

Report by Tony McAleavy, Anna Riggall and Rachael Fitzpatrick

Rapid school improvement



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Welcome to Education Development Trust

Education Development Trust, established over 40 years ago as the Centre for British Teaching and later known as CfBT Education Trust, is a large educational organisation providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in our educational research programme. Please visit www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com for more information.

About the authors

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Foreword

At Education Development Trust we think it is essential that school leaders and policy-makers make informed decisions based on the best possible evidence. It matters to us that all children and young people have the opportunity to benefit from a quality education. Our research programme aims to contribute to an evidence-informed debate about the best ways to ensure educational quality.

This study is important because it helps us to understand some of the practicalities of school improvement. We looked at the experience of an unusually interesting group of schools in England: those in which a dramatic improvement in school quality (as measured by national school inspectors) had taken place in a short period of time. We were particularly interested in examining what school leaders did, and what took place in these schools, during such rapid 'turnarounds'.

This report details what we have learnt from these stories of 'rapid school improvement'. The findings are encouraging and provide grounds for optimism. At the same time this study highlights the complexities of school leadership during adversity, and the often-tough personal experiences of those who undertake the difficult role of leading change in an underperforming school.

This report is important reading material for all school leaders and policy-makers in England. It is also important at the international level, because policy-makers all over the world are wrestling with the problem of how to improve underperforming government-funded schools. We hope it will provide both practical insights and inspiration for anyone involved in the business of bringing about rapid school improvement.



Steve Munby

Chief Executive
Education Development Trust

Chapter 1

What drives rapid school improvement?



This study investigates the experience of an unusual and unusually interesting group of schools.

There are about 20,000 government-funded primary and secondary schools in England. According to Ofsted a very small proportion of these schools have recently improved dramatically from a previously low baseline. According to Ofsted data from late 2015, 360 schools had moved from an Ofsted rating of 'inadequate' (category 4) to 'good' (category 2) – or in a very few cases, to 'outstanding' (category 1) – in two years or less. This study engaged with the headteachers of a sample of these schools in order to better understand their perspective on this apparent transformation in the educational performance of their schools and to ascertain how they think the improvements had taken place.

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A framework for rapid school improvement

The headteachers who participated in this study clearly articulated the approach they had taken to improve their schools. Each headteacher appeared to have, in effect, a theory of how to bring about change based on what they saw as the key levers for school improvement. While many individuals emphasised distinctive features of their personal approach, there was also a marked degree of consistency and agreement about the components of the theory of change. Most of the participant headteachers conceptualised the requirements for school improvement in a very similar way. This shared framework could be summarised as follows (see page 10):

Headteachers' framework for rapid school improvement

Teaching quality is the key. Action on several levels is needed to improve the teaching quality in a school:

- *At the beginning of the improvement process, assess each individual teacher's performance, attitude and capacity to improve*
- *Identify the best teachers, teachers with potential and those other teachers who are 'rescuable'*
- *Support poor teachers, but if they fail to improve encourage them to leave*
- *Bring in talented new teachers to supplement the existing staff. Introduce systems to monitor student outcomes as well as teacher performance; use these as an internal accountability mechanism to both measure and incentivise good teaching*
- *Support the teachers to develop their professional practice with the best possible professional development opportunities*

The momentum for improvement must come from the school's leadership. Initially there is unlikely to be sufficient distributed or shared leadership capacity in an inadequate school, so the head teacher may personally need to take a relatively directive role. Over time this should change. Using a twin-track approach the head teacher should initially prescribe new ways of doing things while building the capacity of the whole school team so that responsibility for decision-making is widely shared in the long term. The priority for building shared or distributed leadership is likely to be twofold: strengthening the personnel and the skill of the senior leadership team (SLT), and developing the role of middle leaders such as those with subject responsibility.

Two core responsibilities for school leaders are monitoring and motivation. Leaders must monitor the performance of both students and teachers, ensuring that students are on track and that teaching is consistently good and complies with whole-school expectations. Yet monitoring is not enough, and by itself can be demoralising. It needs to be combined with motivation and the building of trust. Through positive feedback, improved school climate, excellent professional learning opportunities and 'open-door' communications, leaders can greatly increase teacher morale and motivation to do the best they possibly can.

Leading a school from inadequate to good is tough, and can be lonely. Leaders require technical skills as well as fortitude, determination and resilience. Schools leaders need support from both outside and inside the school. External support can come in many forms: head teachers of other schools, local authority advisers, executive head teachers (if schools are federated) and senior staff from multi-academy trusts (if schools are academies). Key sources of internal support include the SLT and the governing body; where such support is weak, this exacerbates the problems of inadequate schools. Building the capacity of the SLT and governing body should be a priority so that these bodies help accelerate rapid school improvement. Clearly dividing responsibilities between the 'hands-on' executive role of the head teacher and the 'arms-length' non-executive role of the governing body is an important precondition for school effectiveness.

Highly effective school leaders bring about transformation by building coalitions for change with the key stakeholders: teachers, students, governors and parents. Parental support for change is vital. Schools considered inadequate have typically lost the trust of the parent body. There is a need to rebuild trust by energetically engaging with parents both collectively and individually. This is likely to involve frequent written communications, school events that bring parents in and let them see the changes that are taking place, high levels of 'school gate visibility' and systematic measurement of parental satisfaction.

The research methods

The methodology for this study is described in detail in Chapter 2. In summary, a qualitative, mixed-methods research design was used, which was guided by the overarching question:

How do headteachers in rapidly improving schools explain the changes that have taken place in their schools?

The research involved the following phases:

- Analysis of the existing literature on rapid school improvement
- Survey of headteachers
- Semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of the surveyed headteachers
- School case studies – a ‘triangulation’ exercise with a sub set of six schools, this involved interviews with the chair of governors and focus groups with teaching staff
- Overall analysis of findings

The literature review enabled the construction of an initial model of the key factors of rapid school improvement, which was tested with the survey. This model highlighted eight factors: leadership, vision and ethos, teaching quality, governance, monitoring and evaluation, curriculum, staff performance management, and improvements to relationships between schools and the parents and community.

A total of 93 headteachers agreed to take part in the study. They represented about a quarter of all the relevant schools (93/360). There was a roughly proportionate mix of primary and secondary schools, with 19 participating secondary schools from a national group of 54 that met the criteria and 74 participating primaries from a national group of 306 that met the criteria.

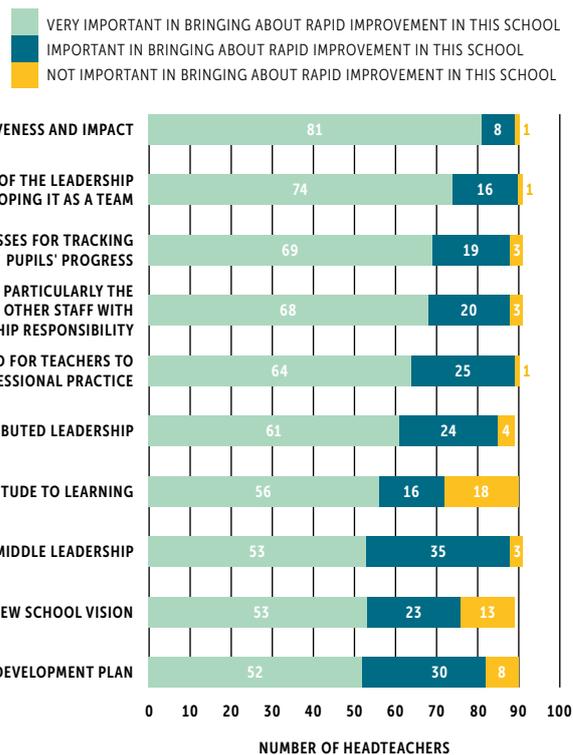
The initial survey revealed that there had been considerable recent turnover of headteachers in schools that were subject to serious criticism from Ofsted. The participants were divided, roughly equally, between heads who had been in post before the first inspection (48) and those who arrived shortly afterwards (43). In five cases there had been two changes in headteacher since the first critical inspection report. Most of the 48 ‘survivors’ who were present during the critical inspection had arrived shortly before that inspection.

The initial survey revealed that there had been considerable recent turnover of headteachers in schools that were subject to serious criticism from Ofsted

Survey findings: a high level of consensus

Chapter 3 summarises the findings from the survey of headteachers, which revealed a shared understanding of what matters in rapid school improvement. The survey provided a series of statements based on the literature review and asked headteachers to state whether potential explanatory factors for rapid improvement had been a priority for their schools (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: PRIORITIES ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICULARLY RAPID SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (SURVEY)



Note: responses with over 50 headteachers considering it to be an important or very important priority

There was a very high level of consensus among the headteachers about the factors associated with particularly rapid improvement in their schools. Almost all of the participants agreed about the importance of action in the following three areas*:

1. Improving teacher effectiveness and impact
2. Improving the effectiveness of the leadership team
3. Improving data monitoring for tracking pupil progress

The participating headteachers, to a striking extent, shared the same educational assumptions about the things that matter when seeking to ensure rapid school improvement. There was virtual unanimity about the importance of action in the three areas described above. The overwhelming majority of participants considered improving teacher effectiveness to be 'very important' (81) and virtually all considered this to be either 'very important' or 'important' (90). Improving the effectiveness of the leadership team was identified as 'very important' by well over three quarters of participants (74), and as either 'very important' or 'important' by almost all (88). Just under three quarters of participants identified improving data monitoring for tracking pupil progress as 'very important' (69), while almost all categorised improving data monitoring as 'very important' or 'important' (88).

In addition to these key three themes, the survey of headteachers showed further areas of almost total agreement. Almost all of the 93 participant headteachers considered the following factors to be 'very important' or 'important':

The participating headteachers, to a striking extent, shared the same educational assumptions about the things that matter when seeking to ensure rapid school improvement

*91 headteachers responded to this section of the survey

- Improving school self-evaluation, particularly monitoring by senior leaders and/or other staff with leadership responsibility
- Improving the opportunities provided for teachers to develop their professional practice
- Strengthening distributed leadership
- Strengthening subject/middle leadership

There was virtual unanimity among the survey respondents on the central role of improved monitoring. Almost all headteachers (86) stated that changes had been made to monitoring and evaluation at their school since it was judged to have serious weaknesses or placed in special measures.* Of these, 79 believed that the changes in monitoring had played a key role in rapid school improvement.

To a remarkable degree, the schools had followed the same formula. The most frequently implemented change to monitoring was the establishment of common tracking formats used by all staff (75), followed by involving governors more closely in the use of monitoring data (74).

Headteachers had an opportunity to describe the experience of being a leader in a school judged to be inadequate, including what they had learned about leadership in relation to their current school. Several themes emerged from their answers: the need for optimism, an emphasis on the importance of motivation and a willingness to get support from others.

Many respondents referred to **resilience**. Being a headteacher in a troubled school was tough, and a headteacher leading the 'turnaround' needed considerable strength of character as well as technical skill. Several headteachers pinpointed fortitude as the key learning point for them as they looked back on their experience:

'You need to be courageous and resilient with a relentless focus on standards.'

'You have to be resilient and committed to taking the necessary actions, however unpleasant, to bring about the necessary changes.'

'You need to be resolute in bringing in change where it is needed. You need total focus on what that change is, and every action/decision taken must take you further towards that change. You must share your vision with passion and conviction to bring all on board. And you must do it all with a warm smile!'

'You need to be determined, resilient and relentless. You have to be brutally honest whilst motivating people to improve. You have to always demonstrate a belief that "we can do this" even on the darkest of days.'

The schools that participated in the initial survey had experienced considerable change at the level of the school governing body.** Several headteachers (19) indicated that the original governing body had been disbanded and an Interim Executive Board (IEB) put in place after the inadequate inspection. Over half of the chairs of the governing body changed in the 12 months following the critical inspection report (55). Headteachers often believed that the governing body was not functioning well at the time of the critical inspection report. When asked to

Several headteachers pinpointed fortitude as the key learning point for them as they looked back on their experience

*89 headteachers responded to the 'Monitoring and Evaluation' section of the survey **90 headteachers responded to the 'Governing Body' section of the survey

assess the quality of the governing body's work at the time of the inspection, none categorised it as 'excellent'. The majority (65) described it as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Headteachers were asked whether steps had been taken to improve the governing body. Almost all (90) indicated that action had been taken. The most frequently cited forms of action were:

- Appointing new personnel to the governing body (60)
- Engaging governors in specific tasks such as monitoring and evaluation (59)
- Improving governors' skills and confidence in the use of performance and financial data (57)

The in-depth interviews confirmed these findings and provided rich contextual insights into how several of the headteachers had improved the capacity of the governing body.

In-depth interviews: a preoccupation with teaching quality

The results of the in-depth interviews with 16 headteachers are presented in Chapter 4. These discussions emphatically confirmed the survey finding that addressing teaching quality was the top priority in these schools. Most of the headteachers interviewed considered teaching quality to be the central theme in their rapid improvement stories. The headteachers typically reviewed teaching quality in the aftermath of the inspection. Some schools were in a chaotic and severely dysfunctional state, while others were outwardly calm and happy places but with a serious lack of quality in teaching and learning.

'The first day I was there I rang the director of education and said, "It's shocking here...I've never seen anything like it...". Everything about it was unsafe; it was horrific.'

'It was all very friendly but no data, no performance management, nothing, no systems in place and it was just that people got on well together and would try their best.'

The majority of headteachers saw the problem not as universally weak teaching, but an unacceptable variability in teaching quality across the school. One respondent described how in an initial presentation to staff the focus was on the unacceptable variability, from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding', and the fundamental unfairness of all staff being associated with the idea of requiring 'special measures' when this was the 'fault' of a sub-set of the teaching team. Since the schools were often characterised by variability in teaching quality, the best teachers were seen as the key resource. By building an alliance with these skilful (but often demotivated) staff, the headteachers set out to change the whole school's culture and ethos. In some cases re-energising these staff emerged as an important priority.

Headteachers commented on the underlying causes of the weaknesses in teaching quality. The interview data matched closely with the findings from the initial survey. The exact mix of factors varied from school to school, but five themes emerged from the interviews:

Most of the headteachers interviewed considered teaching quality to be the central theme in their rapid improvement stories

- An imbalance between the focus on care and the need for excellence in academic outcomes
- Weak systems for tracking student progress
- Poor teacher performance management
- An immature concept of distributed leadership
- A poor approach to teacher professional development

The question of 'expectations' often arose in the discussions with headteachers. They identified a frequent link between weak teaching and school culture, in particular a sense that the teachers had low expectations regarding student academic outcomes because they were unduly influenced by the prevalence of social disadvantage in the school. One headteacher described a conversation with a particularly bright girl in Year 11, which she felt epitomised the school's culture of low expectations that needed to be urgently addressed:

'I asked, "What university are you looking to go to, do you want to go into sixth form?" "Oh no, I'm going to college and do hairdressing" and I said, "Oh, you've got a love of hairdressing?" "No, but I know I'll be able to get on the course and it'll give me a job".'

Respondents to the initial survey highlighted the importance of 'systems', particularly school processes for academic tracking and teacher performance management. Headteachers confirmed this priority in the in-depth interviews, and linked the need for better standard operating procedure systems with their concerns about the inconsistency and variability of teacher performance. At the time of the critical inspection report, many schools had excessive classroom-level autonomy and no key standard operating procedures.

'The systems weren't in place. There was no paperwork...there was no performance management. I sat down with the previous headteacher for about an hour when he gave me the keys but he told me that all the teachers were outstanding but no lesson observations have ever been carried out!'

The headteachers, particularly those who were new arrivals in the schools, often emphasised how they went about establishing trust. Most made a point of trying to win the endorsement, respect and trust of the best teachers and those who were identified as having real but unfulfilled potential.

They saw this as a powerful alliance and a mechanism for dealing with resistance from other teachers.

All but one of the 16 schools experienced significant staff turnover. There were extremely different situations even within this small group of 16 schools. One school made no changes in teaching personnel between the 'inadequate' and 'good' inspection events, while in another the entire teaching staff changed:

'Within 15 months of when we got the "good", there was nobody who had been here when the school was put into special measures.'

The majority of the schools studied were somewhere in the middle, with substantial turnover and substantial staff continuity. Headteachers typically used

The headteachers, particularly those who were new arrivals in the schools, often emphasised how they went about establishing trust

the need to recruit new staff as an opportunity to upgrade both teaching and leadership capacity by bringing in particularly skilful and energetic new members of staff.

Many of the headteachers suggested that they made it clear that there would be consequences if staff were unwilling to engage enthusiastically in transforming the school. Several headteachers described how the departure of some underperforming staff members was an important aspect of school improvement. They also described how the Ofsted rating gave them significant leverage to make staff changes.

'... I'm not into these nights of the long knives that some people seem to go in for, firing everybody. I always think people are rescuable. This is about rescuing schools and rescuing people. But they have to show me that they really aren't rescuable or would block things. [One senior teacher] was so lazy... So there had to be a conversation with her and she got a job elsewhere as well.'

'I had to build leadership capacity, draft in some good teachers, assess all the children and move it forward from there....you have that leverage of, "Well you're a failed teacher because this report is saying that the teaching is inadequate, off you go" so to speak. So managing people out and then employing good teachers was a challenge but it wasn't as hard as it would be if you had people who'd just been coasting along and no, sort of, leverage of special measures..I think that really helped.'

Most headteachers established new in-house professional development programmes. These were often seen as much more powerful than external training courses. The heads identified five strategies for maximising the return on investment for professional development:

1. Prioritise school-based, staff-led training over more traditional off-site courses (junior staff with specific skills may lead training sessions)
2. Advocate on-the-job training through classroom-based coaching and mentoring
3. Establish special interest groups or communities of practice within the school for staff with a shared professional learning focus
4. Target training at specific groups (e.g. skilled teachers or middle leaders)
5. Use professional development resources from other schools with a reputation for effective practice (visit other schools, invite outside teachers to share their expertise)

One head commented on how the critical inspection judgement led to a much more systematic approach to professional development. This same head emphasised the need for a bottom-up, democratic training regime that used existing promising practice:

'The Ofsted really made us focus continuing professional development (CPD) far more sharply, which obviously paid huge dividends in terms of staff

Several headteachers described how the departure of some underperforming staff members was an important aspect of school improvement

confidence, staff competence and making sure that we had those three weekly opportunities to not just get the staff together and say "right, okay, we think this is the problem so here's some CPD", but giving everybody an opportunity to actually be involved in delivering that as well as receiving it...now we have NQTs leading CPD, we have very young teachers leading CPD, we have Teach Meet where everybody can put their two pennies worth in, and it's great so everybody feels as though they are part of that and they've got a voice and a role to play rather than it being top down.'

Low-stakes collaborative relationships between peers was often a useful adjunct to more formal accountability-based relationships:

'We sort of buddied teachers up in a way so that they could observe each in a sort of risk-free environment to see what learning looks like when you're an observer.'

Some of the headteachers described school-to-school collaboration as an essential factor in their school improvement. This was not just about support; it was also about subjecting school performance to challenging benchmarking and tough peer-to-peer accountability.

'I think the whole business of working with other schools is also vital actually and I think that in the current climate...it's a way to ensure that there is that challenge, that can really only come from other schools and that's the culture now...we've all got to be outward facing and use the best schools to challenge each other.'

There was in many cases a strong link between a more serious approach to staff development and new performance management systems.

'We introduced lesson observations three times a year by the senior staff. So, we told staff which week it was happening in but not which lesson we'd be coming to, then from those observations we'd write down the areas for development, and then staff were expected to attend a training session linked to that area for development. Where we identified strengths we'd have staff share that strength in the session as well.'

Across the board there was a renewed emphasis on staff data literacy. This was a collective responsibility. In one school, for example, breakfast data meetings were established to which all staff were expected to make a contribution. In some cases the new emphasis on student data also required changed management responsibilities. Several headteachers also gave senior and middle leaders responsibility for specific data management responsibilities.

Leadership changes took place at every level. Some headteachers set out to build a new SLT. Often this involved recruiting new senior staff, while in other cases existing staff were empowered. There was often a need for training for SLT members. One headteacher talked about how existing SLT members did not have a picture of SLT excellence and training was needed to put this right.

'But the rest of the SLTs did not know what outstanding looked like. So we did a session...it allowed us as an SLT to talk about what outstanding schools do.'

Some of the headteachers described school-to-school collaboration as an essential factor in their school improvement

Although the headteachers were clearly strong characters, they were often committed to a collegiate form of management at the SLT level. One headteacher, for example, described the need for disagreement at this level and used SLT meetings as a form of leadership training for future school leaders. There was a consistent emphasis across the interviews on the need for better-distributed leadership.

'I mean I wanted to be somebody who had distributed leadership because you can't do it all by yourself and it was about giving ownership, allowing, empowering them to be risk takers and yet still keeping an eye on everything.'

Heads used different strategies to develop middle leaders, including identifying and promoting talented staff and sending staff to observe best practice at other schools. One headteacher put a training programme in place to develop middle leaders, considering this to be a vital element of the overall school improvement strategy. Some of the headteachers recognised that they had adopted relatively directive styles of leadership in early stages of the school 'turnaround'. In the immediate post-inspection crisis the priority was not distributed leadership, but basic levels of professional consistency.

'So for every class, I'd done a class timetable and I issued it, and said, "This is what it's going to be. I bought all new books for the children, this is what they're going to be and this is, we're all going to do our literacy in these books, our maths in these books." So it was very systematic and it was very controlled in terms of that; there was no choice.'

While this 'top-down' approach was necessary in the emergency situation it was not the basis for long-term improvement. Many headteachers agreed, and saw that there was a need to 'change gear' in order to make the improvements irreversible; this involved more distributed leadership and an element of 'letting go' by the headteacher. The need was to move from prescription to greater professional autonomy. One headteacher spoke powerfully about the need to have a different paradigm of improvement on the journey from good to great, compared the one from inadequate to good. The next phase was all about empowerment and giving staff 'permission' to use their own judgement. The following testimony from two different heads makes the same point about the lifecycle of school improvement and the need to move from prescription to professional empowerment.

'Rather than it being me, they do it. So we've kept the core of what we were about when we were in special measures but it's much more distributed. Whereas it was very controlled...what we're trying to do now is get staff to almost forget that and teach how they think is right because they've got the pedagogical understanding now.'

'I think the journey from good to outstanding is going to be very different to the journey that we've already been on because it isn't going to be about me driving it, it's going to be about distributing leadership, and about senior and middle leaders driving it and about teachers driving that agenda far more and them taking ownership of what they do.'

There were often dramatic immediate changes to the personnel of the governing body in the immediate aftermath of the critical inspection judgement. Several

Many headteachers agreed, and saw that there was a need to 'change gear' in order to make the improvements irreversible; this involved more distributed leadership and an element of 'letting go' by the headteacher



headteachers described how the chair stood down soon after the inspection. They also often described significant turnover in members of the governing body. These changes were generally seen as necessary and allowed for a fresh start for the new governing body. Many of the headteachers embarked on strategies intended to up-skill the governing body, which was viewed as important in order for them to have a strong basis to challenge the head in the right areas, and not become overly engaged in the day-to-day workings of schools.

One head commented that the governing body had been limited in what they were able to achieve under the previous head because they were not provided with the necessary information to challenge: *'I had a good governing body in terms of their willingness, but at that time they only had the information that was given them...'*. This headteacher's approach to the governing body was to provide accurate data frequently to allow them to make informed decisions.

A key role for governors was considered to be to support and challenge the headship, with a particular focus on how effectively they are able to challenge. Many headteachers said they encouraged questioning from the governors, and saw them as useful in holding them to account.

