways by different people, there was also a degree of consistency about the educational thinking behind the key sources of support. Many of the major interventions were driven by an energetic commitment to the idea of ‘no excuses’ for underachievement, a preoccupation with data and leadership capacity and the development of a united, collaborative and empowered workforce. These common themes will be explored in more detail in the second part of this section.

THE IMPACT OF LONDON CHALLENGE ACTIVITIES ON PRIORITY SCHOOLS AND PRIORITY LOCAL AUTHORITY AREAS

While recognising the limitations of the approach to impact assessment, objective evaluation of London Challenge activities reveals a positive and encouraging picture. Hutchings and her colleagues in their concluding evaluation of London Challenge (and the two other City Challenge projects in Greater Manchester and the Black Country 2008–2011) were extremely positive about the educational outcomes of London Challenge by the time the project ended in 2011 (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a). Across the board the metrics were impressive. Over the final three years of London Challenge 2008–2011:

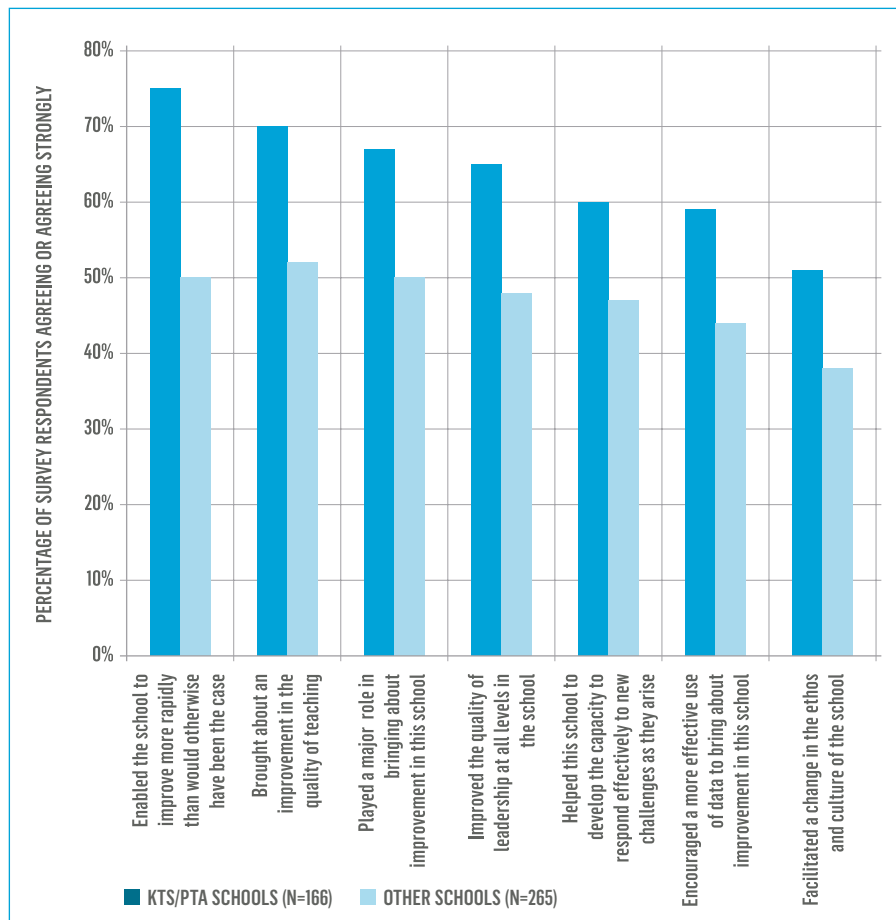
- the number of schools below the floor target fell at a greater rate than the national rate
- the gap between the attainment of London students eligible for free school meals and other students narrowed at both primary and secondary levels
- the percentage of schools achieving Good or Outstanding grades from Ofsted increased.

Hutchings *et al.* considered the rate of improvement in the priority schools, known as Key to Success (KTS) schools. The KTS programme provided tailored support to schools involved, brokered by a London Challenge Adviser. Similar programmes were also provided in Greater Manchester and the Black Country, although the intervention in the Black Country was known as Pathways to Achievement (PTA). In London, 119 secondary schools were involved between 2003 and 2008, and 75 secondary schools from 2008 to 2011 (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a: 40). Hutchings and her colleagues showed that the ‘increase in the percentage of secondary pupils reaching the expected level (five A*–C GCSEs including English and mathematics) was higher in KTS/PTA schools than the national figure (17.2 per cent compared to 10.1 per cent)’ (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a: 41) and that Keys to Success Schools increased school-level achievement of KS4 targets (2003–2011) by two per cent per year (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012b: 47).

Her team also compared responses from a survey of headteachers from City Challenge schools that were part of KTS and those that were not. The data combined responses both from London Challenge schools with the City Challenge schools from the Black Country and Greater Manchester. City Challenge schools typically were more positive across a range of key indicators, as is shown in the following figures (figures 4.1 and 4.2).

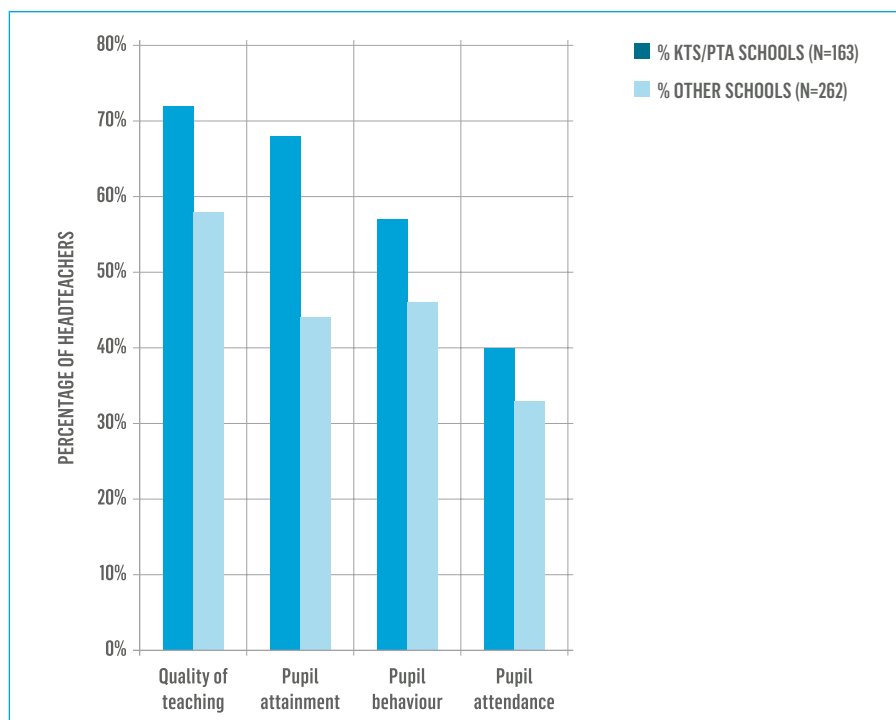
WHILE RECOGNISING THE LIMITATIONS OF THE APPROACH TO IMPACT ASSESSMENT, OBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF LONDON CHALLENGE ACTIVITIES REVEALS A POSITIVE AND ENCOURAGING PICTURE.

Figure 4.1: Outcomes of involvement in City Challenge programmes



Source: Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a

Figure 4.2: The extent to which headteachers thought their school had improved

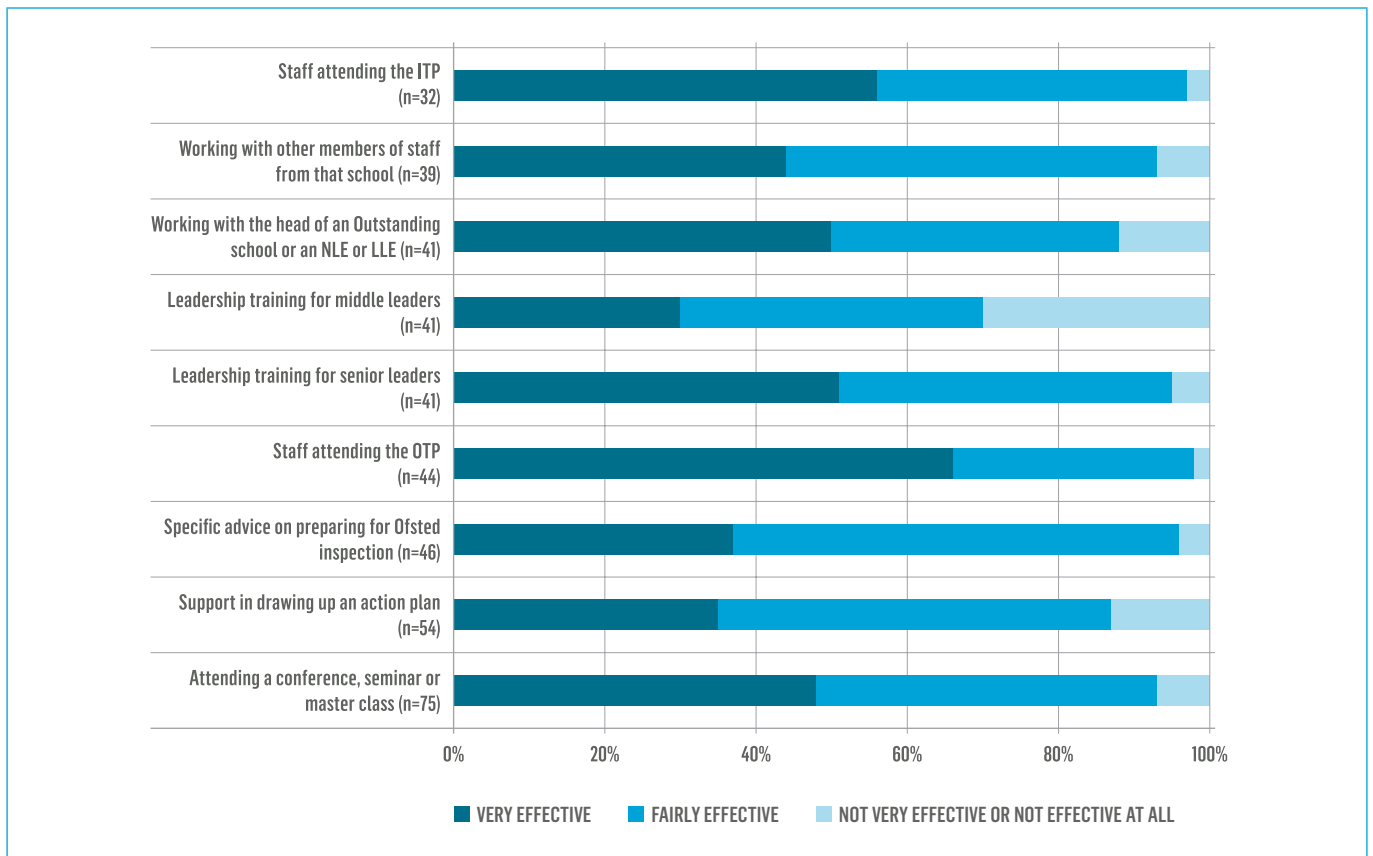


Source: Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a

THE IMPACT OF LONDON CHALLENGE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

There is no authoritative evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of the different professional development activities that were organised by London Challenge. However there is evidence that programmes were perceived to have an impact. Hutchings *et al.* (2012a) surveyed schools involved in the City Challenge about their experiences of various professional development programmes. The City Challenge schools were in London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country, but all the programmes involved were developed and delivered in London from 2003 onwards. The following table summarises headteacher views of the relative effectiveness of different forms of professional development.

Figure 4.3: Perceived usefulness of different professional development plans



Source: Hutchings *et al.*, 2012a: 70

While most forms of support were considered useful, the Improving Teacher Programme (ITP) and Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP) were particularly valued. Ofsted (2010) explained its view of the success of these programmes:

‘Working with teachers from other schools with similar challenges, outside the confines of their home school, enabled frank discussions of strengths and weaknesses in their own teaching, free from concerns about performance management or the disapproval of peers. In particular, a high proportion of time was dedicated to reflecting on and reviewing their own teaching, and their understanding of pedagogy. This taught teachers to become reflective practitioners and they began to share that skill with their colleagues at their home school, under the guidance of the school mentor.’ (Ofsted, 2010)

LONDON CHALLENGE PLACED A PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AT SCHOOL LEVEL.

The power of the ITP and OTP training was identified by our interviewees as a particular strength of London Challenge. The importance of ‘seeing it happen’ was emphasised by interviewees who recounted examples of teachers changing their expectations as a result of exposure to contrasting practice; for example one interviewee said:

‘[One teacher had] been on the Improving Teacher programme, but she’d also had a coach from that school who came into her school, and she said the real thing was seeing this person teaching her class, because it’s so easy to say “Oh well, it works there but it wouldn’t work with my kids”. And seeing it work with her kids, and seeing that her six-year-olds could write at length and be excited about it, had made her excited about it, and so she was now excited about teaching.’ (Headteacher)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LONDON CHALLENGE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

London Challenge placed a particular emphasis on the development of leadership capacity at school level. Strategies were identified for the improvement of leadership proficiency and these were developed in a partnership between London Challenge and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The contract for the evaluation of these Leadership Strategies was awarded to the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which produced both an overall report on the three City Challenge areas (Rudd *et al.*, 2011) and a supporting paper on developments in London (Poet and Kettlewell, 2011).

The NFER evaluation was effusive in its praise for this aspect of London Challenge. The NFER researchers were particularly impressed by the Teaching School concept and the use of serving headteachers as National Leaders of Education (NLEs) or Local Leaders of Education (LLEs). These two related initiatives were described as the most innovative and the most successful aspects of City Challenge, and both began as part of London Challenge.

Rudd and his colleagues suggested that London Challenge had brought about nothing less than a paradigm shift.

*‘In some ways the Leadership Strategies represents a new form of school improvement. Previous models have tended to rely, at least in part, upon an outsider’s input, a consultant or an expert advising the school on how to improve. There was a tendency for initiatives to be ‘done to’ schools rather than to be ‘done with’ them. The key change, evident in both Teaching Schools and NLEs, has been the importance of peer-to-peer relationships and a stronger emphasis on ‘real’ practitioner-based school contexts, with school staff responsible for the delivery of school improvement strategies at all levels.’ (Rudd *et al.*, 2011: 41)*

Today there is bipartisan support for the idea of a 'sector-led' approach to school improvement and the concept of 'a self-improving school system', within which schools, rather than external agencies, lead school improvement. This notion, that a community of schools could be responsible for its own collective development, depends in very substantial measure on the pioneering work of London Challenge and the NCSL. Influenced by the work of writers such as Michael Fullan, London Challenge explored the concept of the 'system leader', an experienced headteacher with the ability and opportunity not only to lead one school but also to contribute to the leadership of the system of schools.

Rudd and his colleagues endorsed the success of London Challenge's emphasis on system leadership. Significantly, they concluded that the work of headteachers as consultants to groups of other schools had benefits for the 'home' school of the headteachers: 'Inviting staff from other schools to visit the "host" schools encouraged constant self-evaluation and a more critical appraisal of the processes and teaching approaches they used' (Rudd *et al.*, 2011: 39).

How did the paradigm shift come about? We interviewed a former headteacher who played several significant roles in the management of the Leadership Strategies. For him success was a question of mindset, based on a newly energised sense of moral purpose and the mechanics of knowledge mobilisation. For this interviewee, system leadership required a new conceptualisation of networking. London headteachers had networked prior to London Challenge but the focus had been on collective action rather than on knowledge sharing. He described the baseline situation at the start of the century: 'So headteachers met as a secondary group of heads [...] to discuss... how to fight the local authority, how to get more money, but not about teaching and learning support groups for one another.' He described how the idea of school-to-school knowledge transfer depended upon building a new kind of 'moral capital' so that successful schools felt that they had a duty to assist other schools in difficulty. He also highlighted the significance of the 'families of schools' data as a practical tool that could be used to identify those schools that had effective practice in very specific areas of provision. The interviewee noted that he was influenced by the non-educational literature relating to knowledge transfer in business and was committed to the development of a more evidence-based reflective leadership. He went on to explain the importance of training for those outstanding headteachers who became system leaders, emphasising that headteacher engagement was the key to accessing specialist talent inside the high-performing schools. He contrasted this successful approach with the relative failure of the earlier outreach activities of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs), which were impaired by the absence of headteacher 'buy-in'.

LONDON HEADTEACHERS HAD NETWORKED PRIOR TO LONDON CHALLENGE BUT THE FOCUS HAD BEEN ON COLLECTIVE ACTION RATHER THAN ON KNOWLEDGE SHARING.

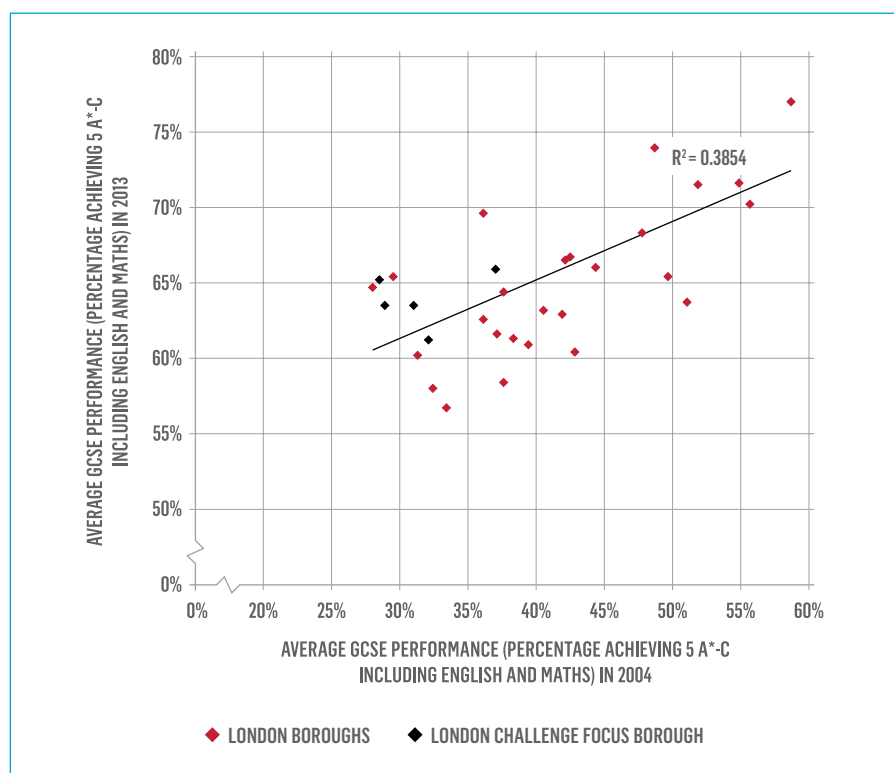


IMPROVEMENT IN THE KEY BOROUGHES

In its first phase, London Challenge targeted particularly intensive support at five key boroughs (Southwark, Lambeth, Hackney, Islington and Haringey). The initial London Challenge prospectus stated that these were the five boroughs in which the highest proportion of Year 6 pupils left the borough at the end of Key Stage 2 (DfES, 2003: 20). One of our interviewees stated that these five local authorities were identified at the time as ‘failing boroughs’.

The following graph shows the performance of London boroughs with London Challenge’s five focus boroughs in black. Boroughs towards the left had the lower GCSE performance in 2004 and, as can be seen, the focus boroughs are generally far to the left, demonstrating that London Challenge was indeed targeting areas of low performance.

Figure 4.4: Expected and actual performance of London boroughs in 2013 based upon their 2004 results



Source: DfE, 2013a and DfES, 2005b

The line in figure 4.4 shows the boroughs’ expected 2013 performance based on their 2004 score ($R^2 = 0.39$). Dots above the line show boroughs that have improved more than one would expect, whereas those below the line improved less than would be expected. The mean improvement in results in most of the London Challenge focus boroughs between 2004 and 2013 was significantly greater than in other London boroughs.

Another source of evidence as to whether targeted support for improvement impacted differentially on the focus boroughs is parental satisfaction: parents were more likely to report improvement in the quality of their child’s schooling over the previous 12 months in these boroughs compared to London as a whole (Wiseman and Dent, 2007: 63).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LONDON CHALLENGE, KTS AND ACADEMISATION

When London Challenge began in 2003 two key interventions were targeted by the government at the lowest-performing schools: KTS and academies. Today these are seen by some as quite distinct, even competing, approaches but academisation was presented as one of the features of the approach in the original London Challenge prospectus (DfES, 2003). Some commentators have provided a narrative of KTS and academies as if they were quite separate policies and some interviewees tended to do the same. Some, for example, spoke as if a school that ultimately became an academy constituted a failure for London Challenge. Others responsible for the management of academies saw only a limited connection between their own work and London Challenge. The view that KTS and academisation of London schools were distinct policy initiatives is not accurate historically. In 2013 Hutchings and Mansaray stated that the plan to create academy schools to replace the lowest-performing schools was a feature of London Challenge from the start. The policymakers who created London Challenge also advocated academies ‘for schools which failed to improve and which had lost the confidence of parents in their local communities’ (Hutchings and Mansaray, 2013: 7).

There were exceptions to the idea of separate narratives for KTS and academies in the recollections of our key stakeholders, and two interviewees emphasised KTS and academies as linked policies and part of an integrated ‘carrot and stick’ approach to school improvement. One was a former minister from the Labour government who described academisation as an integral part of London Challenge: ‘Michael Gove [...] will praise London Challenge but he will talk about London Challenge as though it was only academies. Equally, others will talk about London Challenge and deny that academies were part of it. The truth is academies were an important part but they weren’t the only part.’

Another senior figure who was central to London education for many years spoke in very positive terms about the role of the academies in ensuring the success of London Challenge. Using the language that was common during London Challenge he refers to academisation as a ‘structural solution’. For him the very existence of a possible structural solution via academies had the effect of concentrating the mind and generating improvement even in schools that did not ultimately become academies:

‘I don’t think you should underestimate the importance of the academies, their input into London, because it did mean that where there needed to be a structural solution, there was a structural solution available. I contributed to a programme where we had some Swedish visitors two or three weeks ago from the ministry and the press of Sweden, who had an inspection system not dissimilar to ours. They have a category of special measures but they don’t put schools in it, even though they’ve got poor schools because there is no structural alternative to the school. I think it’s very important that that avenue was opened.’ (Senior Educationalist)

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ACADEMIES PROGRAMME

The Labour government's sponsored academies programme ran from 2003 to 2010. Findings on the impact of these academies are contested, vary between earlier and later academies and do not generally differentiate for academies in London or elsewhere. Stephen Machin of the LSE has carried out several studies of the impact of academies in partnership with different colleagues (Machin and Wilson, 2009; Machin and Vernoit, 2011; Machin and Silva, 2013). His most recent conclusion is that schools that became academies between 2002 and 2007 were beneficial for 'students in the top half of the ability distribution' particularly the top 20 per cent. He found little evidence that academies improved the performance of students in the bottom 20 per cent of the ability range. Machin could find no evidence that the schools that converted to academy status between 2007 and 2009 'had any beneficial effects on pupils of any ability'.

The National Audit Office (NAO) has also undertaken a sequence of studies of the academies programme (NAO, 2007; 2010; 2012) and has reached somewhat different conclusions from those of Machin. In 2007 NAO reported that, overall, when compared to other schools, academies had made good progress in terms of improved GCSE results. The NAO concluded that performance was rising faster than in local authority maintained schools (NAO, 2007). Three years later the NAO again reported a very positive picture and described academies' performance as typically impressive, with rates of improvement that were better than their predecessor schools (NAO, 2010). In the 2012 report the NAO was more guarded. The focus in 2012 was on the dramatic expansion of the academies programme after the election of 2010. The NAO concluded that it was too early to assess the educational impact of the massive increase in the number of academies (NAO, 2012).

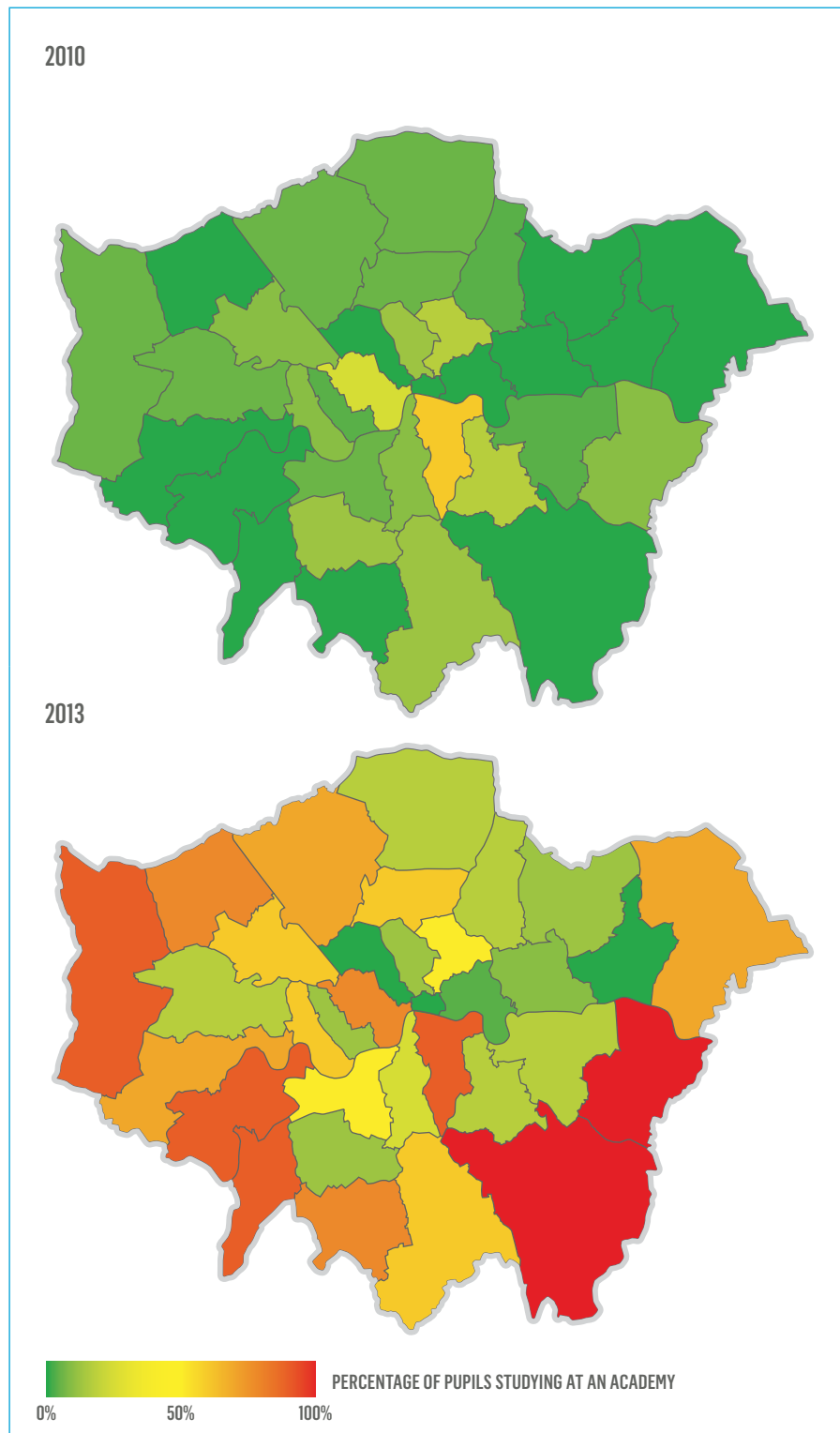
Both Machin and the NAO used quasi-experimental methods in order to arrive at their different conclusions about the academies programme 2003–2010. This difference of opinion by reputable researchers highlights the need for more robust evaluation to be an integral part of the initial design of major educational reforms. The importance of this in terms of public accountability is clear when the sums of money are considered. The NAO calculated that across England the additional cost (not including the running costs) of the academies programme was £288 million (NAO, 2010).

THE DANGER OF GENERALISATIONS ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMIES

The evidence may not be entirely clear. However, it does seem evident that generalisations about academies can be misleading and simplistic. The rate of academisation varied dramatically across different London boroughs. The DfE schools census for January 2013 showed that only three per cent of secondary students were educated in academies in Camden, while 85 per cent of students in Southwark attended academies. In outer London the range was even greater: from zero per cent of students in Barking and Dagenham attending secondary academies to 100 per cent of students in Bexley (DfE, 2013b); see figure 4.5.

After the election of 2010 the academies programme changed spectacularly in terms of its scale. At a national level 203 academies were created between 2003 and 2010; by September 2012 there were 2,309 academies. The new ‘converter’ academies were significantly different to the ‘sponsored’ academies of the first phase.

Figure 4.5: Change in number of pupils studying at a secondary academy, 2010–2013



Source: DfE, 2013b and DfE, 2010

IN ADDITION TO THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF ACADEMIES IN DIRECTLY IMPROVING PERFORMANCE AS A RESULT OF THEIR ACADEMY STATUS, SOME INTERVIEWEES SUGGESTED THAT ANOTHER FUNCTION OF ACADEMIES MAY HAVE BEEN TO APPLY PRESSURE FOR IMPROVEMENT ACROSS THE SYSTEM THROUGH THE EXISTENCE OF AN ALTERNATIVE FORM OF GOVERNANCE.

The performance of academies also varied. Hill pointed out in 2010 that groups or chains of academies were typically performing at a better level than single free-standing academies (Hill, 2010). Cook has taken this segmentation further and has analysed the variation between different academy chains. Using an assessment of GCSE performance based on the points scored by all students rather than the A*-C measure Cook concluded that there was very wide disparity in the performance of different chains, from 'spectacular' to 'struggling':

'The Bourne Family Trust is spectacular – two grades better in four subjects. Its only school in the sample, Mossbourne, really is that good. Sir Michael Wilshaw, now the Chief Inspector, ran a spectacular success [...] [But] some, if you look, are struggling' (Cook, 2013b).