'Someone who could ask really difficult questions and keep me on my toes if I'm really honest. It's really dangerous, if you don't have that person who basically their job is to challenge you on pretty much everything that comes out of your mouth, it's just so easy for the headteacher to fudge things and gloss over stuff that you don't particularly want to talk about.'

'We absolutely established from the start that the governance needed to look like a challenging and supportive group. But we also established with the school that we had to be open to challenge from the governors and that they needed to be part of that scrutinising role, which again was utterly different in terms of culture share.'

Most of the headteachers interviewed set about building a stronger relationship with parents through a new communications strategy. There was often a new spirit of transparency based on personal visibility on the part of the headteacher and open engagement through newsletters, workshops and parental satisfaction surveys. For primary school headteachers, 'school gate' visibility seemed particularly important. Parental liaison about student-specific problems was often an improvement priority. Headteachers commented on the need to be seen and to be approachable at the school gate at the end of the day as being important for building trust and showing a willingness to have an open relationship.

'So right from day one I made sure that I was very visible so I did the gate every morning and every night and literally from the second that I stood on that gate I'd get parents coming to say, "I hope you're going to be different to the last headteacher because she wouldn't let us in".'

The question of visibility was also emphasised by secondary headteachers.

'Just little things, like I made my SLT do bus duty because the buses used to be a huge source of conflict. But again, it's leading by example...'

Headteachers commented on the need to be seen and to be approachable at the school gate at the end of the day as being important for building trust and showing a willingness to have an open relationship

Headteachers' attitudes towards the inspection process

None of the 16 heads interviewed questioned the correctness of the critical inspection judgement. Quite the contrary: without exception, the headteachers accepted the fundamental accuracy and fairness of the inspection judgement.

'The team came in and saw what they saw and I think saw a very fair, accurate picture of where my school was at that time unfortunately.'

While the headteachers agreed with the judgements, they were not always happy with the process. Two headteachers commented on the fact that the inspectors arrived at the start of the inspection and immediately announced the result of the inspection, before looking at the state of the school. The data appeared to have predetermined the outcome of the inspection, which raises questions about the need for face-to-face inspection if poor test scores automatically trigger a poor inspection grade.

'The HMI walked through the door and said, "I'm putting you in special measures" as a hello to me...I said, "Well, give us a chance then because, you know, we have started these things, give us a chance." "No, I can't."

'The lead told me within the first five minutes of the inspection that we were going to be within a category, and he wasn't going to move from that, and he was very much at that time saying that if your outcomes are inadequate then everything else is going to be inadequate.'

The headteachers described a constructive engagement with Ofsted and appeared to have a fundamentally positive view of its role. For many of the headteachers this attitude was understandable because the inspection judgement did not represent a personal threat: they had arrived after or shortly before the critical inspection and were seen as part of the potential solution rather than the problem. There were many complimentary comments about the inspection:

'I thought the team were great when they came...And they did get to the bottom of [things], you know, they listened to me and my understanding of the school and where it was at.'

The interviewees made it clear that Ofsted provided them with a mandate for change, and that was why they so much welcomed the inspection findings. Several of them were clearly pleased with the highly critical inspection findings.

'I wanted it to be special measures.'

'Actually the Ofsted category enabled me, really, to push things through that I wouldn't have got away with without us being in that category.'

One of the 16 interviewed headteachers had been in charge during a prior inspection when the school was categorised as good; she had overseen the school as it moved from a category 2 to 4. When the inspection judgement was delivered, she understood that there was a serious chance she would be dismissed. Despite this she endorsed the Ofsted judgement:

The headteachers described a constructive engagement with Ofsted and appeared to have a fundamentally positive view of its role

'I fully agreed with the Ofsted report actually. It was hard listening to, because as a leader of something you don't want to be told you are inadequate. But they were a very, very professional team, and they kept me informed of their findings and discussions all the way through, and I agreed with them, as did my governing body.'

Not only did the headteachers endorse the initial inspection judgement, they also often spoke highly of the benefits of the Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) monitoring visits that took place in the months after the inspection. The insights of individual HMIs were praised, as was the positive nature of these visits. There was a sense of alignment and joint endeavour between the heads and the monitoring HMIs.

'We found working with the HMI really useful. But the HMI who came was very good, very clued up, very strong, knew her stuff and was really helpful. But we then had an HMI...who was sort of attached to us who visited us twice. He was inspecting us, clearly, but also it was done with advice...You know, people don't like HMIs in the school, they get very nervous about it. But the two HMIs we had were fantastic, they were really helpful.'

'So I was very lucky because the HMI and I...were very aligned in our thought process around where the school needed to go. He was incredibly challenging and very much made me have to fight to convince him that the school was moving forward and to prove it...but that dialogue every few months with an external person who could see the difference that had been made each time he came back was really powerful...I very much valued those visits, I enjoyed those visits.'

Not only did the headteachers endorse the initial inspection judgement, they also often spoke highly of the benefits of the Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) monitoring visits that took place in the months after the inspection

Triangulating the findings: the views of governors and teachers

Chapter 5 is based on interviews with the chair of the governing body and focus groups of teachers in six of the schools for which in-depth interviews with headteachers were conducted. The case study visits provided an opportunity to get different perspectives transformations. These stakeholder interviews largely endorsed the accuracy of the headteacher accounts, and provided added context and colour to the stories of rapid school improvement.

The next few pages provide a summary of each case study.



Case study 1

This primary school was under-performing at the time of the critical inspection report. Key Stage 2 results were below the floor standard on all measures. The head explained: 'I was presented with a RAISEonline document that was blue for everything and blue is bad, and green is good. There was no green, there was no white; it was all blue'. The initial impressions of the new headteacher were not positive following an audit of the school.

'When I came into the school the learning environment was very haphazard so it was very disorganised, there was lots of unnecessary furniture round the school, the corridors were piled high with furniture ... and there didn't seem to be much order or organisation to the way the school environment had been laid out.'

The new head placed an emphasis on transparency and communications. At the start of her first term she organised meetings for staff and parents to explain and reassure. She also instigated a number of changes with immediate effect. These included:

- A new open-door policy towards parents
- An emphasis on clarity in communicating her expectations to staff, parents and pupils
- Instigating a new system of teacher observation and feedback which was focused on teaching quality
- Reorganising staffing arrangements to ensure that capacity was where it was needed most
- Being directive about the curriculum time for different subjects: providing teachers with timetables and telling staff 'This is what it's going to be'
- Putting in more systematic support for the large number of NQTs that were in the school
- Building capacity in the governing body, providing them with information and encouraging challenge

The chair of the governing body's interview confirmed the importance of these actions, commenting that the speed at which change occurred was largely due to the 'clear vision' the new head brought to the school. The teacher focus group discussions also endorsed the head's account. Teachers talked about how her actions and presentation in the very first training session clarified the key factors that would affect pupil behaviour and morale. They also said that improvements were visible quite quickly – parents were able to see that good things were happening in the school.

The head's initial approach was directive, but staff welcomed the new clarity about expectations.

'When I came into the school the learning environment was very haphazard so it was very disorganised.'

'It was much more consistent. Everybody knew where they were going. So although it was hard work having everything be brand new, and it was, "here's your presentation policy, here's your behaviour, these are my expectations, this is what I want to be on your displays, everybody's working to the same page", so although it was a lot of work it felt right and it felt like everybody was kind of on it. It was very clear what was expected. I'd never seen a presentation policy before, or a marking policy. So although I was marking books and obviously I did have high expectations anyway as a teacher, I don't think everybody did. So that was really clear and I found that really helpful.'

Case study 2

A series of dramatic events led to a profound crisis at this secondary school. What followed was an intensely difficult period. While many improvements were set in motion, when Ofsted arrived the result was an 'inadequate' inspection judgement. The school eventually emerged much stronger with teachers who had an impressive sense of collective efficacy and respect for the way the new headteacher transformed the situation.

When the headteacher looked back on her period as acting headteacher, she highlighted how acutely she lacked the authority needed to drive change. The momentum for improvement increased considerably when she was formally appointed to the substantive role and was able to take advantage of the new authority this entailed.

Professional development had not been given much attention historically. This changed dramatically – every Wednesday part of the day was dedicated to joint professional development and planning:

'It's going to be staff CPD so nobody has got an excuse of directed time or, "I didn't have time to do this, I didn't have time to do that", but also collaborative planning within each faculty area.'

One governor who had been part of the original governing body contrasted the way the previous headteacher had restricted discussion with the transparency and open discussion that was encouraged by the new headteacher.

'Before it was more or less a case of, "Well there's the headteacher's report". He would tell us about it and, "Are there any questions? Well, that's great thank you very much."'

Teachers also told a positive story about how a school that had lost its way had been transformed by the collaborative efforts of the school team. While the teachers conceptualised the improvement as a collective act, they also recognised the role of the headteacher as a catalyst for change:

'She had a conversation with me about whether I was on board, you know? Really asking me, you know, if I'm not on board then...'

'She had a conversation with me about whether I was on board, you know? Really asking me, you know, if I'm not on board then... So there were conversations like that.'

There was overall an acceptance of the accuracy of the Ofsted judgement and an assumption that the view of school effectiveness underpinning the Ofsted methodology was well founded. One teacher articulated a fundamentally positive view of Ofsted and how it provided a 'skeleton' or form of scaffolding for the essential elements of good teaching. For this teacher, the Ofsted intervention, although difficult, had also been fundamentally beneficial:

'Well, at the end of the day you can't do well on Ofsted if your grades aren't there, and you can't get your good grades unless you're teaching the students properly, and anticipating their needs, so that's the bottom line. So the fact that we have to tailor everything we do around an Ofsted is good because it does teach you how to refine your practice and make sure it is consistent as a whole-school approach to everything we do. But at the end of the day, the teaching and learning have got to be good, and that all depends on everything. You're only going to get that if your staff are committed, motivated, doing the same thing and teaching to a good standard, so it's kind of like a full circle, really. So everything had to be moving forward, everything had to be addressed and obviously the Ofsted was the skeleton for that.'

The interview with staff in this school revealed how professionally isolated they felt before the inspection. They said the school was characterised by an absence of whole-school

approaches and a high degree of inconsistency. They emphasised the strong sense of collective action and the importance not just of senior leadership action, but of whole-staff commitment to change. Teachers also had a sense of the sequence of improvement building on the first-

phase focus on consistency and whole-school systems. Next-phase improvement required a different emphasis, with teachers being encouraged to innovate, take risks and take control of their professional learning.

Case study 3

The transformation of this school is a story of school partnership and very strong and determined leadership. A secondary school with a long-term history of student under-performance allied itself after the critical inspection report with another, much more successful, local school. Eventually the school became an academy and the schools were linked within a multi-academy trust, with the partner school as the academy sponsor. The new headteacher had previously been a deputy headteacher at the partner school, and some other staff transferred from the partner school. There were strong links between the two schools in terms of ethos, curriculum and staff development.

The new head initially arrived to provide interim support but was appointed to the substantive post. He considered the Ofsted report which led the school into special measures to be an accurate reflection of what the school was like. His overall judgement in retrospect was that:

'When I came, everything was appalling. There was nothing that wasn't [appalling].'

The head greatly valued the resource that was available from the partner school, from which he had come. The schools shared a common executive headteacher who visited weekly.

'I had the huge advantage that I was coming from [school name] which is an outstanding school. I'm about five miles away and obviously I could draw on a lot of expertise there.'

The new head made it clear to the staff at a very early stage, and in a very direct way, that he held some of them responsible for the mess the school was in.

'I think the good ones could see, welcomed it, because pretty brutally, if they are teaching a good lesson in their classroom and then next door there is chaos and carnage and that person is being paid the same salary, if not more, so I think the good staff responded straightaway.'

Initially this headteacher took a highly directive approach. As the improvements were made his methods have changed, and now he takes a more collegiate approach with a much greater degree of delegation. For him, distributed leadership was the ideal but it requires a capable team to delegate to.

'I knew I wanted to be distributed, but I had to get the right team in order to distribute!'

The chair of the governing body characterised the head's leadership style as, 'collaborative':

'He's very clear on what he wants and what he expects, but he does it in a very collaborative way, he's really inclusive.'

The headteacher was emphatic about the need for schools in special measures not to be obsessed with Ofsted. A preoccupation with 'what Ofsted might think' was not the answer. Instead the focus should be on what is right for the students. The chair of the governing body very strongly endorsed this view of the significance of 'Ofsted assumptions'.



Two focus group sessions were held with both teachers who had been at the school before the critical inspection report and those who had joined subsequently. The staff who had been there before the arrival of the new head told a story of transformation. No one disagreed with the correctness of the inspection judgement. According to the teachers, the school had changed beyond all recognition. One recalled how physically unsafe it was before the special measures judgement. Relationships with angry parents were so problematic and school site security so poor that teachers would resort to hiding from parents.

The teachers liked the headteacher's philosophy and the fact that he saw the challenge as not to please Ofsted but to ensure that students did well during their 'one shot' school education. This required a preoccupation not with Ofsted, but with student needs. Staff endorsed this approach. Teachers particularly valued the new head's

commitment to their professional development. They also welcomed the changes in personnel:

Teacher: *'I think there was definitely more accountability. I mean there were some staff who had been moved on [...] the approach before was to move them from one position to another. That's not in the best interests of the students, having those people working as teachers.'*

A number of teachers commented on improved relationships with parents. They referenced increased attendance at parents' evenings and a shift towards parents asking questions about outcomes for the children rather than making complaints about bullying or poor behaviour.

'I think also when parents contact your class, a lot of the conversations with parents were about behaviour but now it's about progress. Now parents are more interested in progress. Before it would be about behaviour and detentions and so on....'

Case study 4

In this primary school there was a substantial emphasis on improving the standard of teaching through coaching. The headteacher joined the school as a strategic adviser shortly before it received the inadequate judgement, but was asked to take the position of head after the inspection and the departure of the previous headteacher. She rapidly came to the view that the school had been largely focused on the pastoral care of the pupils while placing insufficient emphasis on academic achievement.

'I think the attitude was "Well, it's so deprived, these are disadvantaged children." There wasn't a drive for achievement for many many years here.'

When the school went into special measures, there was a shared understanding by both the new head and the existing teaching staff that

there was a need to tackle the weak leadership structures. There was also a need to create a more constructive professional climate. The head indicated that during the period immediately before the critical inspection judgement, the previous headteacher had been 'hypercritical' and unapproachable.

The head emphasised that as part of the improvement plan she wanted to transform staff expectations of the children. She had a passionate concern about the need to take action to break the link between poverty and educational underachievement. For the head, the key mechanism for achieving this transformation was to improve the quality of teaching through coaching. The starting point was not a 'deficit model' but a positive 'development model'. There was a strong focus on how to help each individual

teacher recognise their particular personality type and action that might build professional self-esteem. She put great store in the concept of 'catching them doing it right', identifying existing good practice and making this into personal common practice.

Teachers corroborated the beneficial impact of this approach to coaching. They described how proposed changes were given in 'little chunks' rather than in sweeping suggestions that everything had to be changed immediately. Teachers felt that the lesson observations and feedback were all part of the new head trying to develop their teaching and find ways to increase consistency and make their lives easier. Emphasis was therefore placed on providing positive and constructive criticism as a means of improving the quality of teaching throughout the school. This was also considered to be a 'no blame' approach, in order to make teachers more open to being observed.

In addition to providing coaching to teaching staff, measures were also put in place to ensure consistency across lessons and make sure all core subjects were being taught effectively, with a particular focus on English and maths.

The head commented that the relationship with parents was particularly poor when she arrived. She described how she found a book of complaints in a desk drawer and sympathised with many of the comments. Parental engagement was improved by encouraging parents into the school and appointing a parental engagement officer.

'For the first parents we had parents' evenings and we got them in and only a few came at first. But then more started coming. I have an exceptional parental engagement officer over at [other school name] and she extended her work to come over to [school name]. She's a pastor and her missionary work is helping with parental engagement in schools in rough areas, like like [London districts]. She was a fantastic bridge as well. She will work with even very difficult-to-engage parents... We invited them in for meetings like transition meetings. When they did start the

nursery, we started with a load of workshops to help them support their children's learning. We find cake sales go down a bomb actually.'

Teachers noted these positive changes in the relationships with parents and beneficial consequences in terms of more parent volunteers and better pupil behaviour.

Teacher: *'She [the headteacher] forged good relationships with parents, she encouraged people to run courses with parents, to run workshops and stuff like that, and soon enough they came round the school and it started. We had at some points lots of volunteers, parents who were happy enough to come and give a hand voluntarily in any way, shape or form. We were given Outstanding for behaviour...we couldn't have done it and succeeded.'*

'Anything you do is tailor made. It's not just a blanket thing, "here you go, you do this". It's tailor made to that school and its issues. With very high expectations.'

In terms of the replicability of the approach, the head considered that the fundamentals would 'travel' to other schools but would require 'tailoring' and contextualisation. She was confident that the essential strategy of focusing on teaching and raising standards could be applied across all schools.

'I think the approach is replicable. I'm now helping [other schools]. I've helped quite a few under London Challenge. So I think that the principles of the approach involve being very positive. Anything you do is tailor made. It's not just a blanket thing, "here you go, you do this". It's tailor made to that school and its issues. With very high expectations. You focus on teaching and learning, don't you? It's about raising standards. So that principle, the content is bespoke to each school.'

With regard to the sustainability of the changes, the head considered that keeping focused on children's outcomes was crucial, combined with an emphasis on training the next generation of leaders.

'It's sustaining it and reinforcing it and keeping them focused on the right things, and the quality of teaching continues now. I mean I think the last round of observations was about 80 per cent outstanding. We don't necessarily get the 6 plus across the board; that's always a bit of a fight. But you usually get some 6 plusses. It's keeping them going despite the fact that what we're getting at the bottom end is a massive challenge. We've been flooded with some really SEN children, which is quite difficult. But I'm old now... so my priority is to coach up the next generation of leaders. Or coach up people to take over. That's going quite well as well.'

The chair of the governing body was unusually well qualified, having been an Ofsted lay inspector for ten years and a national leader of governance; the local authority asked him to take the position. The chair described a good working relationship with the head, working closely together to improve the school and ensure the governors were fully involved in development planning. The restructuring of the leadership team was seen as a joint achievement. The chair was proud of the governors' changes in ways of working, which were characterised by a more systematic approach.

Chair: *'We looked at the committee structure just as we looked at the senior leadership structure. I don't think there was one before [the head] came, it was a bit hit and miss and so governors talked about it and agreed what the new structure should be. We set up phase leaders which had never been done before ... and the teachers actually grew into the post; because they were inexperienced, they hadn't done it before and they grew into the post. Then governors made their visits more structured rather than just coming in and saying how nice it is and off they go, but more structured visits and reporting back on them. We got some governor visit forms and things like that. I produced a governor handbook for them which brought together all their policies. We put the school development plan in it, and also the policies that governors are responsible for, as opposed to the school policies.'*

The chair approved of the head's measured approach to change and the strong emphasis on coaching. The collaborative relationship with another high-performing school was singled out as an important way of demonstrating 'what excellence looked like' to staff.

'I suspect that many of the teachers didn't know what a good lesson was before [the new head] came but by linking with [other school name] they were able to go and see what an outstanding lesson was.'

Case study 5

The headteacher in this secondary school set out to convince staff that it was possible to go from special measures to good in 18 months. There was a sense of great urgency and energy about her approach. Even before she formally started work at the school, she instigated a development plan to ensure measures to improve were being put in place as soon as possible after the school

went into special measures. The head identified weak leadership within the school and corroborated this with teachers by requesting staff to complete a survey to identify areas for improvement. Through this urgent audit process an agenda for action was agreed based on a consensus that the school needed much-improved accountability systems.

The headteacher had considerable presence and excellent communications skills. Teachers recalled in a somewhat awestruck way how she had initially presented the agenda for action to the whole staff for the first time. There was an intense clarity and conviction about her analysis and the route map she offered staff.

'Do you remember the first time we were in the hall when she spoke to us all, and at the end of it I was like, "Oh, wow!" "This is what we need to do bam-bam-bam." And you're like, "Oh right, it's clear."

The chair of the governing body was interviewed for this study. He accepted the Ofsted judgement that previous provision was inadequate. He had been at the school at the time of the critical judgement and greatly welcomed the new head's emphasis on accountability, data and distributed leadership. The chair described the narrow insular perspective of the governing body before the arrival of the new head.

'The governing body had never been outside the school, I'd never been outside the school... so we never really got an opportunity to look at where we were and say things like "Why don't we just do this?", you know, "why don't we do that?"'

He was a huge admirer of the new headteacher, describing her as 'fantastic'. Although the chair of the governing body remained in place after the critical inspection he brought about very substantial changes to the membership of the board. He also talked enthusiastically about his visit to observe the governing body of an outstanding school, which was much more data literate.

The head was concerned about dealing with underperformance. The approach to transformation going forward was focused on urgent leadership and teacher development programmes. The school set out to benchmark almost every aspect of practice against an external measure of excellence. Every head of department had a link with an outstanding school in the area. Specialised peer reviews were conducted with a challenge provided by an

'The governing body had never been outside the school, I'd never been outside the school... so we never really got an opportunity to look at where we were and say things like "Why don't we just do this?", you know, "why don't we do that?"'

outsider from a school with distinctive expertise. One teacher described this system of expert peer reviews.

'The other thing we had as well was reviews. I've had a pupil premium review, I've had an SEN review, I'm at the moment doing a teaching assistant review, so we've reviewed every area and we've been paired up obviously with an outstanding school so the pupil premium review was with [school name], which is outstanding, and they came and did a review of pupil premium, and then they gave me ideas, so we've had a lot. And then for the SEN review I had a SENCO who's led an outstanding department, and a pastoral review, so we've had outstanding schools and leaders working with us to look at what we've got in place, audit it and see what we need to change.'

An emphasis on more distributed leadership sat alongside the focus on teaching quality. The head believed that increasing the extent of distributed leadership was essential if improvements were to be sustainable. She considered that the previous head had not trusted his senior leaders, who in turn did not trust their middle leaders.

Discussions with teachers suggest that the head was successful in persuading staff that transformation was possible. One teacher indicated that the head provided not only clear focus but also the support and resources needed for improvement.

'The support of the staff was one reason why I love working here, because even though it's a very difficult time for everybody, all of the teachers and the senior leaders seem to work together and support each other – everyone

wanted the school to be good and so the support was definitely there; we had all of the focus that we needed, we had all the resources we needed to get there and we pulled together and got through. So when we did get the 'good' I felt it was well-deserved.'

Creating a quality-assured, robust and accessible student tracking system was a top priority for the headteacher from the outset. She wanted to ensure all staff were actively engaged in measuring pupil progress. Distinctive features of her approach included the immediate introduction of 'data breakfast meetings', at which student progress was discussed during brisk early morning discussions. The data system she introduced centred on two distinct areas: achievement data (that occur every half term with every department, head of department and their staff) and pastoral data (relating to attendance, absence, punctuality, behaviour including call-outs and exclusions with pastoral managers). The student tracking system was the centrepiece of the head's new accountability system.

'So I meet with every department four times a year for the data input and we know exactly where every single child is, at the moment now, from a "progress made" perspective. So we hold the department and the teachers to account for every single child.'

Rigorous data collection, professional development programmes and lesson observation all contributed to increased accountability. It was clear from discussions with teachers that they believe the new accountability system brought significant benefits.

'There was a clear focus; she knew what needed to be done. And she said, "Right, this is what

we're going to do to tackle that, and that's what we're going to do tackle that and this is our ultimate goal and this is how we're going to do it." And so people were well aware of what it was going to take to get us out of that 4 category.'