Although, as figure 4.5 shows, there is wide variation in the proportion of secondary pupils studying at an academy across different London boroughs, it would be wrong to try and link this with attainment data: converter academies (largely responsible for the increase in academy numbers since 2010) must normally already be performing well before conversion (DfE, 2014b).

THE INDIRECT INFLUENCE OF THE ACADEMIES PROGRAMME

In addition to the potential role of academies in directly improving performance as a result of their academy status, some interviewees suggested that another function of academies may have been to apply pressure for improvement across the system through the existence of an alternative form of governance. One academy leader explained that the schools his chain takes on are those 'where the school has failed and local solutions haven't worked – often over an extended period of time'. In this way, (he argues), academies acted as a backstop, injecting 'new hope, new drive, [a sense that] things are going to be different and a more robust approach to running the school' where 'London Challenge had been involved in and for some reason didn't work or hadn't been involved'. His description of these schools' trajectories casts some light on the process:

'The local authority have had these schools, they had failed, their own solution didn't work... taking them away from that culture and saying you are now part of an independent movement where expectations are different, terms and conditions are different, things are going to be different was a short sharp shock that allowed those schools to change their culture [...] For us though the kind of schools we have taken on and I am sure for ARK and Oasis and the other academy chains that have done it, it has been removing them from the monolithic culture where failure has been accepted.'

Not all local authorities were opposed to academies and attitudes changed over time. The 2008 academies evaluation by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) notes that LAs had become 'generally more positive about the academies programme' (PwC, 2008: 70). Several local authorities embraced academies and argued that they were a useful option that could 'break the existing system'. An interviewee explained:

'By saying that we are not going to have this cosy system where everybody thinks that the school structures are as good as they can be where no new arrangements can come into play. So we will make a determined attempt to create more diversity in the system and try to create an additional push on innovation... A lot of authorities had the savviness when the academies programme was announced, they realised that they either went with it and used it to have their version of it or they would have it forced on them and then they would have no say in it.'

For this respondent the ability to implement academy conversions where necessary therefore played a role in tackling underperformance, and other interviewees agreed that the academies programme played a role in creating a wider momentum for improvement. Another interviewee made the point that academies had influence even where there were few or no academies in the borough. He cited the example of Camden, a local authority with a good reputation over many years, which prided itself on providing such a good service that academies were not necessary:

'Camden, which had no academies, it's not that it was an anti-academy authority [...] but it didn't have any converter academies or schools that had been taken over. It saw its role as being [able] to provide such a good service that none of its schools wanted to be academies.'

In addition to creating academies, under the Education Act 2002 schools were enabled to form federations – more formal partnerships between schools which were an alternative to a school joining a multi-academy trust. This offered a further structural solution to schools in terms of their pursuit of school improvement and was mentioned by some of the interviewees as an alternative way of obtaining support and challenge.

ANOTHER INTERVIEWEE MADE THE POINT THAT ACADEMIES HAD INFLUENCE EVEN WHERE THERE WERE FEW OR NO ACADEMIES IN THE BOROUGH.

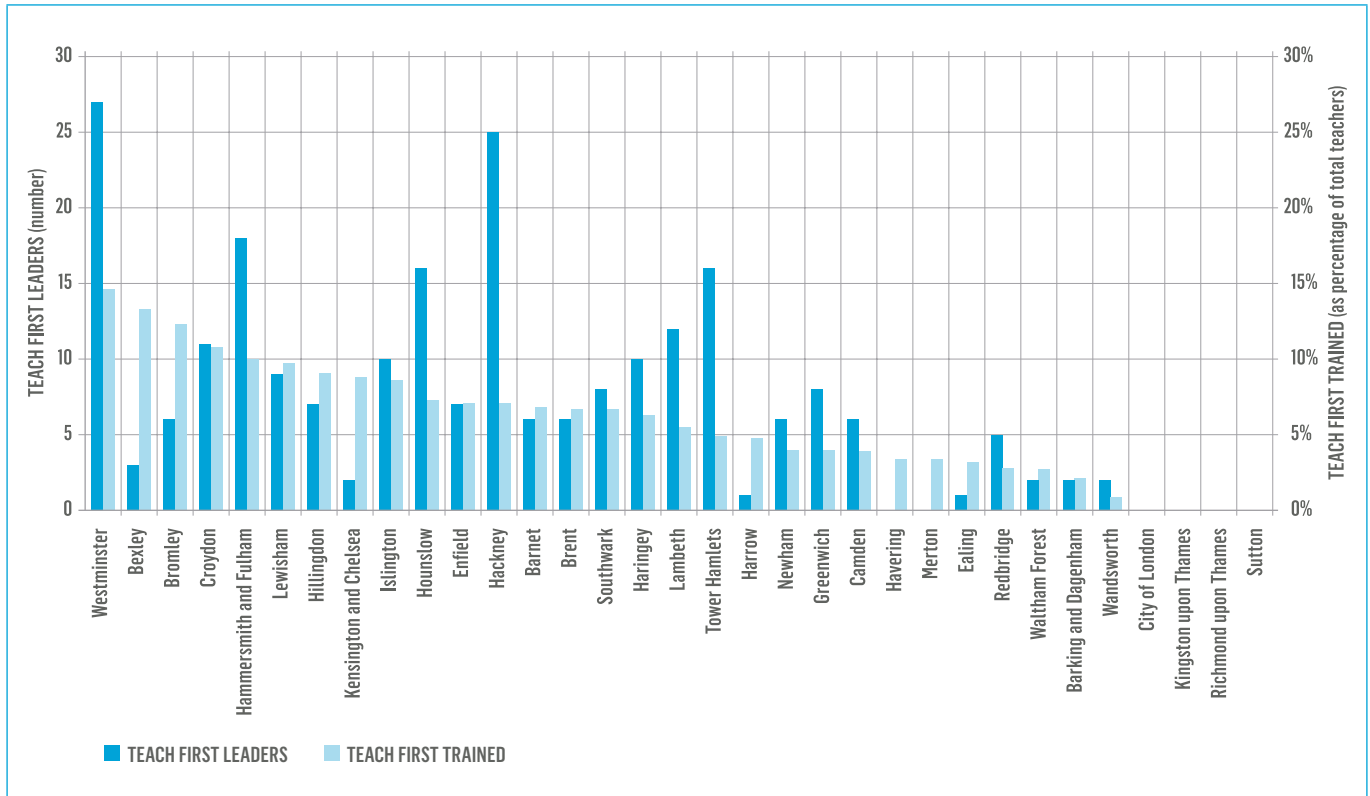


THE CONTRIBUTION OF TEACH FIRST

The Teach First programme began in London in September 2003 and placed 180 participants per cohort in the city's most challenging schools (based on poverty and attainment data). It now places approximately 1,500 participants per year across the country, with around 800 in London schools. It is often argued that the number of teachers coming in through Teach First is too small to be a significant contributory factor to London's success. However, there is evidence to suggest that Teach First made a disproportionate contribution to the transformation of London schools. Since many of the programme's participants remain teaching in London, the number has gradually built up and there is now a body of 1,421 of these teachers in London – amounting to six per cent of the teaching population (Teach First, 2013). Furthermore, they are concentrated in the challenging schools which have seen the greatest improvement.

Like academies, Teach First did not represent a homogeneous pan-London reform. It was skewed towards inner London. Even within inner London the proportion of teachers in each borough who have come through the Teach First programme varies considerably. There are some successful boroughs with relatively few Teach First staff, so clearly, transformation is not necessarily dependent on having Teach First teachers. However, in the boroughs where they can be found in high concentrations, like Westminster (where 15 per cent of teachers have come through the programme), they constitute an influential element of the workforce.

Figure 4.6: Teach First teachers in London (by borough)



Source: Teach First, 2013

Teach First may have contributed to an increase in the proportion of new teachers who had attended a Russell Group university or who held a top degree. However, this was not the benefit most of our interviewees associated with the programme; almost all interviewees emphasised the role of Teach First teachers in altering school culture. One ex-headteacher told us: ‘I know of individual schools whose success was completely off the back of, you know, two or three years intensive input from Teach First’. Another said: ‘The word went around [that] the holes in the staffroom were being filled by very, very bright, very energetic young people instead of [...] rather demoralised supply teachers or people from abroad, so that was one of the first things that began to turn things around.’

There is evidence to suggest that Teach First’s impact is important and extends beyond the individual teachers’ classrooms (Allen and Allnutt, 2013; Muijs *et al.*, 2010, Hutchings *et al.*, 2006). Muijs and his colleagues identified 87 Teach First schools and matched these with statistically similar schools. The schools linked to Teach First overall out-performed the comparator group in terms of GCSE performance and the researchers attributed part of this to Teach First. While this early study has since been criticised, Allen and Allnutt also matched Teach First schools with other similar schools and concluded that there was evidence of a beneficial effect. Overall gains in GCSE performance were estimated at ‘five per cent of a pupil standard deviation or around one grade in one of the pupil’s best eight subjects’. In practical terms a Teach First teacher placed in a department of six teachers could lead to gains of up to five per cent of a subject grade per pupil in that subject right across the department (Allen and Allnutt, 2013).



Teach First may have brought benefits even to schools that did not participate. Many people believe that it has played an important part in the transformation of the standing of the teaching profession in the eyes of the public and in the eyes of other potential new teachers who entered the profession through a variety of routes. During our interviews, these Teach First ‘externalities’ were recognised even among sceptics, as in the case of this headteacher:

‘Teach First itself I don’t have a lot of time for. You know, small numbers of graduates picked to ensure you only pick the winners who would have succeeded anyhow in whatever scheme they got into teaching in. But what it did was it said that teaching is, you know, a top class thing to go into. You know, it made it desirable to be a teacher... The idea 20 years ago that, you know, Russell Group universities would have a road show coming to them which attempted to pick out the best graduates to go into teaching. They’d have been laughed out wouldn’t they?’

The programme therefore assisted in changing attitudes about what teaching in London involved. As one interviewee put it, Teach First had helped to ‘detoxify’ teaching. Teach First’s framing of the work of its teachers as being a ‘mission’ to address ‘educational disadvantage’ also contributed to the moral purpose of teaching in London and helped counter much of the negative press coverage previously given to London schools. As one academy chain leader put it, Teach First led to a broader ‘upgrading of the workforce’ and made it ‘an attractive place to be for bright young teachers’.

While being interviewed for this research, a senior figure argued that: ‘More teachers see themselves as leaders, see what’s possible... that they’re there to make change happen. I think there’s now been enough areas of success in London that people know what’s possible.’ The Teach First programme also places significant emphasis on leadership and 232 Teach First graduates are now in leadership positions in London, of whom 143 are in inner London (mainly Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Westminster and Tower Hamlets). Some of these Teach First teachers are now headteachers. One federation leader emphasised Teach First’s impact on leadership: ‘If you invest enough in them – if you just take them in and leave them it won’t work – but if you invest enough in them they quickly, if they stay, become middle leaders and senior leaders and we are seeing that throughout schools, so we are getting great people.’

One possible criticism of the role of Teach First is that it contributed to greater turnover among teachers as it is only a two-year programme. Although fewer than half of those enrolling in Teach First in 2003 remained in teaching after their initial two-year commitment, the programme's retention rate has increased over time and almost two-thirds of those who finish the programme in London now remain in teaching at the end of the two years.

Figure 4.7: The percentage of Teach First cohorts in London still teaching in their third year (by year of enrolment)

2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
47.5%	60.8%	53.1%	59.0%	58.8%	64.0%	67.7%	64.0%

Source: Teach First, 2013

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The contribution of local authorities is probably the least well researched aspect of the London story. With the exception of the recent study of Tower Hamlets (Woods *et al.*, 2013) there has been little attention to the local authority perspective.

The contribution of local authorities was a major area of focus in the semi-structured interviews we conducted with key stakeholders. Our interviewees had, unsurprisingly given their different backgrounds, a wide range of views on how far local authorities had contributed to school improvement. Insofar as there was consensus it was about the very considerable variability in local authority performance, from high-performing to dysfunctional.

The range of local authority performance

Many interviewees argued against generalisations about local authority performance. London Challenge was based on a premise that the local authorities in the focus boroughs were seriously underperforming. At the same time some other authorities are widely acknowledged as being high-performers. Interviews variously described such local authorities as Camden, Westminster and Tower Hamlets as effective over many years. One stakeholder described the fact that some local authorities were effective before London Challenge and others benefitted from involvement and 'raised their game': 'So there were boroughs, and I mentioned Camden but I think another interesting one is Tower Hamlets, but I think also Westminster and Kensington, that had established good programmes for school improvement prior to London Challenge coming in.' Another commented:

'It was then certainly not easy to persuade those five boroughs that being one of the five key boroughs wasn't some sort of naming and shaming exercise. Ultimately I think we got very good co-operation with all five of them and I think it's fair to say all five of them have improved. Some of them like Hackney very, very dramatically so.'

THE PERFORMANCE OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IS PARTICULARLY IMPRESSIVE, WITH A MUCH NARROWER GAP BETWEEN THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS RECEIVING FSM THAN IS THE CASE NATIONALLY.

In analysing the relative performance of academy chains Cook makes, in passing, some highly significant points about the performance of local authority maintained secondary schools. Using his GCSE point score measure he calculated that the maintained secondary schools of Westminster City Council constituted in effect the best performing ‘chain’ of schools in London. ‘But its reign may be fleeting: some of these schools have become converter academies.’ Cook added that using his measure the maintained schools of Hackney and Islington also constituted relatively high-performing ‘chains’ when compared to some of the academy chains (Cook, 2013b).

Woods and colleagues from the Institute of Education have recently documented the transformation of Tower Hamlets, with an emphasis on the highly positive role of the local authority. The account they present is remarkable. In 1997 the authority was ranked 149 out of 149 in terms of its educational performance. A year later the education work of the council was the subject of a damning Ofsted report. This was the ‘dire’ situation inherited by Christine Gilbert when she became Corporate Director of Education in 1997. Over the next decade, Christine Gilbert and her successor, Kevan Collins supervised a radical improvement in local authority performance. By 2008 Ofsted was effusive in its praise. In that year the inspectors reported that the council ‘consistently delivered outstanding services for children and young people’. The improvement trajectory has continued consistently since then. The achievement of disadvantaged students is particularly impressive, with a much narrower gap between the performance of students receiving FSM than is the case nationally.

The Tower Hamlets study attributes the transformation to several factors but one key component was a highly effective approach to school improvement by the local authority. This included a very robust approach to the performance management of headteachers in schools with serious weaknesses. Between 1998 and 2012, 48 schools were designated as causing concern or in Ofsted categories of serious weakness and there were 42 cases of headteachers being replaced. The local authority then put a particular emphasis on the appointment of first-rate leaders for these vulnerable schools. The stress on the quality of leadership was supplemented by a rigorous data-based approach to support and challenge. The Institute of Education researchers concluded with a claim that the changes in Tower Hamlets constitute a globally significant example of highly successful education reform in an urban environment:

‘The experience of Tower Hamlets since 1998 is inspirational. It shows that improvement is not only possible but achievable, that improvement in some schools does not need to be bought at the expense of others and that improvement, once attained, can not only be sustained but surpassed. As a result, it is not unreasonable to argue that what Tower Hamlets has created are some of the best urban schools in the world.’ (Woods et al., 2013: 57).