Looking back, teachers who had lived through the changes endorsed the reforms. They compared the way subject teachers were isolated in the past with the whole-school professional dialogue about teaching quality that was taking place today. They described a revolution in the use of data, with the data breakfast meetings at the heart of the new approach. The approach to professional development was democratic: everyone was expected to have some expertise to share with the group.

This emphasis on democratic expertise went some way beyond standard notions of distributed leadership. Every teacher was expected to be a leader.

Teachers in the focus group spoke positively about the head's approach. They described her style as '100 miles an hour is all I can say; whirlwind, full-on, very driven', but were also keen to point out how far the transformation had been 'a team effort'. There was an intense sense of collective satisfaction about the way the school had changed.

'A lot of staff feel really proud of the changes and also knowing that the students are getting what they deserve: the best that we can give them. Although it's been exhausting, I think it's been worth it. Although we get tired and grumble sometimes, we all do feel that the changes being made, no matter how difficult, are really worthwhile and benefiting the pupils and that's why we do our job, so it keeps us kind of happy.'



Case study 6

This primary school was judged inadequate after a period of weak and rapidly changing leadership. There was a long previous history of underachievement. The new headteacher described how the school had failed to achieve a good grade from Ofsted for 30 years. The new headteacher's preliminary audit indicated that none of the teaching at the time was good. The perceptions of the school, from those inside and outside, were not positive. The headteacher relayed a powerful anecdote that captured the low standing of the school in the eyes of both parents and staff. He explained the reaction of one of the school's teaching assistants when her own daughter failed to get a place at her school of choice and was instead allocated a place at the school where she worked:

'One of my TAs always says to me that when her child got a place here she just burst into tears because she didn't want her child to come here. And I always think that is a really good example of how the school was: it was portrayed as very much a failing school, and the last on the list that you would want to ever send your child to.'

The teachers and chair of governors echoed the fundamental truth of this story. The chair said the Ofsted judgement was 'no surprise'. Both governors and teachers associated the weaknesses with a long history of poor leadership. One teacher provided vivid testimony regarding the level of turmoil and leadership turnover that the school had experienced, and the sense of chronic enduring crisis:

'I joined the school seven years ago in 2009 when it was in a satisfactory position according to Ofsted. Since then I've had four headteachers, two Ofsteds and countless local authority reviews.'

The focus group of teachers considered that when the new headteacher was appointed things began to change for the better. They were particularly impressed by the clarity of thinking and the emphasis on supportive leadership and staff development through coaching. The headteacher was well versed in thinking about organisational

change. This provided a theoretical framework for change management. He stopped using Ofsted grades in internal lesson observations because of the demotivating consequence of repeatedly telling a colleague that their performance was 'inadequate'. He talked about the need for staff 'to fall in love again with teaching'.

'It...was a revelation to all of us how quickly the children stepped up to the mark.'

The chair of the governing body described with approval the new head's positive agenda. She talked about his wish to give the teachers 'the tools to do the best job that they could'. She endorsed his view that the school leadership should avoid a deficit model and should instead focus on 'enabling them to realise that they weren't failures as teachers'. This strategy paid some rapid dividends in her view:

'It...was a revelation to all of us how quickly the children stepped up to the mark.'

Both the chair of governors and the focus group of teachers reflected on the next phase of challenges for the school. One teacher described how 'brilliant' the headteacher was at the 'big picture stuff' that had been essential for the first phase of the reform. The question was, now that aspects of 'the big picture' were sorted, what next? Both the teachers and the governor suggested that it was important that the school's improvement should not be too key-person dependent because the current headteacher might well move on at some point. The challenge was to ensure that changes were embedded and underpinned by a truly collegiate approach. One teacher expressed some anxiety about this next phase:

'And are we going to have another transition? That's my fear now, having just got to where we've got to.'

What follows in this report

The remainder of this report presents the data and findings in full. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature and research design, Chapter 3 describes the survey findings, Chapter 4 presents the data and findings from the interviews with 16 headteachers and Chapter 5 presents the case studies in full. Chapter 6 offers some final thoughts.

Chapter 2

Investigating factors associated with rapid school improvement



Using data from late 2015, we calculated that 360 schools in England had increased their Ofsted rating from ‘inadequate’ (category 4) to ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ (category 1 or 2) in two years or less. This study engaged with the leadership of some of these schools to better understand their views about how this dramatic change had taken place in such a short period of time.

Background: the literature on rapid school improvement

The relationship between Ofsted and school improvement

This report is not directly about Ofsted and its role in school improvement. Yet Ofsted is important: this study uses Ofsted judgments as the basis for its sampling, and inevitably those judgments have been important to the schools examined. The journey from Ofsted ‘inadequate’ to ‘good’ is the basis of the stories explored in this report. While questions have been raised about the link between school improvement and inspection,¹ these are beyond the scope of this study. However, it is relevant to consider the linkages between how leaders think about school improvement in their context and the level of agreement between weaknesses identified by Ofsted and the school leadership. Hopkins et al.² make some interesting connections in their research into the links between inspection and improvement, observing that during inspection there is a focus on ‘proving’ rather than ‘improving’. Yet they conclude that the process of *proving* is an important aspect of the process of *improving*. More recent research by Jones and Tymms³ suggests that Ofsted’s role in school improvement involves setting standards, giving feedback to schools, using sanctions and rewards (in the form of judgements which can lead to school closures or benefits associated with being an outstanding school), collecting information on schools and public accountability.

Key factors in rapid school improvement

The literature on rapid school improvement suggests there are eight key elements, and that establishing improvements in each area will result in overall school improvement: leadership, teaching, vision and ethos, governance, monitoring and

The journey from Ofsted ‘inadequate’ to ‘good’ is the basis of the stories explored in this report

¹Hopkins et al. (1999); Shaw et al. (2003) ²Hopkins et al. (1999) ³Jones and Tymms (2014)

evaluation, curriculum, the performance management of staff and improvements to relationships between the schools and parents and the community (see Table 1).

FIGURE 2: EIGHT KEY ELEMENTS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

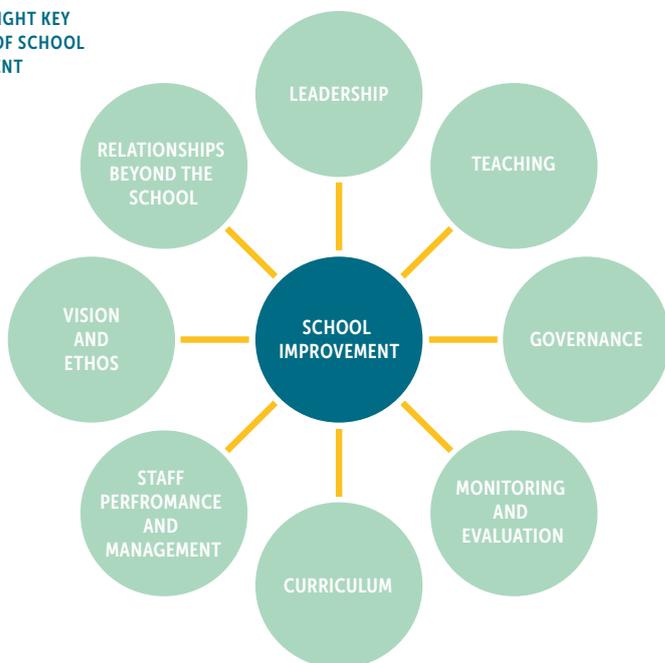


TABLE 1: FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Leadership	<p>Leadership is at the heart of all other factors – it is <i>the</i> key driver⁴</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach to (or style of) leadership is important – bossy/autocratic is good⁵ • Quality of leadership is central⁶ • New school leaders are often required in weak schools⁷ • Lead by example⁸ • Developing middle leadership and work towards distributed leadership⁹
Vision and ethos CIPR	<p>School leaders set the vision and ethos for the whole school¹⁰</p>
Governance	<p>School leaders revise the governance support provided to the schools¹¹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for governors¹²
Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)	<p>School leaders revise monitoring and evaluation¹³</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigorous M&E systems in place¹⁴ • Focus M&E on teaching and learning¹⁵ • Ensure systems are in place to use the data produced¹⁶
Curriculum¹⁷	<p>School leaders revise and streamline the curriculum¹⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus curriculum on literacy and numeracy • Revise and focus timetables to ensure pupils receive the learning opportunities they need • Meet statutory requirements • Offer pupils a variety of attractive pathways

⁴ Ofsted (2012); Hutchinson et al. (2015) ⁵ Huberman (1983) ⁶ Matthews and Sammons (2005) ⁷ Ofsted (2012); Matthews and Sammons (2005) ⁸ Ofsted (2012) ⁹ Ofsted (2012); HMIe (2010) ¹⁰ Ibid. ¹¹ Ofsted (2012) ¹² Ibid. ¹³ Ibid. ¹⁴ Ibid. ¹⁵ Ofsted (2012); HMIe, 2010 ¹⁶ Ofsted (2012) ¹⁷ Ibid. ¹⁸ Ibid.

Staff performance management	<p>Connect performance management to data and track pupil progress¹⁹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document performance management • Focus performance management on clear targets for improvement • Remove automatic pay progression scales and link pay to performance • Provide teachers with clear and consistent feedback on quality of teaching • Personalise professional development across the school • Celebrate good practice and success
Teaching	<p>High-quality teaching²⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop teachers (often through coaching and mentoring, training, performance management and sometimes collaboration with other schools)²¹
School environment	<p>New school buildings are often required²²</p>
Relationships beyond the immediate school	<p>Build better relationships with parents and the school community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter into formal or informal partnerships with other schools²³

While much of the literature acknowledges that there are clear factors associated with school improvement, some authors considered the listing of factors to be a weak reductionist approach. This discussion follows.

Does the order of events matter?

Some papers suggest there is often a clear sequence of events leading to improvement. For example, Ofsted's well-known paper 'Getting to good'²⁴ suggests a three-phase approach. The **getting started phase** focuses on clarifying or setting a school vision, establishing the attitude and skills for improvement, and clarifying what good teaching looks like should come first. The second, **'moving to good', phase** prioritises adapting monitoring and evaluation systems; revising performance management systems and the data which support them; and changing the curriculum to ensure that there is enough focus on literacy and numeracy, that timetables are giving pupils enough opportunities to learn in core subjects, and that the school offers a variety of learning opportunities and meets statutory requirements. The last element of this second phase is ensuring that the governance is supporting school improvement. Most centrally this involves training governors so they have the skills and behaviours required to challenge the school. The third and final phase is **sustaining the improvements**, which includes working towards becoming a learning community, establishing greater engagement with parents and nurturing leadership at all levels in the school.

Factors versus scenarios

This study examines how factors work together: are some more important than others? In what order should school leaders approach the review of these factors? Can certain combinations of factors be tackled together that are associated with rapid positive change?

Some scholars have also questioned the usefulness of the notion of 'factors'. For example, Huberman²⁵ was sceptical about the authenticity of reducing school improvement to isolated elements. Instead he preferred the notion of scripts or scenarios. Among his findings from a three-year study was that success 'often

While much of the literature acknowledges that there are clear factors associated with school improvement, some authors considered the listing of factors to be a weak reductionist approach

¹⁹ Ibid. ²⁰ Huberman (1983); HMle (2010); Hutchinson et al. (2015) ²¹ Ofsted (2012); HMle (2010); Hutchinson et al. (2015) ²² Ofsted (2012) ²³ Ainscow, Muijs and West (2006); Armstrong (2015) ²⁴ Ofsted (2012) ²⁵ Huberman (1983)

occurred at places where administrators exerted strong and continuous pressure on teachers'.²⁶ School leaders had to be centre stage and stay there for some time. Scenarios in which successful strong leadership came and went resulted in poor longer-term results for school outcomes. He acknowledged that other, less autocratic leadership scenarios could work – ones that relied less on this bossy leadership – but concluded that these were 'poorer bets'.²⁷ The difficulty of adopting this 'bossy' stance was that it created a tension between the needs of the leaders driving the change and the needs of the teachers carrying out the change. Teachers experience the 'demands of the innovation [the reforms introduced by the headteacher] on their present skills and the way they run their classes'.²⁸ Success relied on teachers being helped to meet the demands of the innovation.

Success relied on teachers being helped to meet the demands of the innovation

The purpose of the study

Building upon our literature review, this study explores the experiences of headteachers who have supported schools through a process of rapid, dramatic improvement. It sought to:

- Explore the extent to which heads in these schools operated in keeping with the theoretical framework derived from the literature, and determine how they prioritised each factor (if applicable)
- Explore what actions heads took in the area of each of the factors highlighted in the literature
- Find out the extent to which a theory of change guided heads' school improvement actions (consciously or otherwise)
- Identify any other factors heads might think are important for rapid school improvement – in addition to those captured in the literature
- Investigate how much other stakeholders, particularly governors and teachers, agreed with the heads' analysis of how the improvement had taken place
- Conduct in-depth case studies of a small number of schools that have changed dramatically in a short space of time (as measured by Ofsted judgements)

Research design

This research was based on a qualitative, mixed-methods design, guided by the overarching question: How do headteachers in rapidly improving schools explain the changes that have taken place in their schools? The research involved the following phases:

- Analysis of the literature – to create a theoretical framework to guide the creation of the questionnaire for headteachers of schools that have 'rapidly improved'²⁹
- An online survey of headteachers – to capture views on the factors associated with rapid school improvement and document the experiences and actions of heads who have achieved rapid improvement

²⁶ Ibid., p.24 ²⁷ Ibid., p.27 ²⁸ Ibid. ²⁹ For the purpose of this study, 'rapid improvement' is defined as a move from Ofsted category 4 to a 2 or 1 in two years or less



- Semi-structured interviews with a sample of the surveyed headteachers
- School case studies – a ‘triangulation’ exercise in a sub-sample of the schools which involved analysing the headteacher interview, reviewing the Ofsted school reports before and after the improvement process, and conducting interviews with the chair of governors and focus groups with teaching staff

Survey

The survey was administered between 26 January and 4 March 2016. It was sent to a sample of 360 headteachers at schools across England, all of which had moved, in one inspection cycle, from ‘inadequate’ to ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’.³⁰ Given the study period, the latest inspections were conducted on 30 September 2015.³¹ The sample comprised 268 primary or secondary schools and a further 92 newly opened sponsored academies that were matched with their predecessor schools using the Edubase links extract.³² The data used to identify schools were current as of the end of September 2015.

The sample comprised 268 primary or secondary schools and a further 92 newly opened sponsored academies

TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY SAMPLE

	Total	Responses	Rate
Phase			
Primary	306	74	24.2%
Secondary	54	19	35.2%
All schools	360	93	25.8%
Category			
Notice to Improve	69	20	29.0%
Significant Weaknesses	51	7	13.7%
Special Measures	189	48	25.4%
New sponsored academy (assume SM)	51	18	35.3%
Current overall effectiveness			
Outstanding	20	5	25.0%
Good	340	88	25.9%
School type			
Community school	140	36	25.7%
Academy converter	34	9	26.5%
Academy sponsor led	98	29	29.6%
Voluntary aided school	38	9	23.7%
Foundation school	21	3	14.3%
Voluntary controlled school	29	7	24.1%

³⁰ Data on school inspection outcomes were sourced from the Ofsted monthly management information publication Maintained schools and academies inspections and outcomes. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/maintained-schools-and-academies-inspections-and-outcomes-january-2015-to-march-2015> ³¹ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monthly-management-information-ofsted-school-inspections-outcomes>. Inspection outcomes for schools inspected in the autumn 2015 term or early in spring 2016 were not available at the time of sampling. ³² All EduBase data link.csv (accessed online December 2015) [<http://www.edubase.gov.uk/edubase/home.xhtml>]

The survey questions were based on a theoretical framework derived from the literature. They captured the key factors associated with rapid school improvement using a combination of question types including closed and open, multiple choice and ranking items. Two reminders were sent – the response after the initial invitation was 37, after the first reminder it was 77 and after the final reminder it was 99. After removing duplicates and blanks, the total response rate was 93 schools.

Chapter 3

Key priorities for rapid school improvement



This chapter reports on the headteachers' survey responses. It draws predominantly on the quantitative survey data, but also describes the free text responses and provides direct quotes, where relevant.

The survey questions addressed the eight elements suggested in the literature as vital components of school improvement. The survey delved deeper into the factors associated with each element and encouraged headteachers to explain the relative importance of various factors in their school's transformation story. It also explored additional topics – such as research engagement, evidence-based decision-making and school-to-school collaborations – that are not highlighted in the literature. The survey also gave headteachers the opportunity to disagree with the provided alternative explanations.

There was a high degree of agreement across the participants. There appears to be a theory of change that almost all of the headteachers shared, either explicitly or implicitly, and which drove their actions. The follow-up interviews further explored this theory of change.

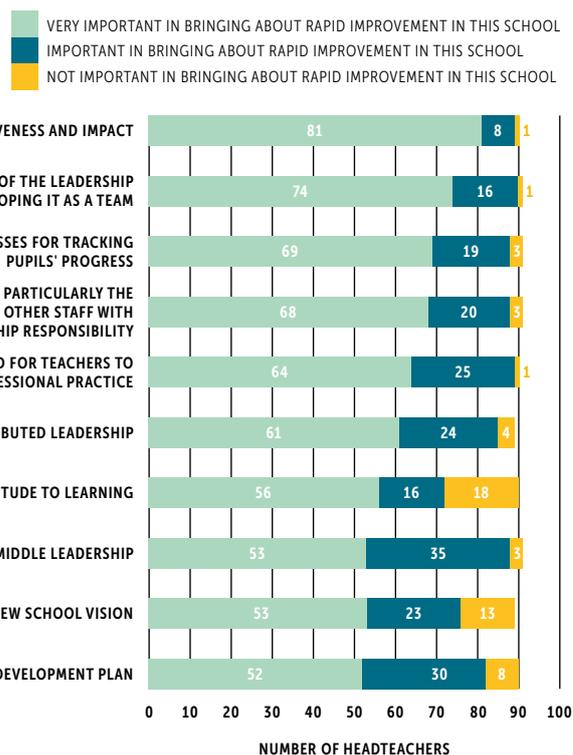
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School leadership

Perhaps not surprisingly, the heads told us that leadership is key to rapid school improvement. The participating headteachers were divided, roughly equally, between those who had been in post before the first inspection (48, 52%) and those who arrived shortly afterwards (43, 46%). Five schools had experienced two changes in headteacher since the first critical inspection report, and 17 (18%) of the participating 93 schools now have an executive head.

The survey asked headteachers about the changes that brought about particularly rapid improvement in their school. Figure 1 shows that they considered the most important priorities to be improving teacher effectiveness and impact (81), improving the effectiveness of the leadership team (74) and improving data monitoring for tracing pupil progress (69). Combining *very important* (green) and *important* (blue) confirmed the centrality of these three elements (90, 90 and 88, respectively). The participants had a collegiate view of the nature of leadership. They reported that improving self-evaluation and monitoring by the whole Senior Leadership Team (SLT) (combined score of 88), strengthening subject leadership (combined score of 88) and distributing leadership across the school more effectively (combined score of 85) were either very important or important.

FIGURE 1: PRIORITIES ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICULARLY RAPID SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (SURVEY)



In the survey headteachers were less likely to identify as priorities for bringing about rapid school improvement such topics as making improvements to the physical environment (31), making workforce changes (23) or establishing partnerships and collaborations with other schools (22).

The participants' comments in the free text responses also emphasised the central importance of actions related to teacher quality. Headteachers were asked to mention any other elements they associated with the speed of improvement in their schools. They included:

- Ensuring the school had high-calibre teachers (3)
- Making sure teachers were engaged, felt proud, were gaining confidence (3)
- Ensuring wider stakeholders were confident the school would improve (2)
- Safeguarding (1)
- Attendance (1)
- Improving resources (1)
- One respondent indicated that the inspection result was the 'change' needed and acted as a 'mandate' for the actions that followed (1)

The survey also delved into the experience of being a leader in a school judged to be inadequate. We asked what headteachers had learned about leadership in relation to their current school. Their responses are listed below in four categories: personal qualities and skills, planning for improvement, influencing others, and ways to create the desired environment and ethos for improvement (see Table 3).

The survey delved into the experience of being a leader in a school judged to be inadequate

TABLE 3: WHAT HEADTEACHERS LEARNED FROM THEIR EXPERIENCE OF RAPID SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Personal qualities*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resilience (5) • focus/commitment and relentlessness (5) • honesty and transparency (4) • decisive (3) • self belief and credibility (3) • compassion and empathy (3) • determination (3) • courage (2) • ability to listen (2) • optimism and trust (2)
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clarity in purpose (4) • make change about pupil learning (3) • think teams (2)
Influencing others*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take everyone with you (3) • paint pictures for others (communicate vision) (3) • establish core purpose (3) • clarity and simplicity are vital (2)
Creating the desired environment/ethos*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor and make progress visible (5) • celebrate success (including small steps) (5) • prioritise teacher quality (3) • care for others (2) • expect and encourage culture of high expectations (2) • be consistent and communicate (2) • foster relationships (2)

*Includes only responses made by more than one individual

Some of the quotes reveal the personal challenges that headteachers experienced in the course of their jobs:

'You need to be courageous and resilient with a relentless focus on standards.'

'You have to be resilient and committed to taking the necessary actions, however unpleasant, to bring about the necessary changes.'

'You need to be resolute in bringing in change where it is needed. You need total focus on what that change is, and every action/ decision taken must take you further towards that change. You must share your vision with passion and conviction to bring all on board. And you must do it all with a warm smile!'

'You need to know who to turn to, and when, for help.'

Their comments showed how they often placed great emphasis on the need to motivate others:

'I think the most important thing is to give people the belief that they can do something.'

'You need to be determined, resilient and relentless. You have to be brutally honest whilst motivating people to improve. You have to always demonstrate a belief that "we can do this" even on the darkest of days.'

Revisiting the distinct identity and ethos of the school

The literature review highlighted the importance of creating a new or improved vision, ethos and identity for a school when seeking to bring about rapid school improvement. The majority of headteachers identified this as a priority (65) in the survey.* One wrote:

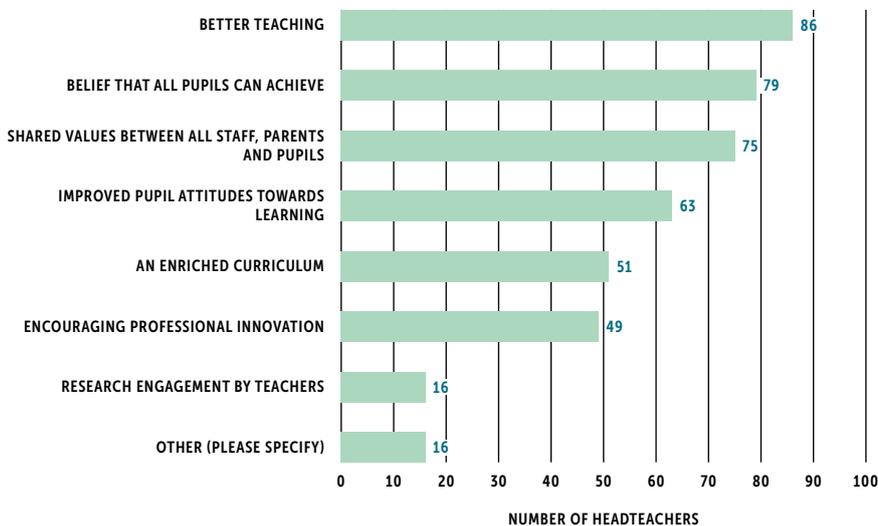
'...excuse the rephrasing of the quote but if you want people to build a boat together (quickly) don't give them the tools and tell them to gather the wood – show them the destination and give them a reason to set sail! My new staff were shocked but pleased that our first meeting was focused on this'

When asked how they went about reviewing the fundamental identity of the school, some headteachers talked about the need for a total school 'rebrand' (in some cases in relation to academisation or joining an academy chain), while others described how they had sought to establish a set of shared values through new mission and vision statements.