In our interviews with stakeholders some echoed the Tower Hamlets story from the perspective of other boroughs. One highly experienced director of children's services explained her view that the better local authorities had been unfairly marginalised in the London improvement narrative:

'People all talk about the fact that it was just about the schools [...] it was absolutely about schools making that improvement themselves and that's something that I'm very, very passionate about, but there was a lot of local authority leverage that was going on in the places that made those improvements.'

Her own approach to 'leverage' matches almost exactly with the approach described in the Tower Hamlets study: a tough approach to the performance management of headteachers and a robust data-based dialogue with the schools about teaching and learning.

While this interviewee was keen to establish the positive record of many local authorities such as her own, she also recognised inconsistency in local authority performance across the capital, with some LAs faring considerably worse than others. One factor that made for increased inconsistency was the policy change that led all local authorities to re-organise their education departments and merge them with children's social services. The legislative context for the policy that became known as 'Every Child Matters' was set out in the Children Act of 2004. In the following years many of the new cadre of directors of 'children's services' were appointed from a social care rather than a schools background and lacked a deep professional understanding of whole school improvement methods. Another interviewee who was a local authority elected member for an inner London borough endorsed this point and spoke about the extent to which the social care agenda and the focus on the needs of highly vulnerable families, while obviously important, distracted some attention from the wider school standards and improvement agenda.

Some interviewees were less positive about the work of local authorities. One head of a substantial academies chain expressed a very strong level of frustration and unhappiness with the local authority legacy that his organisation inherited when taking control of failing schools that had previously been local authority maintained. He described, against a context of general improvement, a continuing problem with some schools that had been let down by local authorities over many years:

'The biggest thing I would [use to] explain the improvement of a number of schools that have become successful academies is taking the local authorities out of the equation [...] There was a view that what existed in the school was inevitable, this was how it had to be. It was to do with the children, there wasn't anything that could be done with the workforce because the local authorities were tied into trade union recognition agreements which tied their hands. And taking them away from that culture and saying you are now part of an independent movement where expectations are different, terms and conditions are different, things are going to be different, was a short sharp shock that allowed those schools to change their culture.'

ONE HEAD OF A SUBSTANTIAL ACADEMIES CHAIN EXPRESSED A VERY STRONG LEVEL OF FRUSTRATION AND UNHAPPINESS WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITY LEGACY THAT HIS ORGANISATION INHERITED WHEN TAKING CONTROL OF FAILING SCHOOLS THAT HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN LOCAL AUTHORITY MAINTAINED.



Improving local authorities through outsourcing

Just as academisation provided a ‘structural solution’ for underperforming schools, forced ‘outsourcing’ of the management of education services to private companies constituted a structural mechanism for tackling underperformance. This mechanism was used when ‘the government didn’t have confidence in the local authorities’. Another participant said: ‘It was partly to do with the competence of authorities, hence some of the outsourcing, you know they just... they didn’t know their schools well enough. They didn’t know what to do, they weren’t acting quickly enough.’

Outsourcing took place in several boroughs. Different models and approaches were used. In Islington the for-profit private company Cambridge Education (part of the Mott MacDonald group) was awarded a long-term contract in 2000 to manage the borough’s education service. In Hackney a not-for-profit trust was established in 2002 to manage the council’s education portfolio. School performance in both Islington and Hackney improved dramatically in the years after initial outsourcing.

Our interviewees were of the view that outsourcing ‘worked well in some places, didn’t work everywhere’; a view echoed in some of the interviews with LA directors, members, councillors and consultants. In 2002, the London Challenge prospectus recognised the varying degrees of success of outsourcing contracts. In Islington, for example, outsourcing was said to have been particularly successful and the contract was extended, whereas in Southwark the contract was ‘terminated’ after two years (DfES, 2003). Several interviewees suggested that the main benefit of outsourcing was bringing stable leadership into local authorities since in some cases most of the staff were previously on temporary contracts:

‘Not all of that [outsourcing] was perfect: not all of it was brilliantly done I don’t think, but overall it made a big difference. It made a big difference to the local authorities where there was intervention [...] if you look at Islington, Southwark, Haringey, Hackney: people went there to lead education departments [...] who would never have gone there without the assistance of direction and the private-sector partner. It was very unusual for a very strong director of education to go for a very troubled borough before that started.’

Although the governance was different, Haringey and Hackney, together with more ‘conventional’ local authorities such as Tower Hamlets, had a similar theory of action based on:

- ensuring first-rate leadership of the school improvement service
- a tough approach to the performance management of headteachers
- a strong emphasis on the use of data
- effective professional development both for leaders and class teachers.

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN NATIONAL AND LOCAL REFORMS

As stated earlier there were many national initiatives intended to improve schools between 2000 and 2014. It is too glib to assume that since every school in England had access to the national reforms these initiatives were not relevant to an explanation of the London transformation. A more nuanced possibility is that the London context provided particularly fertile ground for the implementation of the national reforms, which did therefore contribute to the London transformation. Proving these causal links is impossible. However, case study data does encourage a view that some of the London actors were adept at exploiting resources made available through the national reforms.

Take the case of Tower Hamlets. The study by Woods and his colleagues describes the particularly energetic and purposeful way that the education community in the borough benefitted from national reforms. The work of School Improvement Partners – a national initiative – and the training in pedagogy provided by the National Strategies are both mentioned as having impact. At the heart of the National Strategies for primary schools was a programme of support for the better teaching of literacy and numeracy. Woods and colleagues praise the way this was managed and delivered in Tower Hamlets: ‘For the primary schools the highly focused implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies was paramount’ (Woods *et al.*, 2013: 27).

Our interviews provided further evidence of effective exploitation of national initiatives. In 2003 the government introduced ‘workforce remodelling’ to state schools in England. Among other things this reform led to a dramatic expansion in the number of teaching assistants in schools. One of our interviewees cited workforce remodelling as an example of a national reform that operated in a context of heightened London receptivity. Unlike the majority of the teachers, the new cadre of teaching assistants was recruited from the local community and this helped in the development of community understanding about the work of their schools. An interviewee commented:

‘They were recruiting teaching assistants and mentors and coaches [...] from the immediate community which had another effect. So I think workforce remodelling [...] had a much greater impact possibly in London than elsewhere, maybe [that was] one of the hidden factors behind the success of London schools.’

IN 2003 THE GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED ‘WORKFORCE REMODELLING’ TO STATE SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND. AMONG OTHER THINGS THIS REFORM LED TO A DRAMATIC EXPANSION IN THE NUMBER OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN SCHOOLS.

Another example of London receptivity comes from a focus group discussion in a Tower Hamlets school. It illustrates the interplay between leadership changes at school level and the benefits derived from the rebuilding of the school under the terms of the national Building Schools for the Future programme. For these Tower Hamlets teachers the combination of purposeful new leadership and an exciting new learning environment was a potent mix that was central to the 'turnaround' of the school. When asked whether the new building was an important contributor to changes at the school, the teachers replied:

'Yes, definitely.'

'We already had the new leadership within the school, a change in the systems but when we started coming into the new buildings they were able to push it a bit further.'

'The old school was very old buildings, six floors high, low ceilings, really narrow corridors, and stairwells. It was quite dark but now it's a completely different atmosphere.'

'We were just talking this morning: remember the corridors and the fights in the corridors [...] pushing and play fighting [...] now they're all quite disciplined and following instructions.'

'They're quite calm, I've just been on break duty and it was actually really nice and when the pips go they start moving to lessons [...] There's no hassle because before at the old school, because it was so crowded there was pushing and waiting for someone to fall down the stairs whereas now it's completely different. What a difference!'

'But I think obviously the building does play an important role in it but I think we've had a new management as well.'

PART 2: COMMON THEMES THAT LINK TOGETHER THE LONDON REFORMS

In order to better understand the complex interplay between the range of London reforms, this section will focus on underlying themes which cut across individual programmes or policies. The use of data, both as a lever for change and as a means of promoting accountability, was one of the recurring points made by many of the interviewees when probed for their views on the changes that had taken place in London.

While data-driven approaches are now accepted as standard, the situation was different before 2000. One of our interviewees explained how far the context for data analysis had changed: ‘Chris Woodhead (previously Chief Inspector of schools) said, and meant, that he would never, never be driven in inspections by the results of data: and he wasn’t. Data did not inform Ofsted judgements until I reckon probably about the year 1999.’

This section will also consider the role played by professional development, at both a teacher- and leadership-level, as one of the key issues which characterised the programmes and policies previously discussed.

DATA AS A POWERFUL LEVER FOR CHANGE

While the evidence is imperfect and it is difficult to be precise about causation it does seem that the improvement in London schools was underpinned by particularly purposeful support and challenge; in particular opportunities for professional learning and a regime of performance management and accountability. Many interviewees identified different facets of effective support and challenge in London as important factors in the improvement dynamic. Underpinning these activities was a growth in capacity in the use of educational performance data.

One of the most important developments in London since 2000 has been the growth in data use and data literacy. In our interviews with stakeholders (both groups) there was virtual unanimity in the identification of data analysis and data literacy as key both to powerful accountability and well targeted support. This preoccupation was not the exclusive property of any particular group and all the major initiatives seemed to have strong foundations in the use of educational metrics. The different actors in the London story are therefore linked by a common preoccupation with the effective use of educational data as an instrument for transformation:

- London Challenge placed performance data at the heart of the programme. The schools that received the highest level of support were identified through the use of consistent data-based criteria. The educational improvement process was supported by the careful benchmarking of performance against the performance of other schools with similar characteristics. This use of ‘family of schools’ data was identified both in the previous literature and in our interviews as a major feature of the programme’s success.

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS IN LONDON SINCE 2000 HAS BEEN THE GROWTH IN DATA USE AND DATA LITERACY.



- Economies of scale enable multi-academy trusts to resource substantial data expertise in a similar way to some local authorities. Outstanding academies have been consistently praised by Ofsted for the way that they use data to guide their work. One interviewee described the ARK school, King Solomon Academy, as ‘probably the best school in the country’. The most recent Ofsted report on this school makes it clear that the high expectations that permeate its work are underpinned by particularly careful tracking of the data relating to student academic performance. This data makes possible the setting of ambitious but realistic aspirational targets for each individual student. Economies of scale enable multi-academy trusts to resource substantial data expertise in a similar way to some local authorities.
- The most effective local authorities placed a substantial emphasis on the need to support school improvement through systematic data analysis. The recent report on the transformation of Tower Hamlets (Woods *et al.*, 2013: 25) states that ‘a particular strong feature to drive school improvement has been the emphasis put upon the collection, dissemination and analysis of assessment data.’ Armed with robust data, local authority staff and headteachers were well equipped to take action. Ofsted reports on Tower Hamlets schools frequently comment on the purposeful target setting and tracking at an individual level that was made possible as a consequence of access to good data.
- Since its inception Teach First has carefully targeted the deployment of its teachers through the use of deprivation data in order to ensure that these teachers are serving communities with a disproportionate share of disadvantaged students. Teach First makes a priority of data-based analysis of the career trajectory of Teach First teachers and their alumni or ambassadors.

A TRANSFORMATION IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS DATA

London was perhaps well placed to play a pioneering part in data use because of the earlier work of the Inner London Education Authority. John Sinnott, who worked for ILEA’s Research and Statistics branch, explained this background:

‘There is a longer history of educational data in inner London through the ILEA Research & Statistics Section. This group based at County Hall developed the first “league tables” by listing secondary school results across inner London. They first collected pupil-level contextual factors such as ethnicity, home language, single parents, free meals etc.’ (Sinnott, 2014)

This idea that London local authorities had capacity in the field of data was echoed by two interviewees: 'They were strong on producing data because the ILEA had been strong on data, and the ILEA statistical people had been moved into different boroughs when it collapsed. They all tried, unsuccessfully in many cases, to do as much as the ILEA had done but they were fascinated by data'. Another commented: 'I think harnessing that [Fischer Family Trust] dataset was something London did early and got on top of that and I think actually a lot of that was done by key people in local authorities who were able to intelligently analyse the data.' However, although the expertise from the ILEA was harnessed by some of the boroughs, others found it harder to adapt, and many of those interviewed at borough level commented that following the abolition of the ILEA in 1990 there was no central body to bring coherence to London's schools, with Southwark and Westminster, for instance, identified as being unable to take back responsibility for education (ultimately resulting in both boroughs outsourcing their education services).

While London boroughs had some capacity in data analysis, prior to 2000 there was a less impressive history in terms of the use of data bringing about transformational change. For several interviewees, the key to the changes of the last decade lies in innovations in the way the data was used. They saw changes in the use of data by leaders as an important aspect of the London narrative, and the wider discourse relating to school effectiveness and school improvement. For one of these interviewees the use of data was 'the thread' that made possible a better concept of school leadership, based on a relentless focus on the quality of learning outcomes and the action needed to improve these outcomes. For another interviewee, the new emphasis on data brought benefits at all levels from enhanced political accountability to the more purposeful professional reflections of individual teachers.

AN ENTHUSIASM FOR DATA ACROSS THE BOARD

Reference to data was an almost constant refrain from our interviewees. They came from a variety of backgrounds, but across the board they identified the potency of well used data as a critical factor in school transformation in London. For one director of children's services the combination of moral purpose, based on advocacy for badly served children, and excellent data, was the key to the transformation of London schools. It was the data that made it possible to translate the moral purpose into action.

The chief executive of a leading academy chain was similarly keen to point out the centrality of data to the academies project and the wider improvement of London schools. She described the significance of data as 'huge'. She was particularly keen to point out the importance of the change in the measurement of C or above GCSE performance to include mathematics and English. For her this was a key enabling factor that concentrated the minds of schools and helped to ensure a better deal for students. For one senior policy adviser the highly effective use of data was a characteristic of the best schools and the best external agencies. He identified academy chains as 'the leaders in the use of data'. This interviewee singled out the systematic use of data by ARK as an example of best practice and praised them for the 'seriousness' with which data analysis drove the management of the academies.

WHILE LONDON BOROUGHS HAD SOME CAPACITY IN DATA ANALYSIS, PRIOR TO 2000 THERE WAS A LESS IMPRESSIVE HISTORY IN TERMS OF THE USE OF DATA BRINGING ABOUT TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE.



We interviewed several people who played central roles in London Challenge. They consistently mentioned the benefits of the project's approach to data. One interviewee, who played a major role in the management of London Challenge, characterised schools in London today as 'being ahead of the game on understanding the subtleties of school improvement, subtleties of teaching as well, and using data increasingly well within the school as well as among schools'. One headteacher who had been heavily involved in London Challenge talked about 'a massive focus on the data'. She was particularly impressed by the value of the 'families of schools' data as a means of identifying where the best practice was that could be shared with other schools.