There was a substantial degree of consensus about the aspects of school life considered most in need of attention: better teaching (86), belief that all pupils could achieve (79), shared values between all staff, parents and pupils (75), and improved attitudes towards learning (63).

The literature review highlighted the importance of creating a new or improved vision, ethos and identity for a school when seeking to bring about rapid school improvement

FIGURE 3: ASPECTS OF WHOLE SCHOOL LIFE THAT HEAD TEACHERS PRIORITISED

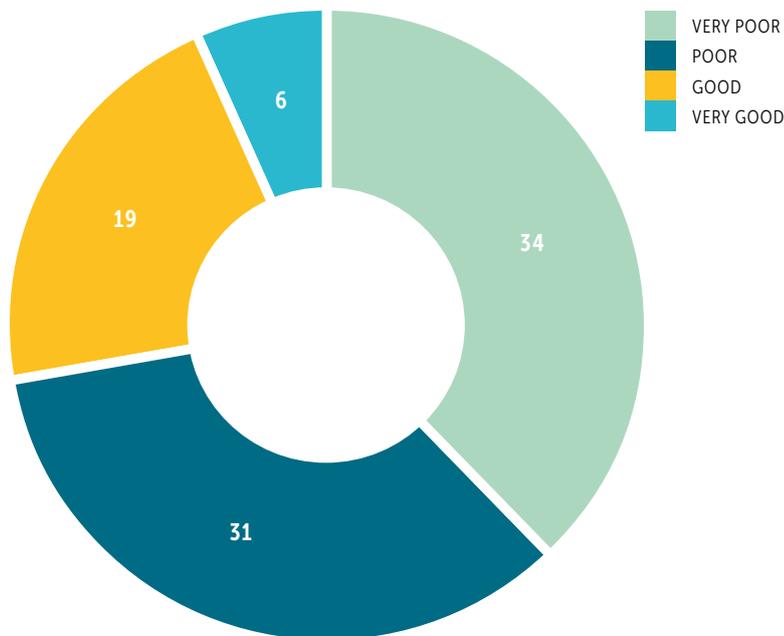


*90 headteachers responded to the 'Ethos and Vision' section of the survey

Governance

The literature suggested a frequent connection between poor school performance and weak school governance. The survey asked about the performance of the governors at the time of the inspection and in subsequent months.* Participants were often critical of the quality of governance before the improvement process began. No headteachers judged their governing at the time of the first inspection as *excellent*. The majority, with a combined frequency score of 65, rated the governing body as *very poor* or *poor*. Interestingly, the majority of headteachers indicated that the chair of governors changed in the 12 months following the inspection that deemed the school inadequate (55). There was therefore more turnover in the chairs of governors than there was in headteachers after the first critical inspection report.

FIGURE 4: HEADTEACHERS' ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE



Headteachers were asked what steps, if any, were taken to improve the governing body, and almost all (90) indicated such steps had been taken. The most frequently stated response was appointing new personnel on the governing body (60), followed by engaging governors in specific tasks such as monitoring and evaluation (59). Nineteen headteachers indicated that the original governing body had been disbanded and an Interim Executive Board (IEB) was put in place after the inadequate inspection.

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*90 headteachers responded to the 'Governance' section of the survey

TABLE 4: IMPROVEMENTS TO GOVERNING BODY

Steps taken to improve the governing body	No. respondents agreeing (n=90)
Appointing new personnel to the governing body	60
Engaging governors in specific tasks, such as monitoring and evaluation	59
Improving governors' skills and confidence in the use of performance and financial data so they can hold school to account and identify priorities	57
Increasing governors' presence in the school, including their involvement in classrooms and their level of contact with parents	51
Achieving greater clarity about the role of governors and the senior leadership team	47
Improving governors' links with key school leaders, including subject leaders	47
Improving communication between the chair and headteacher	42
Delegating specific tasks to governors, such as finance	21

Headteachers were asked to describe specific ways in which the reformed governing body contributed to the rapid improvement of the school. The most common theme raised by headteachers related to the balance of 'support and challenge' provided by the governing body: nine headteachers indicated a supportive body to be essential, 13 responded that being challenged professionally was important, and 13 noted that a combination of support and challenge was key (35 teachers in total). Twenty headteachers also highlighted the importance of governor support in monitoring, including data analysis and observation. Other areas in which headteachers considered the governing body to have played a role in school improvement included:

- Members bringing a good range of skills and knowledge (14)

'Utilising National Governors Association skills audit to ensure the right balance of required skills across the governing body with a consideration for a mix of business and educational.'

- Governors had knowledge of school improvement and were provided the necessary information to challenge effectively (7)

'Providing them with high-quality monitoring and evaluation information so they could appropriately question and challenge the work of the school in a productive and supportive way.'

- Strategic involvement in the school's vision, opposed to micromanagement in daily activities (11)

'The governing body developed its strategic approach, removing/discouraging those who tried to involve themselves in the day-to-day running of the school.'

- Greater visibility and involvement in school (e.g. observing lessons and meeting parents) (5)

'Governors are very involved in the life of the school, which we believe puts them in a good position to make key strategic decisions based on their knowledge of the quality of educational provision. They attend lesson observations and pupil progress meetings on a half-termly basis...'

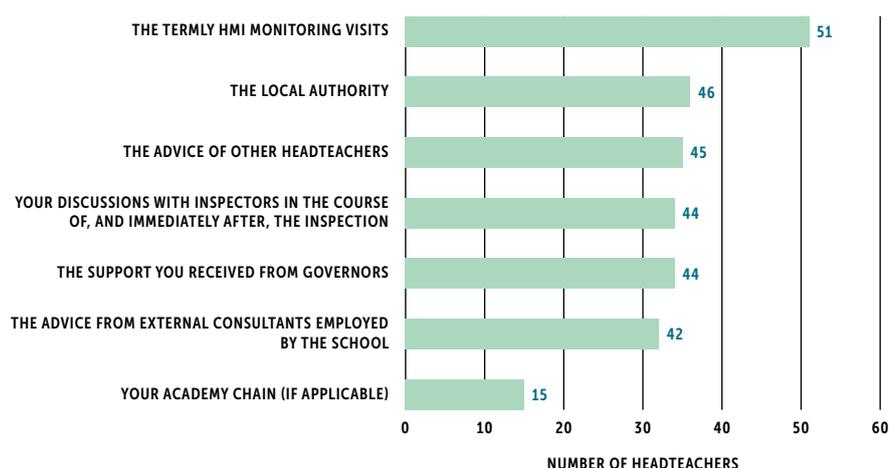
The most common theme raised by headteachers related to the balance of 'support and challenge' provided by the governing body

External support for improvement

The headteachers were asked which of a range of forms of external support (identified in the literature) they found most useful in addressing the key weaknesses identified in the school.* The forms of external support included: the local authority, the academy chain (if applicable), discussions with inspectors during the inspection, the termly Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) monitoring visits, the advice of other headteachers, advice from external consultants employed by the school and support from governors. Figure 5 shows the responses headteachers gave. Many headteachers had a very positive view of HMI monitoring visits. A majority of survey respondents identified termly HMI visits as most useful external support. There was no sense in the survey data of any antagonism between headteachers and HMI. Rather, it seemed that headteachers adopted an approach to school improvement that was closely aligned with the assumptions about quality found in the Ofsted inspection criteria. While monitoring visits were highlighted, many headteachers acknowledged the importance of other forms of external support such as local authority advisers, other headteachers and advice from governors.

A majority of survey respondents identified termly HMI visits as most useful external support

FIGURE 5: FORMS OF SUPPORT HEADTEACHERS FOUND MOST USEFUL



When asked about the extent to which using evidence and research was a part of their school's improvement journey, a majority of headteachers responded that this was not a very important part of the process.

TABLE 5: USE OF EVIDENCE IN RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS' IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

Statement	No. respondents agreeing (n=89)
Our plans were explicitly based on evidence and research	10
Some sources of evidence were consulted to guide particular aspects of school improvement	48
Accessing research was not an important part of the process	32

*89 headteachers responded to the 'External Support' section of the survey

Monitoring and evaluation and curriculum changes

Monitoring and evaluation

There was virtual unanimity about the central role of improved monitoring: 86 headteachers stated changes had been made to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) at their school since it was judged to have serious weaknesses or placed in special measures.* Of these, 79 believed that the changes in monitoring had played a key role in rapid school improvement.

To a remarkable degree the schools had followed the same formula. The most frequently implemented change to improve monitoring was the establishment of common tracking formats used by all staff (75), followed by involving governors more closely in the use of monitoring (74). As noted above, 20 headteachers considered the increased involvement of governors in monitoring to have been integral in the rapid improvement of their school. Other actions taken included sharing and examining data regularly (8), creating more accountability for the accuracy of data (4) and working as part of collaborative partnerships (2). A full list of areas in which M&E was altered is presented in Table 6.

The most frequently implemented change to improve monitoring was the establishment of common tracking formats used by all staff

TABLE 6: CHANGES IN MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Action taken	No. (n=89)
Establish common tracking formats for use by all staff	75
Involve governors more closely in use of monitoring and evaluation data	74
Offer staff training related to use of data to set pupil targets	68
Articulate clear and transparent processes for data use	66
Ensure it is clear that data collection is a teacher responsibility	65
Articulate clear processes for data collection	64
Articulate clear processes for data submission	64
Teach stakeholders about the importance of data collection and use	59
Establish a central repository for monitoring and evaluation data	54
Offer staff training related to collecting and submitting data	54
Make teachers work together to collate data on pupil progress	51
Slim down the amount of data collected, focusing this more tightly on teaching and learning	45
Make timetable changes to ensure staff have time to enact new monitoring and evaluation practices	41
Other (please specify)	26

For the small proportion of staff that indicated the M&E system had not changed, one indicated there was already a system in place, another stated that they had more staff understanding of the current system (and therefore had greater buy-in), and one indicated they were not in post when changes were made.

*89 headteachers responded to the 'Monitoring and Evaluation' section of the survey

Curriculum

The majority of headteachers (70) stated that changes had been made to the curriculum following inadequate judgement.* The most frequently cited change to the curriculum was action to make it more attuned to pupil needs (49), followed by action to enrich the curriculum (48). Other commonly identified areas for curriculum change included ensuring there was a greater focus on literacy (43) and greater focus on numeracy (37).

Other changes to the curriculum included:

- Increasing staff focus on the tested curriculum (15)
- Making the curriculum more engaging for pupils (e.g. implementing a question-based curriculum, enhancing take-up in music, sport and art) (7)
- Greater focus on literacy and maths in other curriculum areas (3)
- Focus teaching on gaps in pupil knowledge rather than a generalised curriculum (2)
- Improving timetabling across the school (2)
- Ensuring the new national curriculum requirements and objectives were embedded (1)
- The application and testing of literacy and maths across other subject areas
- Involving parents and carers (1)
- Training in teacher assessment (1)
- Coaching and the use of action research (1)

Thirty-one headteachers believed that changes to the curriculum had made a strong contribution to the rapid improvement of their school, using language such as 'significantly', 'greatly' and 'a huge amount'.

The most frequently cited change to the curriculum was action to make it more attuned to pupil needs

Staff morale and performance management

Headteachers frequently commented on the low level of staff morale in the 12 months following the inspection that deemed the school to have serious weaknesses or be placed in special measures.** Many headteachers described how morale hit rock bottom or was very low immediately after the critical inspection, although the majority also described how morale improved when changes were made. Typical comments included:

'Some [staff were] grieving, some were angry, some were disbelieving. I needed to bring staff together for a common purpose.'

'It took over a year for some members of staff to regain their morale and confidence. They needed constant reassurance that what they were doing was good enough.'

'Morale was very low to begin with and the workload extremely high.'

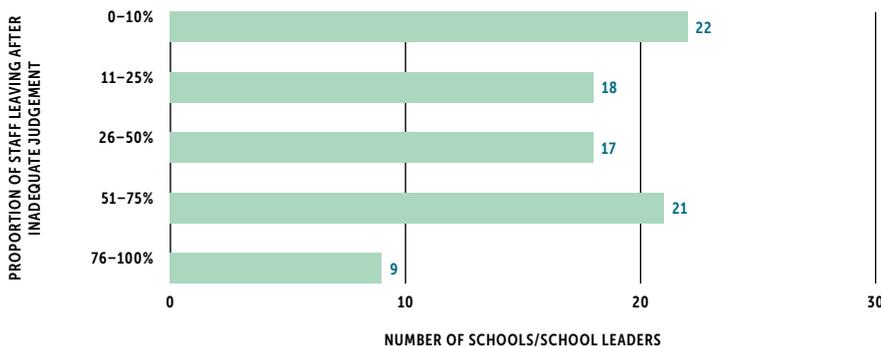
*89 headteachers responded to the 'Curriculum' section of the survey **89 headteachers responded to the 'Staff Morale and Performance' section of the survey

Turnover of staff

Headteachers were asked about the turnover of staff in the months following the inadequate inspection result. Their reasons for leaving were not enquired about in the survey, but were followed up in the in-depth qualitative work that followed, which is reported in the next chapters.

The proportion of staff that left the school in the two years after the inadequate judgement varied dramatically, with some schools indicating they had 100 per cent turnover of teachers, and others that they did not lose any staff.

FIGURE 6: PROPORTION OF STAFF LEAVING AFTER THE INADEQUATE JUDGEMENT (NUMBER OF HEADTEACHERS)



Improving teacher morale

Frequently stated mechanisms for improving morale were activities involving staff working together as a team and providing mutual support to each other. Six headteachers also commented that morale was already low before the inspection; one indicated that they had already started to make changes to improve morale. Other comments on staff morale and the measures headteachers took to improve it include:

- Creating a clear vision and common goal for all staff helped create focus
- Motivation of staff to improve and make changes
- Staff changes, particularly senior staff, helped change morale
- A number of staff left: one headteacher indicated a number of teaching staff left the profession

Most of the heads pursued a 'support and challenge' approach to staff development. Almost all the heads had sought to identify and use the school's existing best practice as a key resource for improvement. The great majority positively cited activity involved in identifying, celebrating and sharing good practice (83), indicating that this had a strong impact on the rapid improvement of the school. Survey participants also highlighted increased staff accountability: the second-most frequently mentioned activity was taking robust action when staff performance was deemed poor (80).

Almost all the heads had sought to identify and use the school's existing best practice as a key resource for improvement

FIGURE 7: CHANGES TO STAFF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

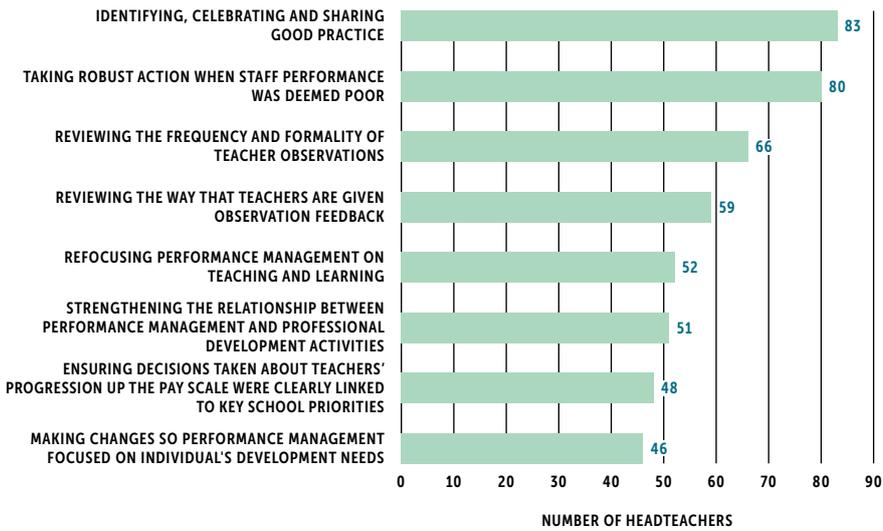
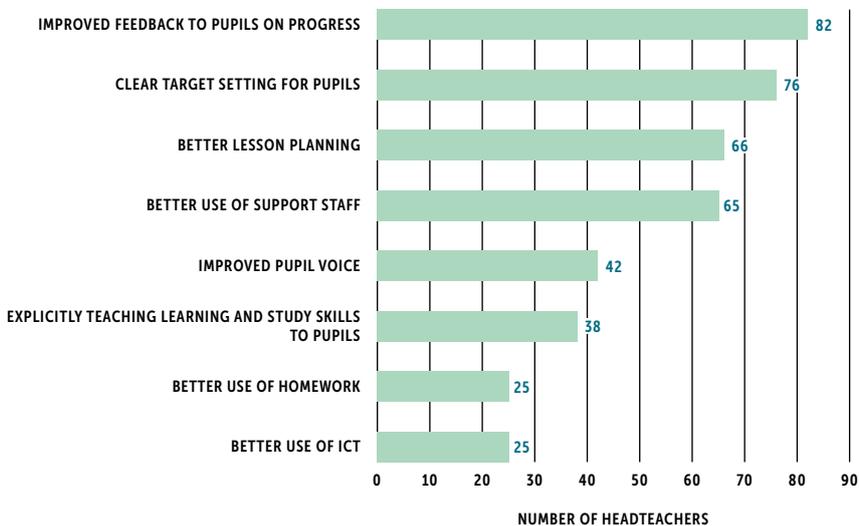


Figure 8 shows the teaching practices that were actively encouraged by headteachers after the inadequate inspection. Again there was a high degree of consistency in responses. The most frequently used practices include improved feedback to pupils on progress (82), clear target setting for pupils (76), better lesson planning (66) and better use of support staff (65).

The most frequently used practices include improved feedback to pupils on progress

FIGURE 8: TEACHING PRACTICES ENCOURAGED BY HEAD TEACHERS FOLLOWING THE INADEQUATE INSPECTION



Building coalitions for change

The literature suggested that parents and wider communities were also key stakeholders and potentially instrumental in supporting rapid school improvement. The survey asked headteachers to comment on the relative importance of addressing the wider community as part of the 'speed' of school turnaround, and requested that they explain their responses.*

School, community and parents

Approximately half of the headteachers surveyed considered improvements in the relationship between the school and the community to have contributed to the transformation of their school (43); the majority of respondents indicated that the relationship between the school and parents contributed to rapid improvement (61). Headteacher comments demonstrate that in many cases a key factor was greater parental engagement in both the school generally and in specific discussions about their child's education (25). The improvement journey often involved action to enable parents to engage more in the school, such as inviting them to observe lessons, appointing parent councils and encouraging parents to provide feedback to teaching staff, either verbally or through questionnaires.

Other key factors in improving the relationship between schools and parents included raising parental expectations of both the school and their child's capabilities (8), and involving parents in the shared vision of the school (8). Two headteachers also commented on providing support to parents who were not coping or struggling in home life. One school also indicated they now offer more courses for parents in literacy and numeracy. Several headteachers also referenced creating greater community links with local businesses, charities, social services and/or politicians (5), with two headteachers commenting on increased funding opportunities within the community as awareness of the school's success became more widely recognised. Pride in the school among the local community (8) was also considered to be a factor in schools' rapid improvement.

The improvement journey often involved action to enable parents to engage more in the school, such as inviting them to observe lessons, appointing parent councils and encouraging parents to provide feedback to teaching staff, either verbally or through questionnaires

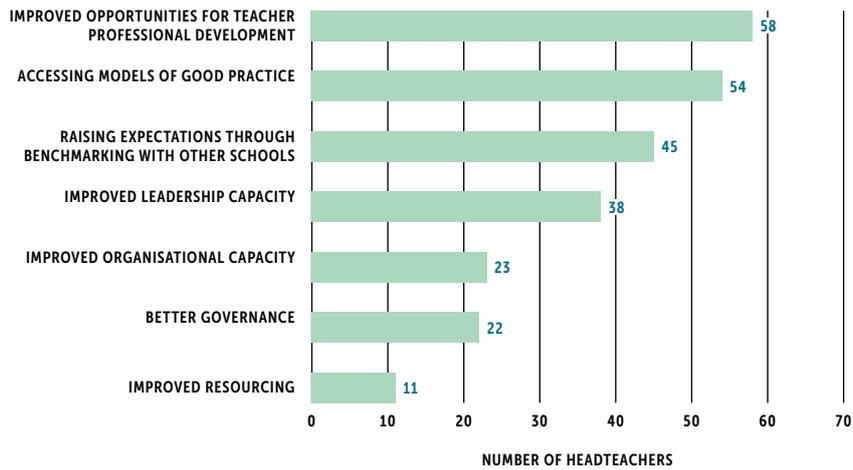
Collaboration with other schools

Many headteachers recognised the importance of support from other schools. For many, school-to-school collaboration after the inadequate judgement was considered to be informal (48), although a considerable minority indicated they received support from a national or local leader of education. Just over a quarter of headteachers indicated that their schools joined an academy chain (23), with resulting support from the multi-academy trust. Most headteachers were positive about the process of becoming an academy, but one stated that the relationship with the academy chain impeded school improvement. Fifteen schools received support from a Teaching School Alliance and nine joined a federated school partnership.

*86 headteachers responded to the 'Relationships beyond the school' section of the survey

While most schools were involved in some form of collaboration, 38 considered this cooperation to have made a major contribution to the school's improvement, 42 considered it to have made some contribution and six indicated it made no contribution. Figure 9 illustrates headteachers' descriptions of the ways in which collaboration helped: the most frequent response was improved opportunities for teacher professional development (58).

FIGURE 9: WAYS IN WHICH COLLABORATION HELPED THE SPEED OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT



Chapter 4

A preoccupation with the quality of teaching



This study involved conducting 16 in-depth interviews with a sample drawn from the larger group of headteachers who had completed the initial survey.

These interviews constituted the first element of the qualitative data collection part of the study. The sample included heads from both primary and secondary schools, as well as those who had been at the school before the critical inspection report and those who had joined after the inspection.

Interviews were conducted with 16 headteachers; 10 primary and six secondary. A total of 10 of the headteachers who took part in interviews were 'parachuted' in following the critical inspection and six were in post at the time of the inspection.

The interviews with headteachers included questions which asked the participant to reflect on the school's journey from the inadequate inspection result forwards; to reflect on their own personal experience of this journey, including the highs and lows, challenges and discomfort and how they navigated these; how well prepared they felt to lead this journey; how they responded to the challenges that they identified in the school (whether these were also identified by Ofsted or not). The transcripts were analysed in order to identify similarities and differences in the 'stories' about rapid school improvement. Particular attention was paid to the skills and knowledge needed for this role, the difficulties encountered, how (or if) individuals knew what to do, how secure the recent 'good' or 'outstanding' judgements are thought to be, and the transferability to other school contexts of the implicit or explicit theory applied by the headteacher.

The interviews with headteachers included questions which asked them to reflect on the school's journey to good

Headteachers' background and experience

Length of time in post?

The 16 headteachers interviewed came from varied backgrounds. The majority arrived in the schools shortly before or shortly after the critical inspection report. Ten were brought in either immediately after the school was judged inadequate or within six months of this judgement. Three had joined the schools only a short time before the inspection, and two had been at the school longer than six months before the inspection that led to special measures. One headteacher was previously deputy head in the school, and was promoted to head after the announcement of special measures. There was little difference in the strategies pursued by these headteachers, regardless of whether they became head before or after the critical inspection judgement.

Previous experience and preparedness

The headteachers interviewed had mixed levels and varieties of prior experience. Yet despite this range of backgrounds, they all used broadly similar strategies for

improvement, for example in relation to teachers' professional development. This section discusses the backgrounds of the headteachers interviewed and how this affected both their preparedness to take on the role and their style of leadership.

Seven headteachers had been deputy heads in previous schools, with five indicating they felt this adequately prepared them for the role, as they had spent time shadowing the headteacher in their prior post and were able to adopt leadership styles based on their observations.

'I had the advantage of being a deputy for four years but I worked under two heads in that time so I learned different strategies. I think I was quite experienced, I took this job when I was 45, and I've taught – this is my seventh school – so I've had good leadership experience, I've been a senior leader in two other schools, I've been a head of department, I think I came with a good package of experience.'

'I felt very prepared for the role when I came in, and there are reasons for that. One, from my perspective I had been a teacher, I had been a middle leader, I had been a senior leader, I had led the development of the teaching school, so I was very aware of all the support programmes that needed to be put in place.'

Two headteachers who had previous experience as deputy heads also highlighted the importance of high-level professional training. One head referenced the importance of undertaking a Masters degree in leadership.

'I happened to be assistant vice principal in a large secondary school in [London]. I had been on the Tomorrow's Heads programme which was a fantastic programme at the National College of Teaching and Learning which has now gone. And I had been doing some outreach work into primary schools in London and working with National Leaders of Education (NLE) in London in primary schools, because it was an area that I was interested in.'

'I used to be in a school which was a training school and I was the director of a training school as well as deputy head and I used to work a lot with the National College, I did research projects for them.... I also had just completed my Masters on leadership management as well and again, looking at the role, the importance of the role in distributive leadership, really, of middle leaders and how important their role was to actually carry out, you know.'

Most of the participants appeared professionally self-confident. However two individuals who had moved from deputy headship to headship in extremely challenging circumstances said they did not feel fully prepared to take on the new role, although they did not shy away from the challenge. When one of these two heads was asked to what extent they felt prepared for the role, they responded:

'Not at all. I mean, I thought it was a ridiculous thing to do. I almost didn't apply when they advertised, they advertised it for January after it had gone into special measures in March because that was the quickest timeline they could get after the head was sacked and I hummed and harred about it but then you very quickly become addicted, you get to know the children, I had my own teaching groups in Year 6 so there was no way I was going anywhere so then

Two headteachers who had previous experience as deputy heads highlighted the importance of high-level professional training

it really hinged on, "I've got to get this job" and I think with the executive principal, it was so good and they've got a track record of school improvement so I think the support I knew I was going to get and the people I knew I was going to work with made me really want to do the job.'

Four headteachers also had experience in inspecting and evaluating schools. One headteacher described her experience supporting school improvement in government schools in the United Arab Emirates:

'I was working in Arabic schools, so local schools over there and I'd go in as part of a School Improvement Team. I'd be the lead and then I'd have sort of four or five advisers with me, and we would go in to look at every aspect of the school. I would generally support the headteacher in the curriculum and learning and then advisers would lead on specific subjects, etc. and so we would have a similar process where Tribal would come and assess every year and we'd have to evidence them how we were moving the school forward against certain sort of key performance indicators. So my experience had been in change, and in supporting schools in difficult environments.'

Another headteacher drew upon her experience as a local authority schools adviser:

'I was head of special schools and an SEN inspector for nine years. So I would think of schools that have failed like special needs children. That sounds terrible; it's not meant to be. In that they are where they are. I try to catch them doing right. Rather than criticise, criticise, criticise.'

One headteacher had been a head at a previous school, but suggested it was her work as a local authority school improvement officer that gave her the most powerful prior learning. This headteacher deliberately adopted an 'autocratic' approach to leadership in the troubled school, which she noted was based on her experience working for the local authority.

'I had a previous headship in [school name] and that school was always good. We never managed to move to better than good. I was headteacher there for seven years. And we had two full Ofsteds and a subject maths inspection and we never managed to move it beyond the good. I then moved to the school effectiveness office up in [region name] and I had a portfolio of ten schools and I look back now and say that that was the strongest professional development that I've had.... there was a complete range of schools in my portfolio. I had a high school that moved from a good to outstanding. I had a special school that moved from a good to outstanding. And I had eight primary schools, one of which was in special measures, and so I supported them through special measures. Because I could see what headteachers were doing to move their schools to outstanding...And having that overview of schools and how each headteacher was doing it completely differently, but I could see what tools they were using. To actually pull it forwards. What I took from the school that was in special measures, the headteacher there had been seconded in from an outstanding school and what she really did was she took a very autocratic lead.'

One headteacher had been a head at a previous school, but suggested it was her work as a local authority school improvement officer that gave her the most powerful prior learning



One headteacher had an unusual career story. Prior to taking on the school in difficulty he had taught at just one school for 25 years. As the acting head of this school he had managed its ultimate closure due to falling rolls.

'I'd come to the job in an odd way. I'd worked at the school nearby, and I'd been there, I'd joined it as a newly qualified teacher, and I stayed there for 25 years. In that time I sort of went from being a main scale teacher, up to assistant principal in the school, doing a lot around welfare, student welfare, and that sort of thing was my bag, as it were. Then we had reorganisation in the area, and the school shrank rapidly, and the head got a job somewhere else. Because it was shrinking they couldn't reappoint anyone, so a deputy was made up to head, I was made up temporarily to a deputy head, with another assistant principal. Then it sort of transpired the school was going to end up closing. It was quite transformational. The acting head then left, and I was last man standing. So I was given acting head, so my headship started with a year group of 60 kids, and the closure of a school. I was actually left to do all the redundancies and so on.'

Some headteachers referenced their prior experience outside education. One was qualified, for example, in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and had a degree in psychology.

'I've got a master's degree in psychology, so I use a lot of psychology. I'm an NLP master practitioner. So I'm sort of ... yeah advanced coaching skills and things like that. I've always used an influencing style. It's very much matched into who they are and their personality type and reading that situation and working in with it. So I'm trying to say if it's a no blame.'

Some headteachers referenced the lessons they had learnt through their involvement with the training programmes of the National College for Teaching and Learning.

'Yes, I've done the, obviously your NPQH, and some middle leader programmes, but then I worked with the National College on what's called the associate head programme, which is about understanding yourself as a leader, understanding the impact that you have on others, therefore the impact that you're going to have on the organisation, your leadership style, and the impact that will have on the organisation.'

In terms of areas of personal professional weakness, three headteachers suggested they were not strong on the more business-related side of leadership, and indicated this to be an area in which they required support.

'So writing your school evaluation forms, your school improvement plans and that sort of thing, that's kind of fine but it is, you're absolutely right, the human resources (HR) and legal side that you need support with. So the business manager is very useful.'

'I have a fantastic business manager who was a member of the SLT, and she was absolutely excellent and had supported me a lot in bringing in new HR policies and things like that, because she could see the need. She came from a business/HR background, she used to work with one of the high street banks, but she did a lot of HR training within that and what have you.'

Some headteachers referenced their prior experience outside education. One was qualified, for example, in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and had a degree in psychology

Two headteachers in the sample had spent time pursuing other careers before becoming teachers. One had been a buyer for a major retail group before she became a teacher. She considered that she had learnt more in her retail management job than in formal headship training such as NPQH.

'I think the way I deal with adults – which is obviously 99 per cent of the job, although we'd like to think it isn't – comes from my ten years in retail.'

One headteacher had previously been a military officer and had seen active service in several war zones. Our interviewer suggested that this was very different from running a school in special measures. He disagreed and pointed out that there were some similarities between the teamwork needed when a school is in difficulty and the way an effective military unit needs to work together in a tough situation. In both cases an essential ingredient was trust between the team leader and the team members. His view was that if people have a deep trust in each other and in a skilful leader then they are often capable of extraordinary achievements.

The personal toll on school leadership after a poor inspection judgement

The headteachers interviewed for this study were self-confident people and they gave the impression of being strong leaders and strong people. However, it was evident that the intensity of leading schools in the aftermath of a difficult inspection result took a considerable toll. Turning around under-performing schools is not easy, and it can be an emotionally draining experience. One of our interviewees found even the act of remembering some of the details painful.

'I don't even like reflecting. It's a long time ago, it seems like a long time ago now but it was horrid. It was a grim job...'

All the headteachers described how tough the improvement was on a personal level. The headteacher with military experience indicated that managing his school was more personally challenging than managing soldiers in a combat situation: 'It nearly killed me. This was the hardest thing I've done and I've been to war four times.'

Several headteachers described the complete absence for a prolonged period of any sense of 'work/life balance'. The months after the critical inspection judgement typically required a monumental effort on the part of headteachers.

'In terms of workload...I was in at 7:00, I would leave at 10:00–10:30 at night. I would be here every Saturday, every Sunday, Christmas Day, literally every day of that year. If I wasn't here I would be working solidly at home. So it was all consuming in terms of my life.'

'It was January that I started, so from January to July, it was exhausting. Very, very long days and hardly any weekends. There was a big push from the two of us to enable others to come on the journey with us, but similarly, because we were in special measures, we didn't have very long to do that. So it had to be very much, "We need to do this and we need to do it now," sort of thing.'

'I think as with everything, I mean for two or three years my work/life balance was appalling, it's hard to quantify, but I was doing 16-hour days and that was work, that wasn't...I was up for 16 hours and it became all consuming because there was just so much to do...the leadership was poor, the IT was poor, you know, it was everything...'

If people have a deep trust in each other and in a skilful leader then they are often capable of extraordinary achievements

Another headteacher talked about the stress induced by the public humiliation involved in a poor Ofsted judgement. This school received extensive media coverage of the inspection findings, including a highly critical feature on regional television.

'We were named and shamed as somebody who had gone into a category... [The] school [was] blazoned all over as a failing school in every category.'

The pace of change could be bewildering and stressful. The headteachers often had to display great flexibility in a fast-moving environment:

'The local authority came along and said, "Something's going to happen at this school, we can't really tell you what, it's highly confidential but would you be able to go in?" and...they parachuted me in.'

The public gossip about the school after an Ofsted inspection could be hurtful, but headteachers had no 'right of reply'. One head described how people began to describe the school as a 'failing school', saying: "Well...it's an awful school and fights happen all the time" and things like that and that isn't the case at all.'

Headteachers valued the HMI cycle of monitoring visits, but the process also injected a sense of intense and stressful urgency about the need for demonstrable change within a very short period of time.

'We had five months basically to turn the school around. So from January when the school went in, my next [HMI] visit was then May. So I had to show transformation of change really in a very quick time.'

The experience of leading a school out of special measures was intense on a personal level. Many of the interviewees felt that they were ill-prepared in terms of prior professional development for the challenge:

'How well-prepared was I? I don't know. I had...I had got NPQH so I had done that. And I had a really good relationship with the headteacher at my previous school where I was deputy head, and he did give me lots of opportunities to sort of shadow him or take on certain tasks and things. I think until you actually sit in the chair behind the door that says headteacher you don't really know what it is like.'

A sense of modesty, and the importance of collective action

Although the 16 interviewees were clearly strong leaders, there was also a level of modesty about many of their comments and a concern to emphasise that the changes in their schools were the result of a team effort rather than a consequence of their remarkable personal leadership. These five comments capture some of the sense of collegiality and modesty that several of the headteachers expressed:

'It's not me, it's everybody, because they could have said "No!" and "Don't listen to this idiot!"'

'There's nothing revolutionary or particularly mind blowing [about what we have done] but I'm happy to talk about it.'

'I don't really feel it's something I could replicate anywhere else, I don't know, it's the team that did it really.'

Although the 16 interviewees were clearly strong leaders, there was also a level of modesty about many of their comments

'You can't do it all by yourself and so it was about giving people ownership, allowing – empowering – them, allowing them to be risk takers.'

'The thing about us is we're so ordinary...It's just a happy school and we've got 99 per cent staff attendance for this year from teachers...[I] don't know how that happened really but it's great that it has.'

The need for headteachers to receive expert external support

Several headteachers in the sample described how much they had valued mentoring relationships with experts from outside the school. In many cases they made it clear that the school transformation was only possible because of this external support. The sources of support were varied: experienced friends, local authority advisers, academy trust staff and executive headteachers.

'Support mechanisms, I think one of those is the most important thing for headteachers because it can be a very, very lonely job. So what you have to do is have people you can talk things through with especially when, as I said, I came into it having been a new headteacher and suddenly you're put in a situation where your school is in notice to improve, how do you move it forward and you don't always want to test your ideas out on your staff at the time, you want to say, "Am I really going off the ball here?" So actually having people that I knew and that I could trust and that I could work with alongside was very important really for that journey as well and it continues to be because I still work very closely with lots of other headteachers, lots of other partnerships and get different things from different partnerships.'

'So there was never a case of, "I don't know what to do" because the head from the school, the head who I'd been deputy to, was here two days a week at the beginning and then an officer from the local authority and then an executive head from the federation that we've since become part of was working with me a day a week as well so I had incredible support from the local authority and that was what really made it ... there was always somebody that you could rely on, and they were very, very good at letting me articulate my own vision but all the support systems were in so I wasn't having to go, "Oh what am I going to do about this legal or HR issue?" or whatever it was...finances were in a mess of course and it was that sort of support... now that we're part of a federation of seven schools, all of that support is not going to change and that was what really made the difference.'

Attitudes towards the inspection system

The inspection process was a traumatic experience for some, but none of the heads questioned the correctness of the decision. Quite the contrary: without exception, the headteachers accepted the fundamental accuracy and fairness of the inspection judgement.

'The team came in and saw what they saw and I think saw a very fair, accurate picture of where my school was at that time unfortunately.'

No headteachers questioned the Ofsted process in any substantial way. However, two headteachers commented on the fact that, based on pre-inspection data, the inspectors arrived and immediately announced the result before any investigative

Several headteachers in the sample described how much they had valued mentoring relationships with experts from outside the school

work had been undertaken. The extent to which the data predetermines the outcome raises questions about the need for face-to-face inspection: if poor test scores automatically trigger a poor grade and inspectors have no discretion to challenge this, it is not obvious why an expensive visit is necessary.

'The HMI walked through the door and said, "I'm putting you in special measures" as a hello to me...I said, "Well, give us a chance then because, you know, we have started these things, give us a chance." "No, I can't."

'The lead told me within the first five minutes of the inspection that we were going to be within a category, and he wasn't going to move from that, and he was very much at that time saying that if your outcomes are inadequate then everything else is going to be inadequate.'

These were difficult experiences but these headteachers and the other interviewees, without exception, described a constructive engagement with Ofsted and appeared to have a fundamentally positive view of its role. They did not challenge the nature of the inspection process or the correctness of the inspection judgement. For many of the headteachers this attitude towards Ofsted was understandable because the inspection judgement did not represent a personal threat: they had arrived after or shortly before the critical inspection and were seen as part of the potential solution rather than the problem. There were many complimentary comments about the inspection, such as:

'I thought the team were great when they came...And they did get to the bottom of [things]...they listened to me and my understanding of the school and where it was at.'

Some interviewees made it clear that they welcomed the inspection findings because Ofsted provided them with a mandate for change. Several of them were clearly pleased with the highly critical inspection findings.

'I wanted it to be special measures.'

'Ofsted were due...which was quite good really because that was the leverage we needed to make the changes.'

'Actually the Ofsted category enabled me, really, to push things through that I wouldn't have gotten away with without us being in a category.'

One headteacher explained the usefulness of the Ofsted category because it facilitated radical change. The sense of real crisis at the school removed barriers and resistance to rapid and substantial change.

'I don't know whether this is borne out by other people, but sometimes it's easier to manage or lead, whatever you want to call it, when it's a bit of a mess because people challenge you less in a way. If things are working, but you can see that it could be better it's almost harder to break that down...staff will say everything is ticking along nicely why mess with it? But when children are running around the school, you're excluding six year olds, nobody wants to work there, staff illness is high, etc., you've got supply teachers coming out of the woodwork every day it's easier in a way, isn't it, because people aren't going to challenge when you change things because it's not working. So in some ways it's easier if that makes sense.'

The sense of real crisis at the school removed barriers and resistance to rapid and substantial change

One of the 16 interviewed headteachers had been in charge of the school as it moved from a category 2 to a 4. When the inspection judgement was delivered, she understood that her own position was under threat: there was a serious chance she would be dismissed. Despite this she endorsed the Ofsted judgement:

'I fully agreed with the Ofsted report actually. It was hard listening to, because as a leader of something you don't want to be told you are inadequate. But they were a very, very professional team, and they kept me informed of their findings and discussions all the way through, and I agreed with them, as did my governing body.'

The nearest that the headteachers came to criticising Ofsted was in the form of light-hearted comments about how it represented an adversarial force.

'Everybody in the school had a common enemy then, which was Ofsted. You know, that's sort of how we worked.'

'I've also trained as an Ofsted inspector. So I know from the other side, I know it from the dark side as well.'

Not only did the headteachers endorse the initial inspection judgement; they also often spoke highly of the benefits of the HMI monitoring visits that took place in the months after the inspection. The insights of individual HMIs were praised, as was the positive nature of these visits. There was a sense of alignment and joint endeavour between the heads and the monitoring HMIs.

'We found working with the HMIs really useful. You know, people don't like HMIs in the school, they get very nervous about it. But the two we had were fantastic, they were really helpful. They were very good, very clued up, very strong, knew their stuff. They were inspecting us, clearly, but it was done with advice...'

'So I was very lucky because the HMI and I...were very aligned in our thought process around where the school needed to go. He was incredibly challenging and very much made me have to fight to convince him that the school was moving forward and to prove it...but that dialogue every few months with an external person who could see the difference that had been made each time he came back was really powerful. And it was really powerful for me as a leader to get that feedback... because when you're immersed in it, you know it's getting better but you can't feel it necessarily. Whereas somebody coming in and saying, "Wow, from where it was to where it is now, it's massively different." That was good for me and very affirming for me and very affirming for the staff as well for me to be able to say, "Do you know what, I'm telling you you're doing great, but Jeremy's come back and compared to what he saw last time he's seen this and this and this and this and isn't that great and look how positive the report is and yes, there's loads we still need to do but..." Having that external person as a key marker, for me and for the staff, was really powerful. I very much valued those visits, I enjoyed those visits.'

Not only did the headteachers endorse the initial inspection judgement; they also often spoke highly of the benefits of the HMI monitoring visits

Diagnosing the school's problems

Overwhelmingly, headteachers' accounts of their school improvement journeys centred on how their schools dramatically improved teaching quality. Most of the headteachers we interviewed considered teaching quality to be the central theme in their rapid improvement stories. The following sections explain how the headteachers diagnosed their schools' problems and managed the interventions they considered necessary for rapid progress, particularly improvements to the quality of teaching.

Diagnosing the problems

The headteachers, including those who had been at the school for some time, typically reviewed teaching quality in the aftermath of the inspection. Several began with a close examination of the data. Most followed up with an observation phase during which they visited classrooms, observed the general life of the school and talked to all the key stakeholders. Their impressions were often negative, but there was also considerable complexity to what they saw. Some schools were in a chaotic and severely dysfunctional state, while others were outwardly calm and happy places but with a serious lack of quality in teaching and learning. In the most extreme situations there were urgent safeguarding issues that needed immediate attention as well as problems in pedagogical quality. The range of situations – from chaotic and dangerous to benign but sleepy – is captured by statements from four interviewees:

'I felt it was unsafe. The children in the playground, there were all sort of fights and I could see there was adult-on-adult bullying but also, more worryingly, adult-on-child bullying going on.'

'The first day I was there I rang the director of education and said, "It's shocking here...I've never seen anything like it"...Everything about it was unsafe; it was horrific.'

'It was all very friendly but no data, no performance management, nothing, no systems in place and it was just that people got on well together and would try their best but that's what I walked into.'

'The school had a lovely feel, still has, but the systems weren't in place.'

The details of the initial audit results varied, but consistently pointed to the prevalence of weak teaching. In a few cases the results of the baseline exercise were comprehensively disappointing in terms of teaching quality. One stated, for example, that teaching quality was 'absolutely appalling'. In a small minority of schools the headteachers were unable to find any example of good-quality teaching. The two following examples from different schools illustrate this phenomenon. The headteachers in question used Ofsted terminology and appear to have used Ofsted assumptions about the elements of teaching quality.

'So we did what was called an initial needs analysis, so you look at what the school needs...The greatest concern was the quality of teaching. So when we

Most of the headteachers we interviewed considered teaching quality to be the central theme in their rapid improvement stories

did the first review of teaching, and we were trying to see what we were getting hold of, three quarters of the lessons were graded as inadequate...with no good teaching, and I think that was a challenge. There probably were good teachers here, but we didn't see any of that good teaching.'

'So [we] baselined it in terms of Ofsted grades and in terms of what are the common things we do well and what are the common things that need to be better. So I went out and saw 36 per cent of teaching that was satisfactory and the other 64 per cent was inadequate and there was no good practice at that point happening in the school.'

The majority of headteachers identified a pattern of not universally weak teaching, but an unacceptable variability in teaching quality across the school. One respondent described how in an initial presentation to staff the focus was on this unacceptable variability, from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding', and the fundamental unfairness of all staff being associated with the idea of requiring 'special measures' when this was the 'fault' of a sub-set of the teaching team:

'The first address I gave to the staff on the first day...[I said] there would be people in here who deserved to be in special measures and they are why the school is in special measures, but there are other people, other leaders, other teachers who do not deserve that because they are providing a good (and in some cases, an outstanding) education because I think it is very easy to type everyone with a brush of inadequate but there was real talent here. Sometimes it was hidden, sometimes it was just a beacon within the school, but I acknowledged that it is not all of their faults.'

In schools with variable teaching quality, the best teachers were seen as the key resource. By building an alliance with these skilful – but often demotivated – staff, the headteachers set out to change the whole school culture and ethos. In some cases re-energising these staff emerged as an important priority.

'I was aware that teachers felt disenfranchised with the school...and actually disenfranchised with the profession of teaching, and educating children, because when you have gone through four years of category/non category/ category, you feel pretty beaten up at the end of it and pretty useless. And that doesn't mean that you aren't good at your job, because there are great people at this school doing a great job in incredibly difficult circumstances. And actually what you are left with sometimes are the real brave people who stick with it through thick and thin. And so it is understanding how to find out those who are here, and are absolutely passionate, and have the skill set to drive the school forward, and out of special measures, and how you engage them back in the process, and how you particularly develop their love for teaching and the profession, and for educating children again.'

Almost all of the headteachers were concerned by examination results.

'In between me accepting the job and actually arriving in September we'd had absolutely shocking SATs results really. The year that I joined, our Year 6's had got 48 per cent combined reading and writing and maths, so we were sending more children unable to access the secondary curriculum than we were

The majority of headteachers identified a pattern of not universally weak teaching, but an unacceptable variability in teaching quality across the school

sending them able to. So that kind of indicated on my arrival in September that we might not be the good school that Ofsted reviewed however many years ago in its previous report.'

'The whole thing was actually at kind of a rock bottom, and that was obviously replicated in the results. So in Early Years the results were in the bottom 5 per cent, in Key Stage 1 the bottom 5 per cent, and Key Stage 2 results were in the bottom 10–20 per cent of the country. So the results were replicated over a sustained period of underperformance. And it was also in a locality where there really weren't outstanding or good primary schools to kind of come together to support. It was a hotbed of underachievement if you like, where only 20 per cent of the schools in the local area were good or better, with a lot of schools in special measures.'