The extent to which data now dominates the working lives of London teachers was clearly demonstrated in the focus group discussions we held with a cross-section of teachers. Almost all of the schools involved had been transformed over the past decade and many of the focus group teachers had personally lived through the transformation. Without exception they identified much stronger student tracking and other forms of data engagement as essential factors driving improvement in their school. Teachers talked in knowledgeable and thoughtful terms about the way their schools used data. They understood the limitations of 'league tables' but also recognised the importance of comparative analysis. They described the mechanics of assessment and data analysis. They emphasised the importance of professional reflection on the patterns found in the data and the power of both internal (subject-to-subject) comparisons and external (school-to-school) comparisons. Teachers stressed in more than one school how essential it was to spot patterns of underperformance early so that corrective action could be taken.

'The data tells a lot [...] There's quite good open communication with teachers from different subjects because a child may be doing well in English and maths and not in science: there is obviously an issue but you won't know that unless there is that communication between the middle leaders [...] Also it's a standing item in faculty meetings because we understand that if we don't visit them regularly we will miss which students are not getting their target levels or grades. If you don't intervene early then you are going to have to play catch-up for the rest of the time the child is in school.'

In a focus group discussion a teacher commented: 'Everything's been reviewed and renewed: tracking students, TIG groups (targeted intervention group) which we didn't really have a long time ago, so we know which students need extra support.' In another someone explained:

'A large part of our focus is identifying areas where we can develop and improve and that is down to using things like improving our data analysis, making sure staff are able to analyse their own data etc [...] Monitoring is the key. Yes, performance management at a management level, making sure that every member of staff is accountable for the students that they teach and focused on the goals of the schools.'

Teachers talked with a degree of real expertise about data-related issues. They discussed the importance of student self-assessment and peer assessment as well as more formal academic monitoring. They spoke about tackling subject-to-subject variation within the school. The focus group discussions gave a strong sense that a high level of data literacy is the norm among staff in these schools.

FROM DATA TO ACCOUNTABILITY

In many London schools performance data is now used systematically in performance management. Several interviewees talked in favourable terms about the way that some underperforming leaders and teachers have now moved on. One interviewee described the beneficial impact of substantial replacement of school leaders in her area of London based on an evidence-informed view of their capacity to lead improvement. In our focus group schools some teachers talked about the radical restructuring and reorganising of staff that new school leaders had brought about in order to reduce the numbers of ineffective teachers. The focus group teachers also described a contemporary working environment that was built around principles of high levels of professional accountability and transparency at every level of the school's staffing structure. In this context of high accountability student voice was mentioned by some teachers as an important source of accountability data. There was also a recognition that, for some more traditional teachers, accountability to the students was professionally challenging:

'The feedback is usually from the children and for some staff it wasn't the right environment because they felt we were listening to the children too much but generally children are more honest than adults and they are more forgiving. What they normally want is for things to be better. It is allowing them to give their feedback without fear it will get them in trouble. For many people it is not an environment that they would find comfortable.'

COMBINING HIGH ACCOUNTABILITY WITH HIGH SUPPORT

While the schools of London are more accountable places than ever, and professionals are subject to significant external and internal scrutiny, there have also been interesting developments in the field of professional support. High accountability and high support in terms of professional development and curriculum support characterises the work of high-performing academy chains. The notion that underperforming staff should be challenged but not 'demonised' was central to the thinking of both the designers of London Challenge and the leadership of some of the more effective local authorities, such as Tower Hamlets. As has often been noted, the London Challenge decision to call the lowest-performing schools 'Key to Success' (KTS) schools was a deliberate manifestation of this commitment to a positive, developmental discourse rather than a 'name and shame' approach to improvement. The contract with the KTS schools was simple: the performance level in your school is unacceptable and as a result you will be given very substantial support to improve; if this fails other steps including a change to academy status will be taken.



The nature of the support provided under London Challenge has been well documented elsewhere. What has attracted less attention is the way that London reforms, including London Challenge but also the work of the best academies, have encouraged innovative approaches to school support that have greatly influenced national policy both before and after the general election of 2010. The current emphasis on a sector-led or self-supporting approach to school improvement was pioneered by London Challenge and the work of the best academy chains. In both these contexts, an essential ingredient is a view that school leaders have a real, shared responsibility for the performance of other schools.

London Challenge pioneered the use of expert headteachers as the mentors of headteachers in underperforming schools. This key ingredient in the London Challenge approach to support was brokered by the expert advisers who supported the KTS schools. With support from NCSL, the concept of the NLE developed. Influenced by previous development at Ravens Wood School in Bromley, the idea of the high-performing school as a teaching school developed in tandem with the embryonic use of NLEs. These approaches have since become part of the mainstream at national level. The current government's approach to sector-led school improvement places NLEs and teaching school alliances at the heart of system-wide thinking about national school improvement.

One of our interviewees expressed very strongly the importance of the cultural change that made possible this new sense of shared accountability and support at headship level. For her the London school system had matured from one characterised by crude competition to a much more mature blend of competition and partnership based on shared accountability for the well-being of all children in London.

'I think there is a real spirit of collegiality across London schools. There is much less competition than I experienced in the early days of my headship. But there is a real pride in being in a London school and being part of this very successful movement [...] And even though people know that circumstances can be challenging they also know that there is support out there because the support will come from other London headteacher colleagues [...] I think in the old days there were some schools that were good but they were charging people to go in and look at what they were doing. I don't think that culture exists any more, it is much more of a partnership culture, much more of an awareness of responsibility for all community schools and outcomes for all children in the local community and not just your own.'

The same interviewee described in very practical terms how this collegiality manifested itself in practice. Although it derived initially from a mentoring relationship at headteacher level, the sharing of expertise was now embedded at the level of subject teaching. She described how an assistant headteacher at her own school with expertise relating to the performance of relatively less able students in English had worked in a substantial way with 'seven or eight schools' last year.

THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TO SECTOR-LED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLACES NLES AND TEACHING SCHOOL ALLIANCES AT THE HEART OF SYSTEM-WIDE THINKING ABOUT NATIONAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One theme that links the key London interventions is a preoccupation with professional development. London Challenge, Teach First, high-performing local authorities and the work of leading academy chains can all be characterised as placing considerable emphasis on the professional learning and development of the workforce in London:

- A central component of London Challenge was the range of professional development opportunities afforded to school staff, whether they were the ITP/OTP for teachers, or the leadership training programmes for middle and senior leaders.
- Teach First continually places emphasis on furthering the learning and development of those who come through its graduate programme, with one of its stated core goals to be to 'develop leaders in the classroom' (Teach First, 2014).
- Many of the LAs that showed particularly strong and effective leadership within their boroughs placed a focus on professional development, such as Tower Hamlets, which 'invested heavily in promoting leadership development programmes (Woods *et al.*, 2013: 25) and prioritised professional development as part of its recruitment and retention strategy for school staff (*ibid.*: 30); or Southwark, where a former education director noted how he had appointed 'an assistant director responsible for leadership development' and equipped headteachers 'with the skill sets to work outside of their own schools'.
- Several of the key academy chains in London emphasise professional development as a key component of their offer. ARK Schools, for instance, hosts networking days for staff from all its schools to come together and 'add value to the professional development offered in-school' (ARK Schools, 2014a).

In every case, recognition of the importance of developing people in order to achieve school improvement has been a lever for change.

In our focus group discussions with teachers from a variety of schools we discussed their experience of professional learning. Certain patterns emerged: schools were adopting a more serious and integrated approach to professional development. Key trends included:

- a sense that approaches to professional development had matured over time, moving away from occasional attendance at off-site courses to more systematic and regular school-based opportunities for context-specific learning
- a growing connection between performance management and professional development, so that teachers learned from the systematic observation and monitoring at school level
- practitioners rather than expert advisers who have left the classroom as the main providers of professional learning
- work-shadowing and coaching relationships as key opportunities for powerful development.

IN OUR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH TEACHERS FROM A VARIETY OF SCHOOLS WE DISCUSSED THEIR EXPERIENCE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING. CERTAIN PATTERNS EMERGED: SCHOOLS WERE ADOPTING A MORE SERIOUS AND INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

The following quotes illustrate this new professional learning in action:

'I think it's generally true of secondary schools across the borough but particularly true of us, that we've tended less to buy into what the local authority provides because we have the expertise in-house.' (Haringey teacher)

'When I was head of science I remember doing quite a few external courses [...] more helpful than that is how the school generates quite tailor-made 'INSETs' that we run on a weekly basis. So different members of staff, they don't all have to be outstanding teachers or practitioners – we look at different strengths of various members of staff – and we put on regular in-house INSETs each week. Some staff will be directed to attend, some will opt to go in, in order to help them along that course. They have been a lot more powerful than some of the [...] courses.' (Tower Hamlets teacher)

'I've spent quite a lot of time working closely with a deputy head who does my job in a different school. And that's had more impact than any course you'd have gone on. It's been an eye opener – it's been brilliant.' (Havering teacher)

'I think it's the organisation getting us to really become more reflective on our own practice that makes things more powerful. It isn't about these one-off INSETs that you might attend, it's about regularly reviewing what your lessons are like, what your meetings have been like – it's almost like my school encouraged me to keep a reflective journal on how I'm getting on in the different areas that I am working with.' (Tower Hamlets teacher)

SUMMARY

The complex combination and interplay of approaches to school improvement in London can claim responsibility for the success enjoyed by schools in the capital over the 2000s. However, underpinning the range of support and challenge measures were key principles involving the use of data as a lever for change and driver of accountability, and an overarching emphasis on professional development.

Owing to the lack of robust evaluation methods built into many of the interventions employed in London, it is difficult to separate out the individual impact of each. However, through a combination of innovative analysis by the likes of Hutchings *et al.* (2012a) and the rich qualitative data collected here, it is possible to credit London Challenge, Teach First, individual local authorities and the programme of academisation as having a combined effect on the performance of London schools since 2000. Furthermore, these policies shared key qualities, such as their use of data for both change and as a form of accountability, and their unwavering focus on professional development activities, which underpinned their approach and led to the school improvement success experienced by London.



CHAPTER 5:

LEADERSHIP

This chapter explores leadership at different levels of the system. It addresses the role played by political leadership at both a national and local level; the importance of political will to drive and facilitate reform; the role of political leadership in an era of sector-led reform and the role played by headteachers as system leaders. It also identifies the aspects of leadership which underpinned London's improvement journey.

Over 20 years ago a youthful Michael Barber (educationalist and, during Tony Blair's first government, Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards) described the untapped potential of the London education workforce.

He pointed out that there was a particular 'esprit de corps' and idealism about London teachers. At the time there was a sense of crisis in London in the years after the abolition of ILEA in 1990. Presciently, Barber suggested that if properly tackled by effective leadership, the crisis could be overcome and London could become a very special place:

'Throughout the first century of education in the capital, inner London teachers felt an extraordinary sense of pride. Their motivation came in part from their participation in what they perceived as a great enterprise [...] though battered by the conflicts and controversies of the 1980s, an element of that pride remains [...] it needs to be nurtured and revived. Inner London needs to become a place once again in which people are proud to work and proud to have worked.' (Barber, 1992: 45)

Two decades later there is evidence that the battered professional pride of the 1990s has indeed been revived as a result of purposeful leadership. Our interviewees described a widely pervasive cultural shift and an energised workforce that felt they were part of 'something special'. In searching for explanations for this change a common theme in their analysis was the effectiveness of leadership. Day and Sammons discuss the wide variation in definitions of leadership that exist across different jurisdictions, concluding that it encompasses a range of 'leading' and 'managing' concerns, including vision and strategic insight; responsibility for people; implementation; and operational responsibility (2013: 5).

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first deals with leadership at different levels of the system. It addresses the role played by political leadership, at both a national and local level; the importance of political will and sponsorship in order to drive and facilitate reform; the role of political leadership in an era of sector-led reform; and the role played by headteachers as system leaders. Part 2 of the chapter identifies the aspects and qualities of leadership which underpinned London's improvement journey. The section is concerned with the sense of possibility that existed in London during the 2000s and the search for coherence in educational provision. It deals in turn with:

- the moral purpose and values of leaders
- a strong reliance on data to guide leadership
- a relentless focus on positivity
- leadership guided by theories of change
- the exceptional key individuals in leadership roles in London.

THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP IN LONDON

There was already a ‘critical mass’ of good leadership in London at the turn of the century: of those secondary schools inspected between 2000 and 2003, 85 per cent of those in London, compared to 81 per cent nationally, were graded either good or better in terms of the effectiveness of their leadership and management (Ofsted, 2006).⁵ This trend has continued, with the gap between London and England widening in recent years. Figure 5.1 shows that between 2009 and 2013 the percentage of secondary schools with outstanding leadership in London improved by 12 percentage points (schools nationally only improved by six per cent during this period).

Figure 5.1: Change from 2009 to 2013 in Ofsted judgements of leadership and management



Source: Ofsted, 2014

⁵ Although grading under the frameworks in operation in 2009 and 2013 is not comparable, the performance of London relative to the rest of the country illustrates the differences in the capital's trajectory.

IN THE EYES OF OUR EXPERT WITNESSES, ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING FEATURES OF THE LONDON STORY IS THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP NOT JUST IN SCHOOLS BUT AT EVERY LEVEL.

Our interviewees had, without exception, a highly positive view of the overall quality of the leadership in London schools now, after more than a decade of effective reform. One former minister talked about ‘the amazing headteachers’ of London. A senior figure from the world of higher education talked about the ‘exceptional leaders and systems leaders’ of London who were the architects of innovative new approaches to leadership that were now widespread in London and increasingly to be found across England. A highly experienced educationalist who played a key role in the London Challenge story attributed the improvement in teaching and learning in London schools to ‘very much better leadership of schools’ by headteachers who had become ‘very clever at enabling teachers to improve their game’. While many headteachers before 2000 had been preoccupied with ‘fire-fighting’ and school-level crisis management, the headteachers of today had the opportunity and ability to focus on the leadership of learning.

PART 1: LEADERSHIP AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF THE SYSTEM

In the eyes of our expert witnesses, one of the most striking features of the London story is the role of transformational leadership not just in schools but at every level. As one headteacher put it to us: ‘It’s all about leadership, isn’t it? So whether it’s leadership at local authority level, whether it’s leadership at the Department [for Education] level, or whether it’s leadership at the school level.’

The leadership contribution was multi-layered and our interviews with both key stakeholders and focus groups of teachers revealed evidence of leadership effectiveness throughout the education system – national government, regional agencies and initiatives, ‘middle tier’ organisations such as local authorities and academy chains and schools. There was a virtually unanimous view that this was a key factor in the transformation of London schools. Our stakeholders described a particularly powerful alignment of leadership energy, from senior figures in the government to individual headteachers.

While leadership at every level was an important part of the London story, the most potent element, in the eyes of our expert interviewees, was the role of leadership at school level and the innovative way that the best London school leaders had become ‘system leaders’. As one former minister said to us, ‘In the end it is at the school level that the change happens, and it is therefore [ultimately] about the headteachers and the teachers and the work that they did.’ The OECD described the role of system leaders as follows:

‘In this new environment, schools and schooling are being given an ever bigger job to do [...] One of school leaders’ new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. System leaders, as they are being called, care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own’ (OECD, 2008: 6).