Many of the headteachers commented on a poor relationship between the school and parents before the school went into special measures and immediately afterwards. Often previous headteachers had kept the parents 'at arms length' and there was little sense of partnership.

'Parents weren't allowed into the playground, they had to wait outside so inviting parents in, getting them into lessons, getting them to see how things started to improve in lessons to see what was going on and trying to be as open and transparent as possible with them.'

The work of the governing body prior to the critical inspection judgement was also often seen as an important area of weakness. In some cases the governors were considered to be too 'hands on' and not sufficiently strategic in the way they perceived their role.

'The chair of governors has been chair for a long time and spent two days a week in school... and teachers in particular, if they had a complaint, they... or well not even a complaint, just an issue, felt that they needed to take it directly to her and she was really quite operational rather than strategic and it was undermining some of what I was doing.'

'The HMI took against the current chair. He's lovely. He does fantastic work here. But he isn't what the school needed. So you have to do what you have to do, don't you?'

As a result of the initial audit the teachers formed a view of the underlying causes of the weaknesses in teaching quality. The exact mix of factors varied from school to school, but five themes emerged in many of the interviews, which are discussed in more detail below.

1. An imbalance between the focus on care and the need for excellence in academic outcomes
2. Weak systems for tracking student progress
3. Poor performance management of teachers
4. An immature concept of distributed leadership
5. A poor approach to teacher professional development

The work of the governing body prior to the critical inspection judgement was also often seen as an important area of weakness

1. An imbalance between the focus on care and the need for excellence in academic outcomes

Several headteachers identified a cultural problem in the form of a disproportionate emphasis on care rather than achievement as a reason for weaknesses in teaching and learning. For them the schools were often good at pastoral care and providing a safe environment for the children but lacked sufficient focus on academic performance.

'Our school has always had a high regard for children's wellbeing...But what I mean is the quality of the relationships between adults and children was always paramount...So that was [the school's] really big strength...It had a flip side though because I'm always wary of when you go to school and you hear that it's really lovely to work here and everyone's really great friends, that often kind of masks the fact that there has been no challenge or accountability.'

Another headteacher believed this imbalance between care and academic achievement was linked to the influence of previous government policy in the area of 'Every Child Matters' and Ofsted inspection guidance which had highlighted the centrality of safeguarding.

'The school had got a Good on its previous Ofsted but that was under the framework which was very much about safeguarding, and talking to the senior team they had felt that they'd scraped the Good at that time. The school had always been very good at its safeguarding, you know, the dotting Is and crossing Ts, and the pastoral care in the school and all those sorts of things. But actually, the outcomes were not that good.'

From the perspective of our interviewees there was often a link between the failure to place sufficient emphasis on academic outcomes and a sense that the teachers had low expectations for student academic outcomes because of the prevalence of social disadvantage at the school. One headteacher described a conversation with a particularly bright girl in Year 11, which the head described as epitomising the school's low expectations and the failure to encourage a culture of ambition and aspiration among students:

*"What university are you looking to go to, do you want to go into sixth form?"
"Oh no, I'm going to college and do hairdressing" and I said, "Oh, you've got a love of hairdressing?" "No but I know I'll be able to get on the course and it'll give me a job."*

One headteacher described how low expectations on the part of teachers placed 'a ceiling on learning'. Another head spoke explicitly about the need for a 'no excuses' approach to explaining student underachievement:

'When I was having initial conversations with teachers or following up on early lesson observations...[I made it] very clear that we weren't prepared to take excuses. So if people were saying, well this child or this group of children didn't do particularly well because of ... something that just smacks of an excuse rather than something within the teacher's control. It's almost that sort of, well you know, they did as good as they can, they did do better than we can expect

Several headteachers identified a cultural problem in the form of a disproportionate emphasis on care rather than achievement as a reason for weaknesses in teaching and learning

from them. Well no, we actually want to raise the bar on those expectations and just be relentless with how you do that.'

'The chair of governors...thought he was governing a good school. And then firstly here comes this upstart headteacher and is quickly followed by Ofsted telling him that actually it isn't and his response was, well my daughter went here and, you know, she didn't get the best grades but she was really happy and she's doing great now. And that was very indicative of the culture amongst parents, amongst staff: low aspirations, low expectations.'

Many of the headteachers identified complacency on the part of teachers as a core problem.

'Some senior staff were happy with thinking oh well, we get about 70/80 per cent of children getting A to Cs, that is absolutely fine, not really looking where the children had started from, and they perhaps should have been getting 85/90% A* to Cs.'*

'The fact that youngsters were joining our school at or around the national average, and depending on the year they'd either leave at or around the national average, or just below. The school never exceeded that, it never reached where it should, but there was a kind of, "we're comfortable with this" sort of feeling.'

While the headteachers were keen to tackle what they perceived as insufficient attention to the 'standards agenda', they also wished to maintain the strengths of their schools in the field of pastoral care. Both characteristics (great quality of care and great academic outcomes) were perceived as essential components of a good school – not alternatives.

'The quality of the relationships between adults and children was always paramount and even through the inadequate Ofsted experience, we didn't lose that and through developing the more, sort of academic and measurable stuff, again I don't think we ever lost that.'

Many of the headteachers identified complacency on the part of teachers as a core problem

2. Weak systems for tracking student progress

The headteachers saw accurate data about student performance as an essential precondition for school effectiveness and improvement. Many of the headteachers interviewed described monitoring and evaluation as poor when the school went into special measures. In some cases there was no suitable data. In other schools data was being collected but was not being effectively used by teachers.

'And in terms of teachers' use of data it was nowhere, absolutely nowhere... there wasn't any moderation so there wasn't an opportunity to check that, there were inconsistencies....there wasn't a sense that this is ongoing live stuff which, you know, today's data inform what you do tomorrow.'

'There wasn't a lot of assessment of teaching. Data was being gathered, but it wasn't actually accurate. So there was a perception that children would leave Key Stage 2 with a certain grade and they weren't then achieving that.'

'I think that things had been, it was all very friendly but no data, no performance management, nothing, no systems in place and it was just that people got on well together and would try their best but that's what I walked into...when Ofsted came in they got very deflated because in their view the school was a good school and therefore it was an absolute shock for everybody, I think, apart from myself that the school went into notice to improve.'

'The data was really poor. So I came in with a mission basically. And within my first fortnight, I had done lesson observation on maths because the data was the weakest for maths.'

Headteachers were concerned that there was a need to monitor both students and teachers more closely

3. Poor performance management of teachers

Headteachers were concerned that there was a need to monitor both students and teachers more closely. They often had a sense of the inconsistency and variability of teacher performance. Many heads had a strong sense that there should be a small number of 'non-negotiable' characteristics of all teaching across the school, but that this was an unrealistic aspiration unless effective performance management systems were put in place. One headteacher talked about the need to focus 'relentlessly on the quality of teaching'. This was only possible through systematic performance management.

'The systems weren't in place. There was no paperwork...there was no performance management. I sat down with the previous headteacher for about an hour when he gave me the keys but he told me that all the teachers were outstanding but no lesson observations have ever been carried out!'

'I think it was very much characterised by establishing – and I even want to say "imposing" – a consistency across the school...It was important to establish a sense of consistency...So, for example, where lessons weren't well planned, there weren't key objectives so we just insisted that every single lesson in the school started with a slide...that explained to students exactly what their learning was and how it fitted in.'

4. An immature concept of distributed leadership

Some headteachers criticised the leadership approach of their predecessors. They described limitations at all levels: weak SLTs, weak middle management and a limited sense of responsibility on the part of more junior staff. The absence of an effective SLT and a wider sense of collegiate responsibility seriously limited the schools' capacity to improve.

'The head was really the only person who really made any decisions in the school. So he hadn't trusted his senior leaders, and his senior leaders weren't trusting middle leaders, and all the things that happened from that. So you've got one person trying to lead the school.'

In several cases they thought the staff lacked a sense of shared or 'distributed' leadership. Teachers were disempowered and expected decisions to be made from above. This limited their sense of responsibility for problems, as well as the likelihood that they would take corrective action.

'I wanted to be somebody who had distributed leadership, because you can't do it all by yourself and so it was about giving people ownership, allowing, empowering them, allowing them to be risk takers.'

'So it was very much trying to engender a culture in which they are not only "allowed to that" but where they have accountability and therefore responsibility for what they do. That had never been the case... I spoke to all my staff in the first month and a half and everybody said, "Oh well, when senior leadership tell us what to do, we'll do it."'

'I knew what I wanted but I couldn't get there initially...focusing leadership on one person is not healthy for anyone, least of all the organisation. I knew I wanted to distribute responsibility, but I had to get the right team in order to distribute.'

5. A poor approach to teacher professional development

Headteachers often observed that at the time of the critical inspection judgement, the school had weak professional development. There was little sense of any professional dialogue about teaching taking place within the schools, and few teachers were involved in coaching or mentoring relationships. One headteacher described teachers as being fundamentally isolated and rarely involved in discussions about effective pedagogy. None of the schools appeared to have effective collaborative relationships with other schools that would make joint professional development possible. Some headteachers commented on the isolation of the schools themselves, with few systems in place to inject new ideas from outside.

'Outsiders described it to me as Sleeping Beauty's Palace. Nobody came out and nobody came in. People didn't really go on courses, professional development wasn't really considered; it was considered that the best way to develop themselves was to keep them in the classroom with the children.'

'My analysis of why we got to that position was largely to do with the fact that this was a staff that hadn't had any professional development invested in them for a long time. They had just been doing the job that they had always done, were told that they were doing okay at that job...Never mind any sort of exposure to...any new pedagogy or different ways of working, going out into other schools and seeing how they were acting.'

None of the schools appeared to have effective collaborative relationships with other schools that would make joint professional development possible

How the headteachers brought about rapid improvement

The headteachers' accounts of their actions after the critical inspection judgement in many ways reflected their diagnosis of the root causes of ineffective teaching. They sought to put in place:

- Effective systems for tracking academic performance
- Improved performance management
- Strengthened leadership models at every level

- Powerful professional development opportunities including collaboration with other schools

They also introduced cultural changes. Many tried to create a new culture based on principles that had been lacking, particularly:

- High expectations about student potential
- A shared understanding of 'what good looks like'
- The need for a high level of consistency of professional practice

How the headteachers sought to establish trust with existing staff

Although headteachers universally considered teaching to be weak, they also recognised in many cases that there were pockets of better teaching and that many under-performing teachers could be 'rescued'. Headteachers typically sought to categorise staff individually in terms of their performance and potential. Only two of the 16 headteachers interviewed concluded that there was a need for a wholesale renewal of the workforce. In the majority of schools the challenge was to identify the best practitioners and the people of potential goodwill and establish a trusting relationship with them.

The headteachers, particularly those who were new to the school at the time of the critical assessment, often emphasised how they went about establishing trust. Their approaches were not uniform. Two of the respondents stressed that they adopted a relatively 'autocratic' approach, with considerable emotional distance between them and the staff. Most of the headteachers adopted a different approach and sought to win the trust, particularly of those teachers who were identified as having real but unfulfilled potential. In interviews with the latter group, 'trust' was mentioned many times.

'I think trust is one of the most important things. If you can establish a rapport and trust, the sooner you get trust, the sooner people will come with you, even on quite risky things.'

'We have a mantra here of trust management. I trust them, they trust me....After a while there was a culture of "actually, this guy isn't here to sack us. This guy is actually improving my teaching, I'm getting better at teaching", and then once you get the teaching right, everything else just falls into place.'

Heads employed different strategies to gain teachers' trust. In some cases they gave responsibility to an individual for an important part of the improvement strategy. Other headteachers described how they personally taught lessons to show staff they were not asking them to do anything they would not do themselves. For them this was a key aspect of building trusting relationships.

'Similarly, the deputy and I both taught so we were leading learning, and I think that was a massive bonus for us and a positive because we weren't asking teachers to do anything that we weren't doing, and I was lucky enough to have two staff here who had a lot of potential but hadn't really been given an opportunity either, and they are now my deputies.'

'I taught in every classroom across the whole school...So that I could see that I could walk the walk as well as talk it. We are in a very, very deprived area with

In the majority of schools the challenge was to identify the best practitioners and the people of potential goodwill and establish a trusting relationship with them

60 per cent free school meals, and to a certain extent there is a mindset of "oh, these kids can't do it, you know, poor backgrounds, no support", so I thought, "right, I'm going to show you how much you can get out of these kids". And I did that for two weeks, taught in every class across the school.'

In two of the schools the headteachers formed the view that staff competence was so limited that they literally 'could not be trusted'. The trust emphasis only came later once the staffing structure had changed dramatically.

'...So for the first two years it was a personality-driven organisation that was focused on me and me alone because I couldn't trust my senior leaders. Of the senior leaders from that time, there is only one who is still here and the others have all gone, three years ago was the last one, and some we got on very good terms, the others were restructuring and whatever, but you know there is only one because I couldn't trust anyone, whereas now I'm supporting another school and I've been out for a day or two days a week but I'm actually confident if I'm not here.'

The importance of recruiting talented new staff

In all but one school there was staff turnover and the headteachers sought to upgrade teaching and leadership capacity by bringing in particularly skilful and energetic new colleagues.

There was one exception: a school where there were (unusually) no staff changes at all other than the arrival of the new headteacher. This headteacher took pride in the fact that precisely the same staff took the school from 'special measures' to a 'good' judgement. At the other extreme was a school where the complete staff team changed 100 per cent in just over a year.

'Within 15 months when we got the "good", there was nobody who was here when the school was put into special measures.'

The perceived need in most cases for staff changes brought management challenges. Many of the interviewees suggested that they made it clear that there would be consequences if staff were unwilling to engage in the improvement project learning programmes. Several headteachers described how the departure of some under-performing staff members was an important aspect of the process of bringing the school out of special measures. These headteachers also stated that many teachers left of their own volition when the school went into special measures, including a number of teachers who retired. They also described how the Ofsted rating made it easier to bring about staff changes.

'... I'm not into these nights of the long knives that some people seem to go in for, firing everybody. I always think people are rescuable. This is about rescuing schools and rescuing people. But they have to show me that they really aren't rescuable or would block things. [One senior teacher] was so lazy. She wasn't doing ... she had virtually three days non-contact time...I'm not sure what she did with her time. I looked in her files. They were dreadful...So there had to be a conversation with her and she got a job elsewhere as well.'

'So what I had to do was build leadership capacity, draft in some good teachers, assess all the children and move it forward from there. It's a very

Several headteachers described how the departure of some under-performing staff members was an important aspect of the process of bringing the school out of special measures

strong position one because you have that leverage of, "Well you're a failed teacher because this report is saying that the teaching is inadequate, off you go" so to speak. So managing people out and then employing good teachers was a challenge, but it wasn't as hard as it would be if you had people who'd just been coasting along and no, sort of, leverage of special measures, I think. That really helped.'

Changes to teacher professional development

Most headteachers established new in-house professional development programmes. These were often seen as much more powerful than external training courses. Headteachers identified four in-house strategies that improved the quality of teaching in schools:

- Several schools facilitated **staff-led training**, with one school emphasising the importance of allowing all staff from all seniority levels the opportunity to share best practice, including NQTs. This approach was considered important in making teachers feel valued and able to contribute to wider learning in the school.

'I think we needed to get the accountability in place first. This last academic year we have been trying to focus on shared professional development as much as possible. We have set up our CPD programme, and one strand of it is all the teachers come together, we do a little bit...one of the deputies leads on this. Does a little bit of input, just perhaps a little snippet from a training video, or something like that, just to get people's thoughts going, and then they split into smaller groups. So they are in groups of nine, that can then split into trios if they wish, and doing a lot of just sharing good practice. Or "I have got this idea, I am going to try it out, will you come and watch and tell me how you think it works?" And we have been developing that sort of...again that more collegiate approach to developing teaching and learning.'

'The Ofsted really made us focus CPD far more sharply which obviously paid huge dividends in terms of staff confidence and competence, and making sure that we had those three weekly opportunities not to just get the staff together and say "right, okay, we think this is the problem so here's some CPD", but giving everybody an opportunity to actually be involved in delivering that as well as receiving it...now we have NQTs leading CPD, we have very young teachers leading CPD, we have Teach Meet where everybody can put their two pennies worth in and it's great so everybody feels as though they are part of that and they've got a voice and a role to play rather than it being top down.'

- In addition to in-school training workshops, headteachers also introduced **on-the-job training through coaching and mentoring**. For several headteachers peer coaching based on observation was also a particularly powerful means of professional development. Peer support was a form of 'low-stakes' accountability that provided a forum for personalised discussions about pedagogy. Video of teachers at work was cited as a very rich stimulus for individual coaching and reflection.

'We sort of buddied teachers up in a way so that they could observe each other in sort of a risk-free environment to see what lessons... learning looks like when obviously you're an observer. I was lucky enough to have two outstanding

For several headteachers peer coaching based on observation was also a particularly powerful means of professional development



teachers in school who are still with me now... one was part-time and one was working here but in amongst everything that was going on, they just... they weren't able to shine. So I used their skills as well to lead model lessons and started going in pairs to see what was happening. They also worked with staff who needed support and who were able to make the shift and move to good, if not better.'

'We use videos...So they'll watch themselves first and 99 per cent of the time they're reflective enough to pick up on the development points themselves. So we video lessons. We watch each other's lessons via video. We talk again, it's about trust management, open and transparent, we talk...'

- Some headteachers described how **special interest groups or communities of practice** were established, and how staff meetings were often used to discuss best teaching practice and to encourage teachers to reflect on their own practice. This ensured all staff had the opportunity to take part in some level of discussion about professional development and that discussions were consistent across all teaching staff.

'...we got rid of all staff meetings, and the only thing that we had were communities of practice. This time was spent looking at pedagogy, developing pedagogy and becoming better teachers in that first year, because that is how you are going to move a school forwards, not by improving results, not by better intervention. The way you move a school forward and build it on a sustainable bed of concrete, rather than a bit of sand that will fall away, is by ensuring that the quality of teaching is continually improving, because that will ensure results after results are coming through. So all of our staff meetings were (and always have been in my whole time here) are CPD staff meetings, so there is an hour's worth of training every week that happens for all teachers on generic stuff and that's been since day one.'

- In several cases **training was targeted to specific groups**, such as skilled teachers on a journey from 'good' to 'outstanding' or middle leaders.

'I wanted my whole cohort of middle, of heads of learning area who are now heads of faculty basically, to be working together on the kinds of things from that programme which we have been developing in my previous school anyway, but I wanted them to have that chance to sit down and reflect, to understand their responsibilities, accountabilities, what their drive is, etc.'

'We have used the Outstanding Teacher Programme to develop individual teachers, and then used them to develop other people, and all the time maintaining that feeling that everyone has a contribution to make. I think making people feel valued is needed in order to get the very best out of them which will then lead to getting the very best out of the students.'

- Training often drew upon **resources from other schools** with a reputation for effective practice. Several headteachers referenced school-to-school collaboration as an important method of professional development. Three of these schools sent teachers to other schools to observe good practice and feed back to teachers in their school on what they saw.

Several headteachers referenced school-to-school collaboration as an important method of professional development

'So it might be working across our Teaching School Alliance, looking at different schools.'

'...Within [the region] at the time there was only one outstanding secondary school...So, myself and my senior team spent some time over in the school talking to them about what they were doing, the way they were doing things, kind of soaking up a bit of their ethos, and what came out of that was that we got a head of science to come and do some work for us. So they were able to relieve their head of science for a morning a week, so he came over and did some work in science.'

- Many headteachers described **school-to-school collaboration** as a vital factor in their school improvement story.

'I think the whole business of working with other schools is also vital, and I think that in the current climate it's a way to ensure that there is that challenge, that can really only come from other schools. That's the culture now, whether it's within a trust or whatever. I do think that we've all got to be outward facing and use the best schools to challenge each other when it's not good enough in order to create an outstanding education for everyone because that's just another strategy that's a very important ingredient.'

'We were given some support from schools which had an NLE lead, and when we came out of the notice to improve, we maintained a relationship with that school and became engaged with a research project...So I found basically collaboration, I couldn't have done it without it.'

Improved performance management

Most of the schools studied focused on managing teachers' performance after the critical inspection report. This was achieved through monitoring performance through pupil data, but also through senior staff scrutinising planning, organising the scrutiny of students' written work and, above all, by observing lessons.

'...We introduced lesson observations three times a year by the senior staff. So we told staff which week it was happening in but not which lesson we'd be coming to, then from those observations we'd write down the areas for development, and then staff were expected to attend a training session linked to that area for development. Where we identified strengths we'd have staff share that strength in the session as well. So it's very much teacher led. What it meant was, as we went round observing teaching, we were much more attuned and looking for much more than just teacher-led practice.'

'I introduced a system of "I'm going to come and watch you teach and I'm going to tell you the things that I think you do well that impacts on learning and I'm going to tell you areas where I think you could have had a better impact on learning." It wasn't just a list of strengths, it was all, it always impacts on learning and what have you done well in order to do that and what you need to do better. So it was very, very learning driven.'

The headteachers described observing lessons not simply as a method of holding teachers to account or to be critical, but also to provide opportunities for professional learning through constructive feedback from senior staff.

Most of the schools studied focused on managing teachers' performance after the critical inspection report

Headteachers were keen to stress the need to link management review of teaching quality with self-review and self-reflection and collaborative reflection. In addition to a formal programme of lesson observations, other more collaborative techniques – such as joint ‘learning walks’ – were often established.

‘...we introduced a calendar of self-evaluation, learning walks, lesson observations, data analysis, etc., and we as a senior team also made sure that we were out and about. I wanted us to be much more high profile, so we introduced lesson observations three times a year by the senior staff.’

Headteachers’ actions depended on what problems their schools faced, and which areas they considered to be the highest risk. The previous section explored how headteachers’ backgrounds influenced leadership style, and this section explored the specific strategies employed – mainly improving the quality of teaching by focusing on professional development and teacher monitoring systems. However, a number of other factors, such as a lack of pupil monitoring systems, also led to schools being placed in special measures; strategies to counteract such issues are explored in the next section.

New monitoring and evaluation systems

Many of the headteachers interviewed established new monitoring and evaluation systems to improve the tracking of student performance. This was a top priority in several cases. It was part of a wider commitment to ensuring whole-school consistency in key policy areas including not only student tracking but also behaviour management, lesson planning and other approaches that were identified as ‘non-negotiable’.

‘It was really close scrutiny of planning and moving them on – right back down to the basics really – there was no checking system in the school that was working well either so I put that in place immediately. When Ofsted came six months later, they could see that we’d already started to make an impact and that the children were making progress. I’d told the Ofsted team as they arrived that I fully expected it to go into special measures.’

‘I think that was quite a fundamental ... and people welcomed that because it just gave them a framework to reassure them that they were doing the basics well and so yes, monitoring in those first few months was very much about “is everyone doing those non-negotiables” and, “was there buy-in to that”. We use terms like “non-negotiables”, and that’s what these were checking for – and, obviously, at the same time checking that there was an impact on the learning.’

‘We started to introduce data and targets; we started to have lesson plans and lesson observations. We started to have performance reviews because nobody had ever had performance management apart from the head.’

Across the board there was a renewed emphasis on staff data literacy. This was a collective responsibility. In one school, for example, breakfast data meetings were established to which all staff were expected to make a contribution. In some cases the new emphasis on student data also required changes in management responsibilities. Several headteachers also gave senior and middle leaders responsibility for specific data management responsibilities.

Headteachers were keen to stress the need to link management review of teaching quality with self-review and self-reflection and collaborative reflection

'So I had rearranged some of their roles...On the SLT, I had one of my assistant headteachers do some data analysis ... because they had been given targets in Year 11 but it was a range of targets, so a child might have a range of targets from a C to an A and the department could choose what the target was.'

'Everyone's got performance management targets and priorities, and middle leaders also have clear quality assurance programmes they've got to put in place. We also obviously have mid-year review and all the things that give quality assurance.'

'We actively built the team to manage a quality assurance system that looks at the quality of teaching and learning, the quality of data, the interpretation of data, and who is accountable for what.'

Action to build leadership capacity

Leadership changes took place at every level. Some headteachers set out to build a new SLT. Often this involved recruiting new senior staff, while in other cases staff were promoted from within. One headteacher highlighted the vital role fulfilled by the deputy head. The new head and the existing deputy formed a strong partnership and together drove the reform agenda. Other heads took urgent action to strengthen the SLT.

'There wasn't really the capacity to actually move things forward. So probably the biggest thing following the [inspection]...well I promoted internally a very good middle leader, a good head of year, onto the SLT. And she has subsequently gone on to be promoted to deputy head. I built the SLT in order to implement various other structures within the school.'

There was often a need to train SLT members. One headteacher talked about how existing SLT members did not have a picture of SLT excellence, and training was needed to put this right.

'I had an SLT of eight: I had brought two of them in from outstanding schools and I knew them, and they were in key areas of personal development, health and safety and achievement. But the rest of the SLTs did not know what outstanding looked like. So we did a session...it allowed us as an SLT to talk about what outstanding schools do. We then did the next sessions...on visioning and then [I went] to every member of the SLT to explain how their role and responsibilities fit in with the vision of the school...What I was able to say at the end was "what we need to do as an SLT now is absolutely challenge and support each other to achieve this vision".'

Although the headteachers were clearly strong characters they were often committed to a collegiate form of management at the SLT level. One headteacher, for example, described the need for disagreement at the SLT level, and used SLT meetings as a form of leadership training for future school leaders. This headteacher emphasised the need for systematic succession planning at the SLT level and the duty that older leaders had towards the next generation.

'I'm very confident in my leadership team...three of us are coming towards the end of our careers...so I charge the three of us old hands with bringing them on and sort of developing them, you know, talking through why we are making a decision – even if they disagree with it, at least understand the rationale of it.'

Leadership changes took place at every level. Some headteachers set out to build a new SLT

There was a consistent emphasis across the interviews on the need for better-distributed leadership.

'I wanted to be somebody who had distributed leadership because you can't do it all by yourself. It was about giving ownership, empowering them, allowing them to be risk takers and yet still keeping an eye on everything.'

Heads used different strategies to develop middle leaders, including identifying and promoting talented staff and sending them to observe best practice at other schools. One headteacher put a training programme in place to develop middle leaders, considering this to be a vital element of the overall school improvement strategy.

Some of the headteachers recognised that they had adopted relatively directive styles of leadership in the early stages of the school turnaround. In the immediate post-inspection crisis the priority was not distributed leadership, but basic levels of professional consistency.

'So for every class, I'd done a class timetable and I issued it, and said, "This is what it's going to be. I bought all new books for the children, this is what they're going to be, and we're all going to do our literacy in these books, our maths in these books." So it was very systematic and it was very controlled in terms of that; there was no choice –'

While this 'top-down' approach was necessary in the emergency situation it was not the basis for long-term improvement. Many headteachers saw that there was a need to 'change gear' in order to make the improvements irreversible, and this involved more distributed leadership and an element of 'letting go' by the headteacher. The need was to move from prescription to greater professional autonomy. One headteacher spoke powerfully about the need for a different paradigm of improvement on the journey from good to great, compared to the journey from inadequate to good. They explained that the next phase was all about empowerment and giving staff 'permission' to use their own judgement. The following testimony from two different heads makes the same point about the lifecycle of school improvement and the need to move from prescription to professional empowerment.

'So we still use these systems and processes but rather than it being me, they do it. So we've kept the core of what we were about when we were in special measures but it's much more distributed. Whereas it was very controlled in terms of "you need to teach literacy here at 9:30 every day and it needs to look like this as a sequence within the lesson". What we're trying to do now is get staff to almost forget that and teach how they think is right because they've got the pedagogical understanding now.'

'I think the journey from good to outstanding is going to be very different to the journey that we've already been on because it isn't going to be about me driving it, it's going to be about distributing leadership, and about senior and middle leaders driving it, and about teachers driving that agenda far more and them taking ownership of what they do and actually taking it in different directions themselves rather than us all going in the same direction at the

Heads used different strategies to develop middle leaders, including identifying and promoting talented staff and sending them to observe best practice at other schools

same time at the same pace. I think now it's about making that a much more individualised approach and giving people the confidence and almost the permission to be more individual and do what they think.'

Changes to the work of the governing body

There were often dramatic, immediate changes to the personnel of the governing body in the immediate aftermath of critical inspection judgements. Several headteachers described how the chair stood down soon after the inspection. They also often described significant turnover in members of the governing body. These changes were generally seen as necessary and allowed for a fresh start for the new governing body.

'The chair resigned on the day the school entered special measures, and it was actually a positive move for the school I think. It created that freshness and that fresh approach, but it meant that for four or five months, we didn't really have a structure. We had a group of people that had sort of joined the governing body prior to my start and prior to the judgement but who didn't really have the skillset and who had never really received any training.'

'About a quarter of the governors are from before special measures; all the others have only been in place for the last two and a half years, but that was a necessary transformation.'

Many of the headteachers embarked on strategies intended to up-skill the governing body. External support in some cases included help from national leaders of governance. The skill set of governors was viewed as important: there was agreement that they needed to have a strong basis to challenge the head in the right areas, and not become overly engaged in the day-to-day workings of schools.

'We sat down with my governors and looked at what we were doing and how we were doing it, and we decided to make some changes. I'd already been working with the governors; we'd had some governor training to help develop them and their role within the school.'

'Our three new governors have been through training; I've actually got one of them on the national governance training. It's only now that they are beginning to realise what their strategic role is.'

'My chair of governors has now got the national governance award...So she's linked to [the National] college now and is helping other schools with governance. So they're quite strong, and quite challenging, but they are very involved in the school, very supportive as well.'

One head commented that the governing body had been limited in what they were able to achieve under the previous head because they were not provided with the necessary information to challenge: 'I had a good governing body in terms of their willingness, but at that time they only had the information that was given them...'. This headteacher made sure to provide accurate data frequently to allow the governors to make informed decisions.

There were often dramatic, immediate changes to the personnel of the governing body in the immediate aftermath of critical inspection judgements

A key role for governors was considered to be supporting and challenging the headship, with a particular focus on how effectively they are able to challenge. Many headteachers said they encouraged questioning from the governors, and saw them as useful in holding them to account.

'Someone who could ask really difficult questions and keep me on my toes if I'm really honest. It's really dangerous, if you don't have that person who basically their job is to challenge you on pretty much everything that comes out of your mouth, it's just so easy for the headteacher to fudge things and gloss over stuff that you don't particularly want to talk about.'

'We absolutely established from the start that the governance needed to look like a challenging and supportive group. But we also established with the school that we had to be open to challenge from the governors and that they needed to be part of that scrutinising role, which again was utterly different in terms of culture share.'

The importance of a new partnership with parents

Most of the headteachers interviewed set about building a stronger relationship with parents through a new communications strategy. There was often a new spirit of transparency based on personal visibility on the part of the headteacher and open engagement through newsletters, workshops and parental satisfaction surveys.

'We do a parental survey after every parent's evening, and each year their satisfaction is going up. If it isn't, we need to address it, the same as we do with the staff twice a year. If it's dropped for any reason, we need to address it.'

'We also set up a series of parent forums, just open meetings after the report had been published, so that if any parents were uncertain about a certain phrase or our direction or wanting clarification on what we were going to do about this, then myself and a group of governors were there to listen.'

'It's not an easy community here, and it was winning them over that was going to take some time. So we started by outlining the vision to them and having lots of meetings, and they weren't easy.'

For primary school headteachers, 'school gate' visibility seemed particularly important. They commented on the need to be seen and to be approachable at the school gate at the end of the day as being important for building trust and showing a willingness to establish an open relationship.

'So right from day one I made sure that I was very visible so I did the gate every morning and every night and literally from the second that I stood on that gate I'd get parents coming to say, "I hope you're going to be different to the last headteacher because she wouldn't let us in".'

The question of visibility was also emphasised by secondary headteachers.

'Just little things, like I made my SLT do bus duty because the buses used to be a huge source of conflict. But again, it's leading by example...'

They commented on the need to be seen and to be approachable at the school gate at the end of the day as being important for building trust and showing a willingness to establish an open relationship

Parental liaison about any student-specific problems was often an improvement priority. One headteacher employed a parental engagement officer to visit the homes of 'hard-to-reach' parents.

'I have...an exceptional parental engagement officer. She's a pastor and her missionary work is helping with parental engagement in schools in rough areas, like [two London districts]. She was a fantastic bridge as well. She will work with even very difficult-to-engage parents.'

Chapter 5

Stories of rapid school improvement



This chapter documents six case studies. Each case study included a review of the interviews with the headteacher and an analysis of semi-structured interviews with the chair of governors and focus group engagement with teachers.

Case study 1: 'It was much more consistent, everybody knew where they were going'

- **Year Groups: Nursery to Year 6**
- **Number of pupils: Above average**
- **Pupil Premium: Above average**
- **Ethnic diversity: Over half pupils White British, a tenth from other White backgrounds and remaining from various ethnic backgrounds**

In this case study a driven and confident new head transformed the way staff viewed their work and created a positive climate for improvement. This school's improvement story clearly shows a sequential approach to change – from emergency planning and urgent action through to longer-term planning to build leadership and teaching capacity, and eventually to foresee the challenges that lie ahead for schools aspiring to move from good to outstanding.

In 2012 an Ofsted inspection placed the school in special measures and a new headteacher was brought in to turn the school around, initially on a short-term basis. The school also became an academy and part of an academy trust 12 months after the new head joined. At this point the head was given a permanent position. At the time the school went into special measures it was in a particularly vulnerable position, as nearly half of its teachers were newly qualified. The school's performance in tests was well below expectations.

Key Stage 2 results were below the floor standard on all measures. The new head explained:

'I was presented with a RAISEonline document that was blue for everything and blue is bad, and green is good. There was no green, there was no white. It was all blue.'

The moment the headteacher was appointed, she began by trying to understand the context of the school. This involved a thorough analysis of the inspection report: *'It was a pretty damning report because the first page just says, "Achievement is inadequate, teaching and learning are inadequate, leadership and management are inadequate."*

Her initial orientation also involved visits to the school:

'When I came into the school the learning environment was very haphazard, so it was very disorganised, there was lots of unnecessary furniture round the school, the corridors were piled high with furniture ... and there didn't seem to be much order or organisation to the way the school environment had been laid out.'

Her impressions were not encouraging: *'The whole feel of the school was chaotic.'* Although the inspection report was damning, her investigation suggested that the reality was actually even worse. The report described pupil

behaviour as 'satisfactory', but she felt this was too generous a judgement. Discussions with the chair of governors confirmed that this was a key problem at the time the school went into special measures. The staff agreed in the focus group interview. One teacher said:

'The behaviour was awful in terms of chairs being thrown, teachers being hit, teachers being locked out of rooms, it was really really hard.'

The school community was traumatised and disorientated by the inspection and its immediate aftermath. For many staff and parents the new headteacher's arrival without much notice was a shock:

'It was an incredibly difficult time for the schools' staff and parents and they found out, I think it was one or two days before the end of the summer term, that their head was leaving and that a new head was being brought in.'

Despite their surprise, parents were clearly unhappy with the state of the school. The headteacher decided on a policy of high visibility with parents:

'I'd got a picture of a school that wasn't really working cohesively with the community...So right from day one I made sure that I was very visible.'

According to the chair of governors (who also joined the governing body at the same time as the new headteacher), the governors were surprised by the inspection judgement. Although they were familiar with school data about pupil performance they had not appreciated its significance.

The headteacher emphasised transparency and communications. At the start of her first term she organised meetings for staff and parents to explain and reassure. She also instigated a number of changes with immediate effect, including:

- A new open doors policy towards parents
- Communicating her expectations of staff, parents and pupils – standards of behaviour, uniform, homework, presentation, commitment, etc.
- Instigating a new system of teacher observation and feedback which was focused on teaching quality

- Reorganising staffing arrangements to ensure that capacity was where it was needed most
- Being directive about the curriculum time for different subjects: providing teachers with timetables and telling staff 'This is what it's going to be.'
- Putting in systematic support for NQTs
- Building capacity in the governing body, providing them with information and encouraging challenge

The chair of governor's interview confirmed the importance of these actions, commenting that the speed at which change occurred was largely due to the 'clear vision' the new head brought to the school. The teacher focus group discussions also endorsed the head's account. Teachers talked about how her actions and presentation in the first training session clarified the key factors that would affect pupil behaviour and morale. They also said that improvements were visible quite quickly – parents were able to see that good things were happening in the school.

The new headteacher began her work at the school on an interim basis. Part way through the emergency response phase, she chose to apply for the permanent job. Once appointed, she turned her attention away from immediate emergency measures to move the school out of special measures and began planning to build capacity for longer-term improvement.

The stressful nature of the frenetic first term of activity took a personal toll on key staff. Despite the workload issues, staff, parents and pupils were responsive to the changes the headteacher made. Her credibility and experience were important – she had done this before elsewhere. Teachers talked about the experience of the monitoring observations that were introduced by the new head. The teacher focus group emphasised the level of crisis that the school faced before the critical inspection judgement:

'My third year...that's when things started to go downhill slightly. My major concern coming to work was behaviour. I had quite a lot of things happen in my classroom that were less than adequate behaviour, it was quite bad. In terms of

senior leadership it was non-existent really, there were only three people in the leadership team. And so it didn't feel like there was much support. People worked very hard here but I don't think it was very clear where we were supposed to be going.'

The new headteacher took energetic action. Teachers understood the need for this but it was nonetheless challenging to be presented with an immediate agenda for change. At the very first training day after the inspection the route plan for improvement was unveiled. The headteacher made it clear that urgent action was absolutely essential in areas such as behaviour and assessment. Her approach was directive and prescriptive, but teachers liked the clarity of the analysis.

Teacher 1: *'So much change all at once, I think so much needed to be done but it was just put in place. I remember the first inset day that we had... And it was like "here's the presentation policy, this is what the books will look like, here's the marking policy, this is what will happen, here's the behaviour policy". So it tackled the main things instantly that were just ... you know, to try and get the behaviour right, get the children having pride in their work. I think that was the two things I seem to remember being stuck in my head what we were tackling.'*

Teacher 2: *'It was just really clear guidelines, wasn't it?'*

For some experienced teachers this was the first time in their professional life that they had been given this degree of clarity about professional expectations.

'It was much more consistent. Everybody knew where they were going. It was, "here's your presentation policy, here's your behaviour, these are my expectations, this is what I want to be on your displays, everybody's working to the same page", so although it was a lot of work it felt right and it felt like everybody was kind of on it. It was very clear what was expected. I'd never seen a presentation policy before, or a marking policy. So although I was marking books and obviously I did have high expectations anyway as a teacher, I

'It was much more consistent. Everybody knew where they were going. It was, "here's your presentation policy, here's your behaviour, these are my expectations, this is what I want to be on your displays, everybody's working to the same page.'"

don't think everybody did. So that was really clear and I found that really helpful.'

Some of the teachers were NQTs. They had applied successfully for jobs at the school thinking that it was, according to Ofsted, a 'good' school. It was only when they arrived for their first day of employment that they discovered the school had been placed into the serious weaknesses/special measures category. This was a stressful moment for the teachers concerned. The headteacher ensured a particularly comprehensive training programme for the NQTs. By the end of their NQT year they had quite a different view. They believed that the professional learning of the previous 12 months had been invaluable, and that they had made massive personal progress as effective class teachers.

The teachers interviewed in the focus group were great admirers of their headteacher. They liked her energy and focus, and they understood what they could do to support her vision. She had extremely high professional expectations, but working with her was deeply rewarding.

Teacher 1: *'I think she's very driven.'*

Teacher 2: *'Yeah.'*

Teacher 1: *'And she's very clear on what she wants.'*

Teacher 2: *'Yeah, it's the clear expectations.'*

Teacher 1: *'The clear vision of what she wants, where you're going to, I think that helps everyone 'cause if you know what the vision is then you can help to build towards it.'*

One of the most striking aspects of the focus group interviews was how highly the teachers

regarded the monitoring visits from HMI. One might imagine that teachers would be particularly stressed by such events. Yet somehow the HMI concerned managed to make these visits into a professionally rewarding and affirmative experience. One described how 'nice' the visits were, while another talked about the 'boost' teachers received as a result of the visits.

Teacher 1: *'The visits were always really positive though, so it's quite nice to have somebody from Ofsted. It was the same man every time and so he could see the progress of the school and he was sharing that with you as well and they were always very positive. I felt much better at the end of that first year.'*

Teacher 2: *'Yeah, they never felt like negative experiences, the monitoring visits from Ofsted, they were always really ... they gave you a little boost actually, didn't they? What you were doing well, what you were still working on, but it was a bit of a boost to know that you were going in the right direction.'*

The level of monitoring and performance management was at times burdensome.

Teacher 1: *'Monitoring in the first year was quite a lot.'*

Teacher 2: *'It was really frequent, yeah. So it was once every half term with the head, and because we were also in special measures Ofsted came every term as well.'*

Teacher 1: *'And then in between we had book scrutiny on a regular basis – at least once a week I would say at one point. So it was quite intense, you got used to being watched and monitored because obviously you needed to get from there to another place.'*

Changes introduced by the new head, including systematic monitoring and access to outside expertise, were also important according to the chair of governors.

The changes were hard for teachers, but also professionally enriching. Looking back, teachers were grateful for the changes. One recalled how before the changes her teaching had

been little more than 'crowd control'. She was very pleasantly surprised by the changes. Her colleagues endorsed her view.

Teacher 1: *'So coming back to work where children wanted to learn again, it made such a big difference, just that environment. So it was really hard work but it was necessary and rewarding.'*

Teacher 2: *'It was rewarding.'*

Teacher 3: *'You saw the progress the children were making, it was rewarding.'*

Teacher 1: *'Absolutely.'*

'I think our children's attitude to learning... is fantastic and that's driven through everything'

Teachers spoke in glowing terms about how good it was to teach at the school now. Previously they had been concerned about students' attitudes, but today they were seen as one of the school's strengths.

'I think our children's attitude to learning... is fantastic and that's driven through everything 'cause they were always sort of involved in any new thing that's happened so they're aware of it, have an assembly about it, they know why it's happening... the children respond really positively to everything I think.'

The headteacher was not resting on her laurels. She had a clear understanding of the need for both 'quick wins' and longer-term capacity building amongst staff to take the school beyond 'good'. The challenge she sees now is to move away from the quite prescriptive structures that were required initially. This approach has proven effective at moving the school out of special measures, but is perceived as a hindrance going forward. The challenge now is to encourage staff to develop and use their professional judgement in order to move from good to outstanding:

'It was very controlled – "you need to teach literacy here at 9:30 every day and it needs to

look like this as a sequence within the lesson". What we're trying to do now is get staff to almost forget that and teach how they think is right because they've got the pedagogical understanding now to make their own decisions. Now that is proving really challenging because

they won't break from the [school] mould – they now think there is a right way and a wrong way and they are only teaching like that. Now that's been really successful in getting us to good, but it won't get us to outstanding because it's too formulaic.'

Case study 2: 'She had a conversation with me about whether I was on board'

- **Year groups: Year 7 to Year 11**
- **Number of pupils: Below average**
- **Pupil premium: Average**
- **Ethnic diversity: Majority intake of White British heritage and a range of ethnic backgrounds in which the number of English as Additional Language pupils is twice the national average**
- **Other: Higher than average intake of disabled pupils**

A series of dramatic events led to a profound crisis at this secondary school. What followed was an intensely difficult period. While many improvements were set in motion, when Ofsted arrived the result was an 'inadequate' inspection judgement. The school eventually emerged much stronger with teachers who had an impressive sense of collective efficacy and respect for the way the new headteacher transformed the situation.

The headteacher thought this was a problematic period because there was a lack of clarity about leadership:

'So I was acting head, we had no governors, we had an IEB eventually and the IEB then appointed me as the substantive head but then we spent the best part of the next 12 months really with the IEB in place. ...the issue was I didn't know how long I was going to be acting head for – the head was on "gardening leave" and it wasn't until the February that

we knew the head definitely wasn't coming back.'

When the headteacher looked back on her period as acting headteacher, she highlighted how acutely she lacked the authority needed to drive change:

'As acting head, you have no mandate to make changes and the staff don't see you as having the mandate for change, the IEB said they weren't going to appoint a substantive head because they felt that should be the role of the governing body. But towards the end of the summer term it was apparent that things were starting to slip – I hadn't been replaced as deputy because obviously we had a massive budget deficit so I was trying to do what I had done as deputy and a lot of the head's job, with other people in the SLT taking over some of my responsibilities as deputy. It was just a really, really difficult time for the school and we just didn't feel that we could focus as much on the teaching and learning, etc.'

The momentum for improvement increased considerably when the new headteacher was formally appointed to the substantive role and was able to take advantage of the new authority this brought. She explained that it was not necessary to change everything because many of the required ingredients were already in place:

'Improvements in terms of behaviour, in terms of attitudes to learning, in terms of parental engagement, all of those things were already in place. The school vision, and what we were about



and our mission statement and all of those things were firmly embedded.'

The head identified one major problematic subject area. Even though the problem was clear, the solution was not simple. She said: *'It was very quickly apparent that we needed to do something about that... the [subject area] head had been in the school forever, was older than me, very, very well liked by the staff, very well-established, great person, but not a good head of [subject area]'*.

Insistence on the creation of robust data led to a difference of opinion and a difficult conversation:

'I wanted them to do regular testing of the kids that we could have externally marked so that we could track the progress and make sure that we weren't going to end up at the end of the year with more egg on our face, and the head of [subject area] was saying to me, "you are putting too much pressure on these kids, the kids are going to crack"... We then sat down and had a difficult conversation.

Staff morale was low, and things were not getting much easier for the headteacher as she attempted to insist on change: *'Staff morale was quite fragile. I had just been made into proper head and so now I'm saying "right, now I'm the proper head, this is what's happening, that's what's happening" and they were like, "oh my god, the claws are coming out, the worm has turned" kind of thing.'* The headteacher analysed the features of the most successful subject departments.

'So we looked at [another subject area] and it came down really to much stronger teachers in that subject area and really good relationships with the kids, really positive relationships with the kids, which we weren't seeing in some of the other subject areas, so we tried to "bottle", if you like, what we were seeing in [subject area] and then tried to germinate it amongst the rest of the staff.'

Professional development had not been given much attention historically. This changed dramatically – every Wednesday part of the day was given over to joint professional development and planning: *'it's going to be staff CPD so nobody has got an excuse of directed time or, "I didn't have time to do this, I didn't have time to do that", but also collaborative planning within each faculty*

'So we looked at [another subject area] and it came down really to much stronger teachers in that subject area and really good relationships with the kids, really positive relationships with the kids...'

area'. After the Ofsted visit the planning became even more systematic and much more closely linked to accurate data tracking, evaluating and milestones – 'it became strategic'.