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

One major lesson from the London school improvement story is the importance of high-level sponsorship from policymakers. Under the Labour governments of 1997–2010 the reform of London schools was supported by politicians at Cabinet level, and their key advisers. Several interviewees commented on the interest of government ministers in London school reform. They were of the view that high-level political commitment and will was an important ingredient of the London success story. One of our interviewees was a junior minister in the Labour government prior to the 2005 election. In the context of London Challenge he described how both the Prime Minister and successive secretaries of state for education personally endorsed London school reform as a priority:



‘Then, politically, you know, this was a programme that Tony Blair, Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke, David Miliband, you know, all of the senior people in the government that were there when it was set up, they believed in it, it came from them and it had buy-in at the senior level. I think, again, if we hadn’t had that it might not have had the impact that it did.’

The view that Blair and his inner circle of advisers, including Andrew Adonis and Michael Barber, were driving the policy for London schools was articulated by two of the headteachers that we interviewed:

‘It really was driven a lot of it by the Government. They were pulling levers that were having an impact. And Blair, his mantra was ‘education, education, education’. And I think he thought if they could really make a difference in London then it could be done elsewhere [...] So I think that is where the driving force came from.’

‘Personally I believe that Blair and Brown are the causes of it because in 1997 they were very clear to campaign on better schools and hospitals.’

A former special adviser to a secretary of state for education confirmed the extent to which London was a high-level political priority. In one of our interviews he provided us with an ‘insider’s’ view of how high-level political sponsorship opened doors and created an urgency about change among senior officials in the Civil Service and other influential people:

‘Political support creates the legitimacy and soft power to make change and if you’ve got the Prime Minister, and you’ve got Andrew Adonis as a number 10 special adviser, and you’ve got Stephen Twigg, not to mention, you know, [the] secretary of state also backing it [...] that is a formidable weaponry to have at your disposal [...] if you’re an official or you’re involved in making the change.’

JUNIOR MINISTERS PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT PART IN PROVIDING THE DAY-TO-DAY DRIVE BEHIND THE LONDON REFORMS.

The London reforms benefitted from particularly sustained political sponsorship. Teach First, which began in 2003, has continued to attract support from every secretary of state since Estelle Morris. The London academies programme has also been consistently supported at the highest levels from 2003 to the present day. One of the experts we interviewed was a university academic with very extensive experience in the evaluation of national government programmes. She described London Challenge as ‘a very unusual programme’ because it was implemented over a period of eight years. During this time there was considerable ministerial turnover but a sustained political commitment to the programme. She considered this long-term support to be ‘absolutely extraordinary’. In her eyes the unusual commitment over time paid dividends. It allowed London Challenge to achieve a level of maturity which increased the return on investment. London Challenge was particularly effective in its final three years. As one of our expert witnesses said, ‘Most government programmes to improve schools are sort of 18 months or two years at most; you don’t get that length of programme, you don’t get programmes with that consistency of leadership and focus.’

Junior ministers played a significant part in providing the day-to-day drive behind the London reforms. The role of Andrew Adonis is well known. He was successively head of the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit from 2001 and junior minister in the education department 2005–2008. In both roles he energetically promoted sponsored academies and Teach First. He was well known to many of the key London stakeholders that we interviewed, who recognised and shared his passion for tackling the link between poverty and underachievement in London and elsewhere. Another important political figure was Stephen Twigg who was a junior education minister 2002–2005 at the time that London Challenge, Teach First and academisation were beginning to change the education landscape in London. Twigg was a London MP until he lost his seat in 2005. Crucially he was appointed as a minister with special responsibility for London schools. Twigg takes particular pride in his work for London schools in these years. In a speech in 2012 he talked about how success of London Challenge could provide a blueprint for local transformation in other places:

‘I would seek to emulate the success of the London Challenge, which I was involved in as a minister and which developed a constructive partnership between central government, schools and local authorities. The key thing is that it worked: standards in London schools went from being below average to above average. And whatever his other faults, it’s interesting to see that the Mayor of London is seeking to emulate some of the approaches taken in the London Challenge in the report he published last week.’ (Stephen Twigg in Labour Teachers, 2012)

Twigg's reference to Boris Johnson is noteworthy given they represent different political parties. There has been a surprising, although far from complete, cross-party consensus about some aspects of the London narrative. As Mayor of London, Johnson has made the further improvement of London schools one of his priorities. The Mayor's office organised a major education Inquiry which published its report in 2012 (Mayor of London, 2012). In 2013 the Mayor's office also published the first of a proposed series of London Annual Education reports, benchmarking London performance against other parts of England and high performing metropolitan areas worldwide (Mayor of London, 2013).

The report of the Mayor's Education Inquiry in 2012 explicitly recognised and sought to build on the achievements of the Labour government in London schools between 2003 and 2010. Despite the different political allegiance of the Mayor, the report makes substantial references to the work of London Challenge. The report also recognised some of the fragmentation risks associated with aspects of national education policy around the expansion of the academies programme and the new parent-led category of free schools. Key interventions identified in the report are entirely in keeping with the philosophy of London Challenge and include:

- the Gold Club for schools which are particularly successful at ensuring the achievement of the most disadvantaged students. They will be expected to share their practice with other schools. Very much in the spirit of the 'families of schools' approach, the report stated that Gold Club School performance and demographic data will be shared across all London schools 'to allow those in similar contexts to identify those Gold Club schools which may be able to support their own improvement' (Mayor of London, 2012: 24).
- the London Schools Excellence Fund: this 'major fund' would provide pump-priming resourcing for projects intended to help schools make substantial progress on the most pressing education priorities in London, which the inquiry identified as literacy, numeracy and raising standards in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

While Boris Johnson sought to build on London Challenge, it could be argued that Michael Gove identified key aspects of the London transformation and took them to national scale. In particular the coalition government has had the following education priorities which link to the London story 2003–2010:

- an emphasis on sector-led school improvement
- the continuation of the national expansion of the system of consultant headteachers acting as NLEs or LLEs (this expansion was already happening rapidly prior to 2010, but was not slowed by the coalition government)
- the establishment of a national infrastructure of teaching school alliances intended to act as hubs for school improvement in their areas
- a dramatic expansion of the academies programme
- further growth for Teach First both at London and national levels.

WHILE BORIS JOHNSON SOUGHT TO BUILD ON LONDON CHALLENGE, IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT MICHAEL GOVE IDENTIFIED KEY ASPECTS OF THE LONDON TRANSFORMATION AND TOOK THEM TO NATIONAL SCALE.

Many of our interviewees disagreed with Michael Gove about his plans for school improvement but some also recognised the extent to which the transformation of London 2003–2010 had influenced the policy of the coalition government 2010–2014. The degree of continuity in policy for London schools between 2003 and 2014 is almost unprecedented and is likely to have contributed to the growing momentum for continuous improvement.

The role of national and local government leadership in an era of ‘sector-led’ reform

The key stakeholders in the story of London’s improvement tend to see the changes as the result of a ‘sector-led approach’ rather than the implementation of a top-down policy by either national or local government. Nevertheless London schools appear to have benefitted from the interaction of political forces at national, regional and borough levels (and a sector-led approach was facilitated through political will) and from the multiple identities of Londoners as both residents of the capital city and members of much more local communities.

As we have seen, central government injected urgency, energy and resources into the London system. During the period 2002–2005 a national government minister and senior civil servants from the all-England ministry for education made London a personal priority and this undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for change. By appointing Stephen Twigg to the new role of minister for London schools the government ensured there was a ‘lobbyist for London schools’ in Westminster.

One of our interviewees argued that a positive aspect of London Challenge was that it closed the gap between ministers and the child in the classroom. Yet this did not mean that London Challenge was a top-down, centralist policy – as the Institute for Government note: ‘London Challenge found effective ways to reconcile both top-down and bottom-up approaches’ (Kidson, 2014).

London Challenge operated at a regional level and ‘went with the grain’ in terms of London teachers’ perceptions of themselves as sharing a common cause with other London teachers. The more recent activities of the Mayor’s office similarly play to this sense of pan-London identity.

Local authorities, Challenge Advisors, academy chains and in particular the NCSL (who brokered support from consultant leaders/NLEs to those schools that needed it) played the role of a mediating layer between the centre and schools. Their role can be characterised as finding and facilitating solutions (for example helping schools draw up improvement plans) and taking decisive action where needed (for example in closing underperforming schools or making changes to school leadership).

The best local authorities made use of the more intimate scale of the London borough, a view expressed in a number of our interviews with key personnel from the boroughs. Among other things, the interviewees remarked on the proximity of boroughs, their size (in terms of having enough schools to form effective networks, but not too many to be unwieldy) and the ability to have a sense of what was happening within each borough. One of our interviewees was a highly experienced director of children's services, who described the potential benefits of a small urban authority, compared to the much larger forms of local government found in some other cities and in rural England:

'You've got very small local authorities that are therefore able to have much more purchase, much more leverage, much more impact [...] The relationships that you can build up [...] I can get all the secondary heads around a table easily, and so you get 15 people round the table, and you build really good relationships and they know that you will lie down in the road to support them, and [...] they are clear about what they need to do, and you're clear that your job is to catalyse it [...] having that kind of relationship where everybody knows each other so well, to be honest I don't know how, whether, even those of us that have done well, if we were doing it in Kent or Cumbria, at that level of leadership, with the real authority, that I could walk into any governing body or work with any, to have that authority at that level I think the scale of London boroughs allowed that to happen.'

SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL NETWORKS AND HEADTEACHERS AS SYSTEM LEADERS

By the time that London Challenge was beginning, the concept of 'system leadership' was part of the educational *zeitgeist* in England. The idea owed much to the thinking of Michael Barber and Michael Fullan about how school systems could move beyond dirigiste 'top-down' reform. The lesson of the National Strategies (which Barber had managed and Fullan had evaluated) appeared to be that the centralised prescription of the 1990s was appropriate for its time, but ultimately led to diminishing returns. After significant gains the results from primary schools in England had reached a plateau. In order to take an education system to a higher level of productivity there was a need for a greater degree of professional ownership of the reform and improvement process.

The architects of London Challenge were able to apply these ideas to the improvement of London secondary schools. In doing so they were supported and encouraged by NCSL. Some of the best schools and best headteachers were encouraged to lead improvement networks with other schools and other school leaders. The lead schools were designated as teaching schools and their headteachers were recognised as LLEs or NLEs.

IN ORDER TO TAKE AN EDUCATION SYSTEM TO A HIGHER LEVEL OF PRODUCTIVITY THERE WAS A NEED FOR A GREATER DEGREE OF PROFESSIONAL OWNERSHIP OF THE REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT PROCESS.



In 2010 the Portuguese academic Jorge Avila de Lima reviewed the literature relating to effective networks in education. De Lima argues the most effective networks are ‘goal directed’ and have four key features:

‘Network change is driven primarily by goal directedness. Network participants see themselves as part of a whole and are committed to clear [...] network-level goals. All relations between network members are structured in order to achieve these goals. Usually, an administrative entity (a steering committee, a coordinating council, a leadership team, or the like) is formed and endowed with the function of planning and coordinating the activities of the network as a whole’ (de Lima, 2010: 10).

The networks that were built up through London Challenge are a perfect match with de Lima’s four characteristics:

- **Part of a whole:** Schools were ‘London schools’, with ‘London pupils’ and ‘London teachers’ taking on the ‘London Challenge’. One headteacher described how at national conferences ‘you will very often get a reference to “that band of London heads”.’ She argued that this was not previously the case and has changed over the last decade.
- **A clear and specific goal:** Schools were united around the clear goal of breaking the link between poverty and poor outcomes and making education in London the best in the world. These were goals that teachers and leaders could get behind because they tapped into the reasons why many originally went into the profession.
- **Relationships structured around goals:** There was recognition that careful pairing of schools was important (Ainscow, 2012: 299). Pairings needed to take into account schools’ context, where they were on the school improvement journey and the personalities of the leaders involved (Poet and Kettlewell, 2011: 16). The NCSL brokered this relationship, allocating consultant leaders/NLEs – in dialogue with skilled Challenge Advisors and local authority staff, and through the use of data from schools/families of schools – to those schools that needed them.
- **Planned and co-ordinated activity:** An exceptional leadership team drove the process and provided the logistical infrastructure to take the weight off individual schools. Hutchings describes the City Challenge central co-ordinating team as one of its most effective elements (Hutchings and Mansaray, 2013: 5) and emphasises that schools tend to lack the capacity and bureaucratic infrastructure to manage networks. By providing this centrally, the ‘cost’ of collaboration was reduced.

The NAO (2009: 8) and West (2010: 98) also summarise key features of effective collaboration and again, the approach taken in London overwhelmingly followed these good practice models. Importantly, the skill to collaborate effectively was built rather than introductions being made and then schools being left to it. For example, after being carefully selected, NLEs received careful and effective training (Poet and Kettlewell, 2011: 14) and their designation could be revoked if necessary (Hill and Matthews, 2008: 37), a process which was overseen by NCSL.

Key individuals who managed the development of networks of school-to-school support were interested in the theory of knowledge management and knowledge mobilisation. They identified some of the naive assumptions that often weakened attempts to 'share good practice' in the context of London schools. One of our expert witnesses described three techniques, used by London Challenge, to optimise the chances of effective knowledge mobilisation by consultant leaders:

1. It was important to quality assure the expertise that was about to be 'shared'.
2. It was necessary to identify a 'fit-for-purpose' mechanism for sharing expertise which could include such different media as one-to-one coaching or large scale e-learning.
3. Expert practitioners needed very careful training if they were to undertake work as coaches of other, weaker practitioners.

This structured approach to the identification and training of expert leaders as system leaders was undertaken by London Challenge in partnership with the NCSL. From the perspective of headteachers and others, the result was a new form of collaboration. Interviewees contrasted the networked discussions under London Challenge with previous manifestations of networking:

'I mean there always used to be sort of cluster group meetings, but it was heads sitting round and having a moan and it didn't really affect the rest of the staff.' (Headteacher)

'I think there is a real spirit of collegiality across London schools. There is much less competition than I experienced in the early days of my headship. But there is a real pride in being in a London school, being part of this very successful movement [...] And even though people know that circumstances can be challenging they also know that there is support out there because the support will come from other London headteacher colleagues.'
(Headteacher)

[Headteachers] were really supportive of each other, [a] very strong collaborative group.' (London Challenge Advisor, Barking and Dagenham)

SUCCESSFUL SYSTEM LEADERSHIP REQUIRED A CHANGE IN THE MINDSET OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS.

Successful system leadership required a change in the mindset of highly effective school leaders. This was commented on by many of our interviewees. In addition to a professional responsibility for the life chances of students at their own school, system leaders accepted that they had a shared and collective responsibility with other school leaders for the well-being of all students in their community. One of our interviewees expressed this clearly. He had successively been a London headteacher and the head of an academy chain:

‘There was an increasing sense in London schools that London teachers and London headteachers, London leaders, were there for all the children in London, not just the children that were in their school. And that sounds a little bit idealistic but I kind of think there was a bit of that, and still is. So that sense of collaborating for the London child rather than just for the child that goes to your school is really important.’

The same interviewee, while convinced of the power of the new system leadership, also identified some limitations to the work of the best consultant leaders. He considered that they were particularly successful at providing credible and useful support, but less comfortable exercising an accountability function:

‘What schools find very difficult actually is holding one another to account. And so, you know, even with the London Challenge, that was sort of done more by the Challenge Advisors [...] than it was by the heads challenging one another. They would go in and work and support and have challenging conversations but they weren’t kind of holding those schools to account in quite the same way.’

PART 2: QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN LONDON

The second part of this chapter deals with the qualities that underpinned leadership at a political, system and school level and the key features of leadership during the 2000s in London which contributed to the success story. It also addresses the key individuals who are often highly credited for their leadership roles.

Any emphasis on rival solutions within London (for example the role of academies versus LA maintained schools) is misleading. In reality there has been a surprising degree of convergence between the leadership approaches of the most thoughtful professionals operating in each 'camp'. Underpinning many of the comments from our interviewees, regardless of their background, was a set of linked ideas about how leadership had transformed London schools. The ideas of the 'LA people' and the 'academies people' were almost indistinguishable. The concepts or guiding principles can be summed up as a view of leadership based on ideas of *possibility* and *coherence*. London leaders approached their work with a strong optimism relating to the possibility of change and an impressive understanding of the practical action needed to bring about more coherent educational provision.

The 'coherence logic' had several strands, shared by the different constituencies. They shared a leadership concept based on a kind of leadership value chain, comprising the following 'links':

- Transformational leadership was driven by moral purpose, and a strong sense that leaders' first responsibility was to optimise outcomes for learners and not to promote the 'provider interest'. This moral purpose and sense of advocacy meant that leaders needed at times to challenge or confront a 'provider interest', represented by underperforming groups of professionals either at school or local authority level.
- Moral purpose is not enough; it requires leverage. Our group of leaders believed that moral purpose could be translated into effective leadership action through the 'relentless' and 'forensic' use of data: potentially powerful management information about the performance of students could be used to identify and challenge local authorities, schools and individual teachers whose performance was sub-optimal.
- Challenge must be combined with support and recognition that while accountability was essential, simply 'demonising' others (through, for example, a name-and-shame approach) could be counter-productive.
- Support was typically based on a coherent 'theory of change'. Simply telling professionals that in terms of benchmarked data their performance is below par will not lead to improvement. Effective leaders went way beyond criticism and exhortation. Our stakeholders typically possessed a set of ideas about how schools and classrooms could be organised differently, and how the performance of teachers could be enhanced through effective professional learning. In other words these leaders had a theory of change that could be applied to specific examples of underperformance.

AN INTERVIEWEE RECALLED THAT MANY OF THE SCHOOLS WHICH HAD BEEN TRANSFORMED AFTER THE YEAR 2000 HAD BEEN CHRONICALLY UNDERPERFORMING SINCE THE 1980S AND THAT GENERATIONS OF CHILDREN HAD BEEN DENIED THE GOOD QUALITY EDUCATION TO WHICH THEY WERE ENTITLED.

LEADERSHIP AND MORAL PURPOSE

The concept of 'moral purpose' was explicitly or implicitly articulated by many of the people we interviewed. A teacher in one of our focus groups exemplified the ambitious culture and moral purpose of the capital's workforce in recalling their school's previous underperformance:

'Sometimes I think to myself, "How many students have we failed (in the past)?" The school has failed so many people in the community that I know personally, like my friends, family members, neighbours and – you know what? If you were in school now your life would have been changed.'

A senior educationalist and former Chief Inspector of Schools made a very similar point when interviewed. He recalled that many of the schools which had been transformed after the year 2000 had been chronically underperforming since the 1980s and that generations of children had been denied the good quality education to which they were entitled. This moral failure of the system was belatedly put right during the period of reform in the new century.

All of our interviewed stakeholders exercised some sort of leadership position during the London education reforms. Many were clearly personally motivated by a powerful sense of advocacy for children and an equally powerful sense of frustration with some of the attitudes that were prevalent in the 1990s. This was often associated with a sense of outrage at the way disadvantaged students were let down by the system. As a senior educationalist commented to us:

'I used to get fed up to the back teeth of going to see schools talking to schools about where they were and when you talked to staff it wasn't very long before someone said, "I have worked here for 25 years" and blah blah blah. And you think yes that is the problem, you are doing now what you did 25 years ago and you think it is all okay. You think that the quality of education [provided to] these kids, because of their background [...] is acceptable. And you think you are some kind of great hero'.

DATA-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

One former special adviser to the government told us that educational leadership in London today was typically based on ‘a forensic focus on performance’. This strong association between leadership and the use of data as management information was mentioned often in interviews. Several interviewees remarked on the dramatic change in accountability in London schools. This increased accountability was made possible by a revolution in the use of data, as one interviewee commented:

‘I think the biggest change among teachers is around accountability. I think that there is a real understanding that individual teachers are accountable for the outcomes of their children and that there is a much clearer expectation now about teachers, about the fact that their performance is judged by pupils’ performance than there ever used to be.’

For this respondent, data-based accountability was closely associated with the question of moral purpose. Access to robust comparative data fuelled a ‘righteous indignation’ that students’ precious life chances were being blighted by existing poor provision. This allowed leaders to create a powerful case for change based on the proposition that: ‘Our children can achieve better, and that what they’re achieving is scandalous and that what we have to do is make a difference’.

This association of data-based accountability with professional responsibility operated across the education system in London. Local authority managers, leaders of academy chains, headteachers and individual teachers were all challenged to perform by the existence of student data that was available and was analysed at every level of the system. While ILEA and London boroughs in the 1990s had pioneered the development of comparative data, the difference from 2000 onwards was that the data was increasingly used to support a tough performance management regime. It was the combination of moral purpose, data literacy and the application of a theory of change that made transformation possible. Interviewees described how the data allowed leaders to challenge low expectations in a highly practical and effective way, for example:

‘I thought the way the data allowed you to pair schools up in ways that we were never able to do inside an authority was a revelation, so I could go to a head of a school in East London and I could say “I know you tell me you’re like no-one else in Tower Hamlets so what about this school in Hammersmith, it’s got exactly the same proportion of boys there, exactly the same proportion of free school meals” you’re just knocking off excuses really and then say “now tell me why you’re not doing as well as that school?”’

LOCAL AUTHORITY MANAGERS, LEADERS OF ACADEMY CHAINS, HEADTEACHERS AND INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS WERE ALL CHALLENGED TO PERFORM BY THE EXISTENCE OF STUDENT DATA THAT WAS AVAILABLE AND WAS ANALYSED AT EVERY LEVEL OF THE SYSTEM.

Our expert witnesses, many of whom were themselves London leaders, linked the data-driven approach to the idea of focus. They talked about the need for unremitting and relentless leadership action. One highly experienced director of children's services stated this succinctly: 'I remember back in 2004 I think [...] I remember the phrases being used in our Ofsted report about just 'relentless', you know relentless leadership, relentless activity and that's what we did, that's what we did.'

ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE

Many of the people at the heart of the London reforms adopted a deliberately positive view and sought to avoid a 'deficit model' for school improvement, placing an emphasis on solutions rather than blame.

London Challenge was intentionally designed to change the culture of education. The Challenge's approach was influenced by Michael Fullan's influential book *'Leading in Culture of Change'* (2001). This text and Collins' *'Good to Great'* so impressed London's Schools' Commissioner Tim Brighouse that he ordered a stock to hand out to headteachers (Collins, 2001). Fullan begins his book with a conceptual model that emphasised ways of unleashing 'energy, enthusiasm and hope' – one of Brighouse's catchphrases (Fullan, 2001: 4).

While London Challenge was the most sustained and wide-ranging mission-driven attempt to build collective moral purpose, a range of programmes, organisations and initiatives took a similar approach:

- The transformation of Tower Hamlets was motivated by a sense that pupils should be able to achieve more: sandwiched between the City and Canary Wharf, the borough's pupils should not be trapped by intergenerational underachievement.
- Teach First is explicitly designed around a 'mission' that 'no child's success in life should be limited by how much their parents earn' (Teach First, 2014).
- The high-performing academy chain ARK couches its recruitment in terms of 'Make a difference' and an aim of creating 'outstanding schools that give every pupil, regardless of their background, the opportunity to go to university or pursue the career of their choice' (ARK Schools, 2014b).

One interviewee coupled London Challenge and Teach First together as two initiatives that were 'very, very positively focused and so much in education reform is negatively focused'. The positivity of London Challenge's approach was constantly emphasised during interviews.

Further examples of positive practices that built a sense of possibility and collective moral purpose include:

- employing language that emphasised London's shared identity – for example 'Chartered London Teacher' emphasised what schools and teachers had in common rather than what set them apart
- using inspirational, aspirational language and targets: London needed to become 'the best' even when this seemed 'pie in the sky'; Christine Gilbert in Tower Hamlets is credited with negotiating DfES targets up because they were not aspirational enough for her borough
- labelling the most challenging schools 'Keys To Success' rather than 'failing schools'
- celebrating headteachers' achievements with honours (for example making key figures Knights and Dames)
- Tim Brighouse following up school visits by writing personal letters to the teachers and headteachers he met: this was then 'modelled across London by the headteachers, a sort of culture of thanking people' according to one headteacher
- challenging limiting beliefs, as one director of children's services told us: 'If I caught anybody saying that "what do you expect from these kids?"[...] that would be something that would be deemed very serious indeed. We had a phrase around then: "You can do anything, you can't do everything, but you can do anything".'

Similarly another interviewee recounted that when schools he worked in talked about the challenge of having high proportions of pupils for whom English was an additional language, he would say: 'Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it wonderful? You've probably got a Shakespeare in there!'

The impact of a positive approach is clear when headteachers talk about why they made the decisions they did. One highly successful headteacher told us that she would never have taken on the KTS if it were not for the positive language used by the senior figures from London Challenge. Similarly, another headteacher described being pleased to work on KTS because she had 'heard about this London Bus' and was pleased to join it. She went on to describe KTS as 'the best thing that happened to me'. Despite the fact that we cannot 'measure' the impact of moral purpose and positivity, these examples show that headteachers were sensitive to these issues of language.

DESPITE THE FACT THAT WE CANNOT 'MEASURE' THE IMPACT OF MORAL PURPOSE AND POSITIVITY, THESE EXAMPLES SHOW THAT HEADTEACHERS WERE SENSITIVE TO THESE ISSUES OF LANGUAGE.

It is difficult of course to quantify the effect of positivity; however, we can get some measure of its role by contrasting the ‘buy-in’ achieved in London with other initiatives that had similar goals but which were presented more negatively. London Challenge became a much-loved brand with schools celebrating being part of the programme. For example one Challenge Advisor described a big billboard outside a school proclaiming ‘We are part of London Challenge’ and one director of children’s services admitted he labelled lots of things ‘London Challenge’ even if they had nothing to do with it because it had such positive associations. Casting London Challenge in a positive light was a substantial achievement given some of the initial attitudes:

‘Initially when London Challenge was set up with five boroughs nobody wanted anything to do with it, because to be part of London Challenge meant that you were a problem. But when the five boroughs that got involved showed how it could work I think other boroughs started to say “Hey, we want a piece of this”.’

In contrast, when in 2008 the government launched an all-England initiative based on features of London Challenge, the branding did not accentuate the positive to the same extent. This project was known as National Challenge and when National Challenge schools were announced, headlines emphasised the punitive and negative aspects of the programme – for example: ‘Civic chiefs face a caning on schools’ (George, 2008) and ‘Minister’s threats put schools in turmoil, say heads’ (Curtis, 2008).

Berliner describes the ‘devastating’ consequences of the negative associations of National Challenge, asking the question: how could a large investment in schools have such unintended consequence?

‘Why did a scheme that would pump £400m into the secondary school sector play so badly? Because the government didn’t understand that a policy which included a list of schools below a target and an ultimate sanction of closing them would be the top line of a news story, rather than a generous package of support. It’s like going into the lion’s den with a tin of cat food. You’ll be on the menu first.’ (Berliner, 2008: 1)

LEADERSHIP UNDERPINNED BY A THEORY OF CHANGE

The stakeholders interviewed were drawn from different professional backgrounds and collectively had experience in:

- school leadership
- management of academy chains
- LA leadership
- management of national and regional school improvement strategies
- management of the national school inspectorate
- senior roles in the Civil Service
- management of national professional associations.

Across these different contexts for leadership there was a common sense of professional efficacy based on the need to apply tried and tested ideas about action. For some these ideas were based on a reading of the research literature. For others the frame of reference was the previous experience of the individual. However it was derived, our stakeholders typically had a theory of change or action that gave them a framework for their work as leaders. There was a common view that school reform was not, in the words of the cliché, ‘rocket science’. The content of these leadership theories varied from individual to individual but collectively covered such topics as:

- reforming large educational systems
- managing middle-tier functions such as local authority school improvement services or the leadership of academy chains
- knowledge mobilisation and effective school-to-school professional learning
- school improvement at the level of the individual institution.

Possessing a framework for action strengthened the sense of possibility and encouraged optimism about change and impatience with those who thought that the status quo could not be changed. One respondent, for example, summarised his view of the required method for urban school reform in 20 self-confident words: ‘Use the best school leaders, focus on high quality teaching and learning, bring talented young teachers in. There you go.’

Other leaders interviewed had rather more detailed versions of the same thinking about the overall theory of change. For another of our interviewees the London reforms were, either by accident or design or some mix of the two, an effective application of a formula based on the best research into system reform which requires:

- exceptional people in system leadership positions
- the data needed to hold people to account
- high accountability and high autonomy
- a commitment to empower school leaders.

MANY OF THE INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE LONDON STORY WERE CONSIDERED BY THEIR PEERS TO BE QUITE REMARKABLE LEADERS.

A clear theory of change typified the leadership thinking of the outstanding headteachers and senior staff within academy chains that we interviewed. One head of an academy chain described the consistent ‘turnaround’ strategy that his organisation implemented in London schools. This involved the use of standard operating procedures in core areas such as the performance management of teachers, approaches to pedagogy and student assessment:

‘We introduce a different curriculum, we introduce intensive literacy and numeracy schemes. We feel we have got a technology for school improvement. In other words we have a view [...] you have to have a view. How do you actually improve literacy? because it doesn’t happen by wishing for it. How do you improve numeracy, what is the stuff you do, how do you target kids, how much do you expect them to improve by, what are you expecting from those? So we have got all that stuff and we put that in.’

Another stakeholder who had played a key role in London Challenge talked passionately about how the profession knew how to bring about school improvement through structured support and challenge. He described this as ‘the methodology’, and expressed his frustration that it was not universally used: ‘The methodology! I’m getting a bit too enthusiastic now, sorry! The methodology is there. We don’t need the talk about the radical solutions because we’ve got them.’

This idea of the application of proven practice, rather than a search for innovation was also expressed by a former civil servant. In discussing the ITP and OTP programmes, which appear to have helped improve pedagogical practice in participating schools, he commented that the thinking behind these courses was not new or particularly innovative. It was the energetic application of existing proven practice that characterised the programme. One interviewee explained:

‘That was just a well-designed programme to help people adopt known effective practices [...] On the whole we thought more about how to get the known effective practice more widely used, rather than thinking about how to develop innovative methods, models and so on.’

THE EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP OF KEY INDIVIDUALS

Many of the individuals who were involved in the London story were considered by their peers to be quite remarkable leaders. The person who attracted the greatest number of comments about his individual contribution and distinctive leadership style was Tim Brighouse. He was closely followed by the senior civil servant, and now academy chain leader, Jon Coles. Both Brighouse and Coles were thought by their peers to have brought unusual leadership energy and insight to the transformation of London schools.

Their work was described in positive terms by people from many different backgrounds:

'I wouldn't underestimate Tim Brighouse himself, [or] Jon Coles himself. You know, there were people leading this programme who, because of their combination of experience, ability and authority, commanded the respect that was needed for this to be something that everyone signed up to.'

(Former minister)

'There could have been civil servants who would not have let that approach work because they were more used to working in a prescriptive top-down way. So I actually think Jon's ability to understand that, probably alongside Tim Brighouse, and the ability to let that function – when possibly there may have been concerns raised about needing a more clearly structured top-down approach – I think that was a strong contributory factor.' (Senior university academic)

'Brighouse spent hours doing all this stuff, and he engaged everyone, and he had the confidence to do it; without his leadership we would never have got anywhere.' (Leader of a headteachers' professional association)

BY SHAPING A COLLECTIVE, MISSION-DRIVEN CULTURE AROUND EDUCATION IN LONDON, KEY INDIVIDUALS WERE ABLE TO SET A CONTEXT IN WHICH TEACHERS AND LEADERS COULD FLOURISH.

By shaping a collective, mission-driven culture around education in London, key individuals were able to set a context in which teachers and leaders could flourish. One headteacher explained that the workforce was willing to go to huge lengths and do 'whatever it takes' to achieve the vision as a result of these individuals' approach: 'People will walk over glass for those kinds of people because it's so interesting and exciting and you feel as if you're doing a great job and you're really making a difference.'

The theme of exceptional leadership extends well beyond Tim Brighouse and Jon Coles. Teach First has been led energetically and successfully from the beginning by Brett Wigdortz, and he has given the organisation a distinctive character, particularly in terms of its moral purpose. Key academy chains, such as ARK Schools and the Harris Federation, have benefitted from leadership of a high order and, like Teach First, a substantial measure of leadership continuity over the last decade. Some of the most effective LAs enjoyed significant 'stability' of leadership, according to some of the borough interviewees.

In addition to the Tim Brighouse's charismatic leadership, London Challenge had real depth in terms of leadership expertise. The same names repeatedly crop up in discussions with key stakeholders about talented and influential leaders: David Woods (who worked for the DfE as principal London Challenge Adviser and later Commissioner for London); George Berwick and Sue John (both London headteachers who worked for NCSL in directing the leadership strategy for London Challenge) and many more. At the next managerial level, one highly regarded group were the Challenge Advisors who worked closely with the KTS schools and the vulnerable local authorities. They adopted a problem-solving approach and had a high degree of credibility with both schools and local authorities.



They won the trust of headteachers and local authority officers who could easily have perceived them in fearful or antagonistic terms were it not for their professional skill. In their 2010 evaluation of London Challenge Ofsted paid tribute to the role of the Challenge Advisors for their relentless commitment to the key messages of the programme:

‘From the beginning of London Challenge, London schools have received clear, consistent leadership from the team leaders appointed by the DfE. Their message has been the pressing need to improve educational standards and the sense of professional duty incumbent on teachers to do this for London children. Over time, that message of commitment and encouragement has been repeated consistently by the London Challenge leadership team. These endeavours have reinforced a clear sense of moral purpose among teachers and school leaders to close attainment gaps between London and the rest of the country. The staff in almost every school that contributed to this survey expressed their commitment to London children, not simply to those in their own school. Their sense of pride in being part of a city-wide education service, irrespective of whether they were receiving or providing support, was a fundamental characteristic of London City Challenge.’ (Ofsted 2010: 4)

SUMMARY

As with the school improvement strategies discussed in chapter 4, the successful role played by leadership during the London transformation cannot be allocated to one single facet of the concept, and instead is due to a complex combination of approaches and individuals.

Aspects of leadership which can all be considered crucial to the success of London include:

- long-term sustained political will and support
- the identification of outstanding headteachers from across London to provide system leadership and to support the KTS schools
- the role played by key individuals such as Tim Brighouse and Jon Coles
- an approach to leadership which was underpinned by data and based upon theories of change
- an emphasis on a shared moral purpose and values
- an overwhelming sense of positivity in the approach.

An emphasis on effective leadership at different levels of the system (political, system and school level) was underpinned through a number of overarching approaches, and it was this combination which can ultimately be considered responsible for much of the London success story.



CHAPTER 6:

LESSONS FROM LONDON

The London story is of global significance. While the context of every great city is distinct, policymakers worldwide who are interested in urban school reform can learn from the London experience.

In this concluding chapter we reflect on some of the key lessons that can be derived from the London school improvement story. We have identified seven lessons from the London story, outlined below.

LESSON 1: ENSURE THAT POLICY IS BASED ON HARD EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Although there is substantial *evidence of improvement* in London schools, there is much less *evidence of the causes of impact* because the evaluation of the effect of the various interventions was not a high priority when the London reforms were being designed. Several of the key London reforms – specific London Challenge interventions, the use of sponsored academies and the deployment of Teach First teachers – could have been piloted first and subject to randomised controlled trial testing. This did not happen. London interventions have been evaluated by expert researchers but the absence of a comparator control group for any specific programmes severely limits our ability to measure the precise impact of particular approaches.

Take the example of Teach First as it is the easiest of the policies, programmes and reforms discussed in this report with which to demonstrate the extent to which there was a missed opportunity. The programme was an attempt to adapt for London a well-established American model for teacher recruitment known as Teach for America. A small band of Teach First teachers were deployed in highly-disadvantaged London schools in September 2003. The impact of their work could have been tested through the use of a control group of similarly disadvantaged London schools who were not involved. A similar point could be made about particular facets of the London Challenge suite of interventions and the use of sponsored academies in places where previous schools had a history of failure.

Of course there are reasons why the policymakers did not trial each of the various London interventions. Some decisions were motivated by an ethical concern to share the benefits of promising programmes as soon as possible. In addition, politicians press for rapid change. Organising rigorous field trials rather than going straight to ‘roll-out’ involves delay and reduces the short-term political benefit of new reforms. However, these views represent a barrier to effective evidence-based policymaking.

The lesson is that policy in a fundamental area such as urban school reform should start with the testing of the benefits of promising interventions in a systematic way through the use of pilot phases, carefully matched control groups and complementary qualitative investigations of the contextual supports and barriers. Then, if evidentially supported, scaling up the roll-out of successful interventions should continue to involve experimental, controlled investigation alongside the collection of rich qualitative data. School reform is too important to be left to intuition or even educated guesswork.

LESSON 2: MAINTAIN A SUSTAINED AND CONSISTENT POLICY MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE OVER TIME

London schools benefitted from the highly unusual level of long-term, cross-partisan support that they received from government. The academies programme, for example, began in 2002 and is still in place today. London Challenge ran from 2003 to 2011 and the office of the Mayor of London is attempting to build on aspects of the programme today. Teach First teachers were initially deployed in 2003 and a new cohort of idealistic young teachers have gone to work in London schools in every subsequent year over a decade. This sustained ‘attack’ on underperformance has paid dividends. The London story is a reminder that school reform is not a quick fix. Changing professional culture is not a question of ‘flicking a switch’ or issuing a ministerial directive. It requires, to use the word of one of our expert witnesses, a ‘relentless’ focus over a long period of time. It is one of the characteristics of high-performing jurisdictions, such as Finland and Singapore, that education policy maintains a large degree of consistency over time. This is also one of the key lessons from the success of London schools.

LESSON 3: USE PERFORMANCE DATA SYSTEMATICALLY TO MAKE THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Our expert witnesses described how the ‘terms of trade’ changed in London so that schools were increasingly run in the interests of students rather than in the interests of the workforce. This was made possible through the gathering and comparative analysis of performance data at every level of the London education system. Performance in the years 2000–2003 was highly varied, with some schools doing well and some doing badly despite the fact that they served very similar communities. It was the benchmarking of data that made it possible to challenge underperformance on the compelling grounds that if other schools were doing much better with a similar intake of students significant improvement was possible. The use of data, therefore, generated both optimism and urgency about the need for change.

LESSON 4: TRANSFORM UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS THROUGH WELL-MANAGED, SECTOR-LED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES

London pioneered the successful use of expert practitioners as leaders of change in the context of individual underperforming schools. Central to this was the work of serving headteachers designated as NLEs, with an outreach responsibility for the improvement of other schools. The best schools became hubs for professional development through their work as teaching schools. Sector-led school improvement activity was of benefit not only to the ‘recipient’ schools but also to the ‘home’ school because the partnership relationships created an enhanced environment for reflection on school effectiveness.

The NLEs in London schools operated both as the leaders of individual schools and as system leaders. This was possible because they accepted that as system leaders they had a shared responsibility for the performance of students at community level in addition to their responsibility for students at their own individual schools.

While the London story demonstrated the potential of a sector-led model, it also confirmed that school-to-school support requires careful management. In particular, NLEs as consultant leaders needed very careful selection, training and quality assurance, as there is no guarantee that a good headteacher will make for a good consultant leader.

LESSON 5: DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE 'MIDDLE TIER' TO SUPPORT SECTOR-LED IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITY

While London schools did not improve through the imposition of 'top-down' solutions, they did benefit from organisational support at a city-wide and more local level. It is not enough for central government to create a system of largely autonomous schools. There is a need for support mechanisms at an accessible and local level. London Challenge operated at borough and city level and encouraged London teachers' perceptions of themselves as sharing a common cause with other London teachers. The more recent activities of the Mayor's office similarly play to this sense of city-wide London identity.

The more effective local authorities and academy chains fulfilled a vital role in the provision of data-based support and challenge for schools and the brokerage of support from other high-performing schools. The level of 'middle tier' support for London schools has reduced since 2010 while the pattern of improvement has continued. Some of our expert witnesses were concerned that without more mediation and support the sector-led approach to school improvement remained fragile.

LESSON 6: ENSURE THAT TEACHING IS A CAREER OF CHOICE FOR TALENTED AND IDEALISTIC RECRUITS

In London efforts have been made to attract and retain high quality teachers and the professional culture across the capital has improved. Teach First has contributed significantly to a new perception of teaching in London as a high status profession for able graduates. In the past many well qualified teachers have sought posts in schools serving relatively prosperous communities. Teach First has changed this by requiring participants to teach in the capital's most disadvantaged schools. This has contributed to the renewed energy and optimism in these schools.

LESSON 7: APPLY PRESSURE FOR CHANGE THROUGH ALLOWING MARKET ENTRY TO NEW PROVIDERS OF EDUCATION SERVICES

London's school system since 2000 has become more diverse, particularly through the introduction of sponsored academies. Although the evidence for their performance is mixed, the best new sponsored academies are some of the highest-performing state-funded schools in England. Some of our expert witnesses spoke about how the very existence of an alternative form of governance, through the academies programme 'concentrated the mind' and assisted others to 'raise their game'.

New providers also assisted in the improvement of some LA education services. Although again the evidence is mixed, boroughs such as Islington and Hackney benefitted from new forms of public-private partnership and creative thinking about the role of new providers of education services.

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APPENDIX A: METHODS

The particular elements employed to investigate the success of London' schools included:

- Literature review – conducted to assess the existing evidence base and define the main lines of enquiry for the study. The review included academic sources, government reports and papers and media articles. These have been used in two ways: firstly, to produce a list of possible explanations for the success that London has experienced, and secondly, to offer either support or challenge for those theories.
- Secondary analysis of quantitative and qualitative data – a key element of the methodology adopted here has been the collection and scrutiny of existing quantitative data. Typically such data has been used to track change over time, compare London with other parts of the country or the national average in order to establish the extent to which any given cause proffered for London's success appears to be supported by evidence.

We are particularly indebted to Chris Cook for allowing us access to his analyses – re-analysis of these has enabled us to undertake careful consideration of possible explanatory factors often mentioned in the context of the changes seen in London. The work of Cook has been drawn on several times. His original analysis was based upon the National Pupil Database (NPD) showing LA performance between 2004 and 2012 excluding 'equivalents' – non-GCSE qualifications that were considered at the time to be equivalent to GCSE. He allocates each pupil eight points for an A* down to one for a G for the best five GCSEs. His analyses show how well pupils do compared to how they would be expected to do according to regression models which take into account their ethnicity, Special Educational Needs (SEN) and socio-economic background (defined by their Lower Super Output Area's Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) score). He has also run this type of analysis at borough level to compare how well pupils in different boroughs perform compared to how they would be expected to perform if they were in one major city (Birmingham). The results are relative to national averages so are immune to grade inflation. We have used the difference between 2004 and 2012 scores to calculate contextualised improvement over time at borough level.

In addition to this, other key data sources have been used. These include performance measures such as percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-Cs GCSEs (PTAC5); percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C GCSEs including English and mathematics (AC5EM) – with and without GCSE equivalents; Ofsted school inspection data; the DfE's school census from 2004 onwards; demographic and economic data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on migration, ethnic composition, job density, occupational structure; data on funding – DfE Consistent Financial Reporting data, data on revenue income, surpluses, deficits, and LA outturn statements; workforce information including the School Workforce Census and the database of teacher records for pensions.

There are some limitations associated with the data that was collected. For example some data does not separate inner and outer London, and some does not allow for comparison over time because of the changing nature of what was collected or the ways in which information has been reported.

- Semi-structured interviews – conducted with 25 key individuals, all of whom had been or still were key figures in the London or national education system either at a political, school or LA level or in other educational organisations including multi-academy trusts or ‘chains’. Some interviewees personally spanned multiple categories because of the different jobs they have undertaken over the last two decades.

The semi-structured interview script was structured around four themes: firstly, the interviews examined the nature of London schools’ success; secondly, they explored the reasons for this success; thirdly, they considered the validity and importance of the main themes identified in the literature review, and finally they considered the transferability of London’s success to other contexts.

Most interviews were between 30 minutes and an hour in duration, and were conducted either in person or by telephone.

- Focus groups and interviews in six LAs (Haringey, Havering, Tower Hamlets, Southwark, Barking & Dagenham and Westminster) – a total of seven practitioner focus groups (in five schools across four boroughs) were undertaken by NFER. The focus groups were conducted in state secondary schools (both local authority maintained and academies) which had been established for at least ten years and were based in one of four focus boroughs: Haringey, Havering, Southwark and Tower Hamlets. The focus groups were attended by 32 participating staff including senior leaders, middle leaders, subject leaders, teachers and an administrator. During the focus groups the participants were asked to comment on the changes they had perceived over time related to their motivation to work where they do; the opportunities for CPD, change in the nature of networking, collaboration and leadership; the nature of challenge, accountability and underperformance; and changing demography and opportunity.

An additional 25 interviews were conducted in all six boroughs. These interviews involved LA executives and representatives, outsource service providers, government officials and independent consultants. The interviews were semi-structured, and participants were asked about changes related to teacher and leadership development; measuring and improving school performance; demographic change; context and moral purpose.





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