The interview with two governors revealed some further complexities to the story. The departure of the previous head created a crisis of governance. The governing body was replaced by the IEB, but after the IEB had been operating for 12 months, four members of the former governing body regrouped and, with two new members, became active again as a shadow governing body. This group replaced the IEB as the school governing body just before the Ofsted visit that judged the school to be inadequate. They had doubts about their efficacy as a group prior to the inspection:

Governor 2: *'Before the inspection, because we knew where our weaknesses were, we'd contacted the national leaders of governance and had a dialogue with them. But that was just before, so we hadn't implemented anything before the inspection, but after the inspection we had this very, very thorough look at where we needed to go and what we needed to do and it was a very, very small governing body at this time.'*

They were a small group – only six – and found it hard to recruit parents:

Governor 2: *'We were still trying to recruit parent governors; parents did not, at that time, want to know. ... the parent governors who'd been on before the IEB took over didn't want to know, so it was a very small governing body.'*

There were some advantages, however, to being small and recently re-formed:

Governor 2: *'In some ways it was quite useful because we were just starting off again. So we*

didn't have years of history as a governing body to try and shake up; we could tailor what wanted to do to.'

Governor 1: 'We could set up the committees the way we wanted them rather than people saying, "Well, I've been on this board for years, I want to stay on here." It was a case of, "Well, your skill set fits that committee best, we want you on there."'

They got organised. They sought support from the national leaders of governance, and they did a skills audit so they knew what skills they still needed. There was a focus on data and they did RAISEonline training. They were aware that monitoring needed revising, the budget deficit was a serious problem and that staff morale was low. Despite this they were overoptimistic about the state of the school at the time of the inspection – believing that the Ofsted judgement could 'go either way'. One governor who had been part of the original governing body contrasted the way the previous headteacher had restricted discussion with the transparency and open discussion that was encouraged by the new headteacher.

Governor 1: 'Before it was more or less a case of, "Well there's the headteacher's report". He would tell us about it and, "Are there any questions? Well, that's great thank you very much." Whereas now, it is much more that if anybody thought of a question they say it, and the questions are more focused about what's going on and what impact that's having. So I think that that's the real change, isn't it?'

The governors were very positive about the way the new head had led the school's improvement. They approved, for example, on the transformation of key subject areas where there were weaknesses. They endorsed the headteacher's twin-track approach to staff development: bringing in expertise from outside while also using the best teachers within the school as a key resource.

Governor 2: 'When the "inadequate" was given to us, she got involved and got good teachers from other schools, not just to come in and say, "You do this, you do that." No, there was nothing like that, they worked with us, they worked with

our staff and we used our own teachers. We've got some excellent teachers, so we use them, but we're also an isolated school, so we don't see what's going on outside that little perimeter. We needed outside influences as well as the good influences we had within our school.'

Several teachers with differing levels of experience and seniority were interviewed in a focus group session. They told a positive story about how a school that had lost its way had been transformed by the collaborative efforts of the school team. While the teachers conceptualised the improvement as a collective act, they also recognised the role of the headteacher as a catalyst for change:

'When the "inadequate" was given to us, she got involved and got good teachers from other schools, not just to come in and say, "You do this, you do that." No, there was nothing like that, they worked with us...'

Teacher 1: 'She had a conversation with me about whether I was on board, you know? Really asking me, you know, if I'm not on board then... So there were conversations like that.'

Although the teachers felt that some aspects of the critical inspection report were a little harsh, there was an overall acceptance of the accuracy of the judgement and an assumption that the view of school effectiveness underpinning the Ofsted methodology was well founded. One teacher articulated a fundamentally positive view of Ofsted and how it provided a 'skeleton' or form of scaffolding for the essential elements of good teaching. For this teacher, the Ofsted intervention, although difficult, had also been fundamentally beneficial:

Teacher 1: 'Well, at the end of the day you can't do well on Ofsted if your grades aren't there, and you can't get your good grades unless you're teaching the students properly, and anticipating their needs, so that's the bottom line. So the fact

that we have to tailor everything we do around an Ofsted is good because it does teach you how to refine your practice and make sure it is consistent as a whole-school approach to everything we do. But at the end of the day, the teaching and learning have got to be good, and that all depends on everything. You're only going to get that if your staff are committed, motivated, doing the same thing and teaching to a good standard, so it's kind of like a full circle, really. So everything had to be moving forward, everything had to be addressed, and obviously the Ofsted was the skeleton for that.'

The interview with staff in this school revealed how professionally isolated they felt before the inspection. They said the school was characterised by an absence of whole-school approaches and a high degree of inconsistency:

Teacher 1: *'I think prior to the inspection, there was a lot of good practice around the school, probably in every faculty actually, although some faculties performed better than others in terms of outcomes and results. But it was that inconsistency, really, and that was the main thing that was picked up in the inspection, and the inconsistency had led to a dip in results, particularly in maths, and in English the year of the inspection, and one or two other areas too, I think in the humanities and some other areas from memory. So there was a lack of cohesion, wasn't there, as well, across the faculties, of things like sharing best practice.'*

Teacher 2: *'Yes, there was a lot of segregation between us, there was faculty, faculty, faculty...'*

Teacher 3: *'Yes, we were all separate.'*

The teachers confirmed that the inspection result brought about a more cohesive and strategic approach. One teacher said:

'It was left to individual leaders. I mean, I think, as I remember and some of the other faculties, we'd get support from the local authority with some things, which was great, but it was quite ad hoc and fractured, if that makes sense. You know, it came in snatches and so there'd be some snatched conversations with people about what they were doing in other faculties but there wasn't that cohesion and structure to the whole thing before the inspection.'

Another added: *'We became complacent... That was [our] downfall.'*

The interviews emphasised the strong sense of collective action and the importance not just of senior leadership action but also of whole staff commitment to change. According to the teachers, middle leadership played a key role after the inspection in standardising the approach across the school and ensuring that the best ideas were being shared between staff:

Teacher 2: *'There was a lot of stuff done with middle leadership for consistency, but like the books, for example, that was done very quickly, because it's something you could show a quick improvement with the marking.'*

Teacher 3: *'Let's use the skills we've got, so we had teachers who were classed as outstanding delivering CPD sessions, there was the teacher partnership, we created our own little sort of Dragon's Den of groups of people who were experts on certain things and staff would go to a dragon if they wanted help and support. We did peer-to-peer observations, setting our own little targets about what we wanted to improve.'*

Teacher 1: *'We had an Ofsted working group which we targeted; the marking stickers was one of them and lesson planning, changing the way we did lesson plans, so there were six of us in a group and it was directly in response to the Ofsted comments. So we would look at the comments and we just bounce ideas off each other, really, and it was across different faculties.'*

The staff were prepared to question some of the post-inspection actions, particularly some of the 'quick fixes' put into place immediately afterwards, and stressed the need to use sensible, long-lasting strategies so that the changes would stick. Overall their view of the changes was highly positive, and they spoke in particularly upbeat terms about an improved ethos based on the celebration of success.

Teacher 1: *'Yes, there's a lot of ethos on celebrating success for the kids and for the staff.'*

Teacher 2: *'So anybody who's done anything extra, we call it the extra mile, they get nominated and they get a little...it's more like a booby prize.'*

Teacher 1: 'They get a really tacky prize but it's actually funny because it's so tacky. People are waiting to see what it is.'

Teacher 2: 'But it's all on the screens, saying...and it could be staff and pupils who win.'

Teacher 3: 'We've got it in the auditorium so the pupils can all see who's been nominated, who's won, for both staff and pupils. I just think it's a better ethos and a better feeling about the place.'

Teachers had a sense of the sequence of improvement building on the first-phase focus on consistency and whole-school systems. Next-phase improvement required a different emphasis, with teachers being encouraged to innovate, take risks and take control of their professional learning:

Teacher 1: 'With my [subject] hat on, creating that reading culture throughout Key Stage 3, now we've got that consistency of teaching, that's the way you get to outstanding, I think, and coupled with all the things that are going on that we've talked about – the more innovative stuff, the risk taking – again, there are elements of an outstanding school so that's where I'd like to see us continue to go.'

'With my [subject] hat on, creating that reading culture throughout Key Stage 3, now we've got that consistency of teaching, that's the way you get to outstanding...'

Teacher 2: 'For me, it's allowing teachers to refine what they do and sort of engrain what they do the best and challenge a bit further, but also allowing the students to do that as well, because they don't realise how good they are and what potential they've got. At the moment there's a lot of focus on trying to say to them "you've realised what you've got and how far you can get", and it's the same with staff in any job, you know?'

Teacher 3: 'They want to be valued. People are ambitious, they want to be valued and they want to be able to do well and they want to see that they can do well, so if we keep pushing that and we keep doing well as a school then that becomes self-belief then for all the students, "well, they've done it so I'm going to do it", and that's what we want to see as a culture in our school.'

Case study 3: 'I knew I wanted to be distributed, but I had to get the right team in order to distribute!'

- **Year groups:** Year 7 to sixth form
- **Number of pupils:** Average
- **Pupil premium:** Above average
- **Ethnic diversity:** Above average proportion of students from minority ethnic groups and those who speak EAL

The transformation of this school is a story of school partnership and very strong and determined leadership. A secondary school with a long-term history of student under-performance

allied itself after the critical inspection report with another, much more successful, school. Eventually the school became an academy and the schools were linked within a multi-academy trust, with the partner school as the academy sponsor. The new headteacher had previously been a deputy headteacher at the partner school, and some other staff transferred from the partner school. There were strong links between the two schools in terms of ethos, curriculum and staff development.

This is a secondary school in outer London. It was situated in a highly competitive context. Many neighbouring schools had reputations for excellence, while this school was for many years at the bottom of the local 'league table' for academic results. When the school was designated as requiring special measures it was in the bottom 3 per cent nationally for attainment at GCSE.

In the period before the special measures judgement, the school had undergone prolonged periods of instability in leadership through a succession of 'super heads', who were, as one teacher put it, 'not so super'. The new head initially arrived to provide interim support but was appointed to the substantive post. He considered the Ofsted report which led the school into special measures to be an accurate reflection of what the school was like. His overall judgement in retrospect was that:

'When I came, everything was appalling. There was nothing that wasn't [appalling].'

The new head took exception to one aspect of the damning Ofsted report: the focus on poor student behaviour. He believed that the emphasis on behaviour was somewhat misleading because the fundamental problem was not student attitudes but weak leadership:

'The only thing I think was poor was they talked about the behaviour of the pupils which actually I think deflected from the real issue, which was leadership and management. It is very easy to blame kids for things, but if kids aren't well taught, and if they are not cared for and then, you know, they've got a voice, they will misbehave, so I think the only criticism I would make is...they should have focused on leadership management more than the behaviour of the pupils.'

For this head there was no question of 'building on the strengths of the school', because in his view there were no significant strengths. Instead he saw the need for radical and comprehensive change.

'My thinking was it had to be a fresh broom and a fresh perspective on everything because if you are just going to adapt what was there before,

that was inadequate so why on earth are you going to even look at it. I looked at it and just discarded it.'

The head greatly valued the resource that was available from the partner school, from which he had come. The schools shared a common executive headteacher who visited weekly.

'I had the huge advantage that I was coming from [school name] which is an outstanding school. I'm about five miles away and obviously I could draw on a lot of expertise there, there was a CEO across the two schools...she would come over once a week and so I had a resource there and the other big resource I used, after about a year I started bringing staff over. I didn't do it for a year because I wanted to establish myself, and then I brought staff, good staff who I knew would work well here and that was a huge advantage as well.'

The new head made it clear to the staff at a very early stage, and in a very direct way, that he held some of them responsible for the mess the school was in. At the same time he reached out to the staff who he saw as the better teachers and tried to build an alliance with them. Looking back he saw this as a successful tactic. It tapped into the long-standing frustrations of the more effective teachers in the underperforming school.

'I think the good ones could see, welcomed it, because pretty brutally, if they are teaching a good lesson in their classroom and then next door there is chaos and carnage and that person is being paid the same salary, if not more, so I think the good staff responded straightaway.'

A robust approach to staff underperformance was adopted. In the interview the head explained his philosophy regarding weak professional performance and the scale of the changes he had made:

'I think I've probably moved on 30 staff, mainly teaching staff, but again, I've got one today I'm meeting after you because his performance isn't adequate, it's not good enough for the kids and so the first conversation will be he needs to be thinking about what he's doing...If the people aren't delivering, they've had every support possible, you know, I can't honestly keep paying

their wages, that's not fair because they are not doing their best for the students.'

The head tried to be highly visible and highly accessible to both parents and staff. He talked about the importance of his open-door policy. He made a point of doing bus duty with his SLT as this was a point of engagement with the community, and historically, poor student behaviour on buses had sent out an extremely negative message to parents and the community.

Initially this headteacher took a highly directive approach. As the improvements were made his methods have changed, and now he takes a more collegiate approach with a much greater degree of delegation. For him, distributed leadership was the ideal but it requires a capable team to delegate to.

'I knew I wanted to be distributed, but I had to get the right team in order to distribute!'

Although his style was increasingly towards greater delegation, one area that he had not delegated at all was his personal responsibility for dealing with difficult staffing issues.

'I mean that's the bit I haven't given to anyone else because I think ultimately it isn't pleasant. I am very aware that that's someone's husband or wife, son or daughter, mum or dad, so I think these issues needs to be handled with dignity and delicacy, but equally, firmly and consistently. So I haven't delegated this role. They know what I'm doing and they know how I do it. I've never actually asked them to do it.'

The chair of the governing body characterised the head's leadership style as: 'collaborative. He's very clear on what he wants and what he expects, but he does it in a very collaborative way, he's really inclusive'. The headteacher was emphatic about the need for schools in special measures not to be obsessed with Ofsted. A preoccupation with 'what Ofsted might think' was not the answer. Instead the focus should be on what is right for the students. The chair of the governing body very strongly endorsed this view of the significance of 'Ofsted assumptions'.

The governor endorsed the headteacher's robust approach to staff changes and characterised the

staffroom mood before the changes as one of negativity and defeatism.

'They weren't being enthusiastic about anything, everything was terrible, nobody liked us, everybody hated us. People in the community had a perception of the school, the children who came to the school were perceived a certain way, and it was all very difficult...But the [headteacher] moving, trying to change people's perceptions, giving the children a voice was something we did very early on. Getting their opinions and understanding what their views were...it was a challenge I think. Some teachers couldn't adapt, and they moved on.'

Two focus group sessions were held with both teachers who had been at the school before the critical inspection report and those who had joined subsequently. The staff who had been there before the arrival of the new head told a story of transformation. No one disagreed with correctness of the inspection judgement. When asked whether they were surprised when the school went into special measures again in 2010, they all shook their heads, and some teachers laughed. One teacher said:

'I think my overriding opinion was that it was inevitable, and a good thing because then change would happen, and the fact that a lot of the senior leadership then left within the space of a couple of years was quite a positive thing I thought, because that needed to happen.'

Teachers commented positively on the wholesale changes that had taken place such as the head's policy of maximum visibility and the open door.

Teacher: *'I think also I noticed that the SLT and senior managers were more visible. You would see them at break time, you would see them at lunchtime, you would see them in the corridors, whereas before the previous headteacher you wouldn't see.'*

Teacher: *'...but you can go anytime and the door is always open and anyone can go with any sort of concern. You always feel important in that respect; no one is ever too busy to see you.'*

Teacher: *'There isn't a sense of a traditional school hierarchy. When I did some work in a*

school in south London I was a tea boy, and the headteacher wouldn't speak to anyone who was lower than SLT. And it is the complete opposite here.'

According to the teachers, the school had changed beyond all recognition. One recalled how physically unsafe it was before the special measures judgement. Relationships with angry parents were so problematic and school site security so poor that teachers would resort to hiding from parents.

Teacher: *'Oh God, we used to have parents come to sort you out and you'd have to hide or be hidden by staff. This happened to me a number of times and you'd ask yourself "what am I doing? I'm doing my job". You'd have a parent coming, and it was open, the whole place was open, so you'd find a parent in your class, and you wouldn't know about it.'*

The teachers we interviewed liked the headteacher's philosophy and the fact that he saw the challenge as not to please Ofsted but to ensure that students did well during their 'one shot' school education. This required a preoccupation not with Ofsted, but with student needs. Staff endorsed this approach.

Teacher: *'I've had my chance, staff have, you had and we had good experiences which is why we're in the jobs we're in now. But the students here have one chance and if you're not doing right by them then this isn't the right school for you and I think that's a very positive thing. He's [headteacher] managed to get that through to all staff on all levels, the caretaking staff, the site staff. It's child centred, and I think that's the biggest factor that's got the school through all of this.'*

The new headteacher's mantra was about the need for 'small gains'. During the initial phase of tackling problems he indicated it was all about making incremental improvements across the board, focusing on all areas and not just one.

'I think you've got to try and focus on everything because, as I say, it's small gains everywhere, so it's small gains on behaviour, small gains on attendance, small gains on leadership. and if you

'... the SLT and senior managers were more visible. You would see them at break time, you would see them at lunchtime, you would see them in the corridors, whereas before the previous headteacher you wouldn't see.'

just focus on one area, you are never going to, to me, and just let the others walk, because they are all inter linked. If they are not well taught, the outcomes won't be good.'

Teachers particularly valued the new head's commitment to their professional development.

Teacher: *'For me one of the best qualities of the school is the CPD that we do, and a lot of it is done in house.'*

Teacher: *'The Middle Leaders Programme started and I think there were other initiatives like that.'*

Teacher: *'I agree with that because when I came here five or six years ago there were a lot of people on the course who quickly went into middle leadership so I think [the head] gave the opportunity for leadership which was good because it obviously made the departments stronger.'*

The staff who were interviewed also welcomed the changes in personnel.

Teacher 3: *'I think there was definitely more accountability. I mean there were some staff who had been moved on and shouldn't have been here for a long time, and the approach before was to move them from one position to another. That's not in the best interests of the students, having those people working as teachers.'*

The teachers also agreed with the headteacher's views that the long-standing behaviour problems would be resolved if the school improved the fundamental quality of teaching.

Teacher 2: *'If lessons are good, the behaviour improves. If the teaching is good, the students want to be here, and it helps the next teacher because that consistency is going on. That was the big focus, and still is now I guess. But*

certainly the big change that we all talk about is how can you deliver an outstanding lesson, what are the consistencies that every lesson should have – and the teachers who have since left are the ones who resisted that change. They were the staff with bad habits, they didn't want to put in the effort, didn't plan decent lessons, and sooner or later, they found alternative employment.'

A number of teachers commented on improved relationships with parents. They referenced

increased attendance at parents' evenings and a shift towards parents asking questions about outcomes for the children rather than making complaints about bullying or poor behaviour.

Teacher: *'I think also when parents contact your class, a lot of the conversations with parents were about behaviour but now it's about progress. Now parents are more interested in progress. Before it would be about behaviour and detentions and so on....'*

Case study 4: 'I can't help you unless I see you teach'

- **Year Groups: Nursery to Year 6**
- **Number of pupils: Average**
- **Pupil premium intake: Above average**
- **Ethnic diversity: High proportion of EAL students**

In this school there was a substantial emphasis on improving the standard of teaching through coaching-led leadership. The headteacher joined the school as a strategic adviser shortly before it received the inadequate judgement, but was asked to take the position of head after the inspection and the departure of the previous headteacher.

When the new head arrived, she rapidly came to the view that the school had been largely focused on the pastoral care of the pupils while placing insufficient emphasis on academic achievement. There was a weak leadership structure and insufficient distributed leadership. She considered that the staff had low expectations about student academic performance, and that the school had not been well managed for many years.

'I think the attitude was "well, it's so deprived, these are disadvantaged children." There wasn't a drive for achievement for many many years here. It had a terribly patchy history. There had been headteachers who were basically off out doing other things a lot. The poor deputy ran the school, even though she was a class teacher. They had no management structure here at all.

They had no subject leadership... It had been phenomenally in debt. So there'd been profligate use of money as well.'

The teachers agreed that there was a weak leadership structure, and believed they had been let down by a lack of leadership and leadership-based consistency throughout the school.

Teacher: *'We've always felt that the teaching in the school has been very good, but we felt that there was possibly a lack of consistency and a lack of structure in the leadership. This sort of a hierarchy in the leadership led to people not knowing exactly and directly what their job roles were... It wasn't very clear what we should do with our subjects. So we were given a subject, but it was a bit like a sort of token, "Here, you do art," but then we weren't really actually told what to do with it, whereas that has changed immensely.'*

When the school went into special measures, there was therefore a shared understanding by both the new head and the existing teaching staff that there was a need to tackle the weak leadership structures. There was also a need to create a more constructive professional climate. The head indicated that during the period immediately before the critical inspection judgement, the previous headteacher had been 'hypercritical' and unapproachable. The new head's initial role was as a coach to the previous head, but this relationship proved to be very difficult.



'The previous heads had been what I call happy clappy. You know, "these are terribly disadvantaged children, let's do lovely wonderful creative things with them". But the one who had arrived in September thought that the way to turn around a school was to be hypercritical and that's why they got worse... so she was hypercritical and never left her office. Liked to have email wars. Was very difficult. Because when it failed I was asked as a national leader of education in an outstanding school, recent outstanding as well under the new framework, to go in and support her. She didn't want me here, made that very clear. If I was coming here I was to be her administrative assistant. I said "no, I'm here to support you over strategic matters". My specialism is rapidly turning round schools. I'd got one out of special measures in two terms. Not as a head, but as a coach and things like that. So that's a bit of a specialist area of mine. Oh no, she didn't want me here. But nevertheless the local authority said "you've got to accept the support".'

The head emphasised that as part of the improvement plan she wanted to transform staff expectations for the children. She had a passionate concern about the need to take action to break the link between poverty and educational underachievement:

'I'm very driven by that. If I can get decent results for them and help them learn how to behave well and in a socially acceptable way, I've got them started. They've got a good chance when they start a secondary. Then they can choose if they wish to go into further or higher education. They can climb themselves out of poverty. So I'm very driven by that. So the achievement agenda is important ... as important to me as the pastoral agenda as it were.'

For the head, the key mechanism for achieving this transformation was to improve the quality of teaching through coaching. The starting point was not a 'deficit model' but a positive 'development model'. There was a strong focus on how to help each individual teacher recognise his or her particular personality type and action that might build professional self-esteem. She put great store in the concept of 'catching them

doing it right', identifying existing good practice and making this into personal common practice:

'At the same time, having been treated so badly and made to feel absolutely downtrodden they took to somebody who was being positive about them. I said when I came, "I'm really sorry, but I've got to watch you teach. I can't help you unless I see you teach. I can't work out what we need to do to improve rapidly unless I see you teach." So I did random lesson observations and I'd script them in detail. I'd give positive feedback. I said, "I think that's almost a good. If you just tweaked this and tweaked that and sorted that bit out it'd be good".... I'd try to catch them doing it right and build on that, to build their self-esteem and self-confidence. People don't teach well, do they, unless they feel good about themselves.'

'If I can get decent results for them and help them learn how to behave well and in a socially acceptable way, I've got them started. They've got a good chance when they start a secondary.'

The head also stated that she only ever gave manageable feedback, rather than overloading teachers and making them feel they were being asked to do the impossible:

'I only ever give people about three targets for development. So they're not like target targets. They would be tailored to them and how big a step they're ready to take. They might have 15 areas of improvement, but there's no point, is there? Just give them three they can do.'

Teachers corroborated the beneficial impact of this approach to coaching. They described how proposed changes were given in 'little chunks' rather than in sweeping suggestions that everything had to be changed immediately. Teachers felt that the lesson observations and feedback were all part of the new head trying to develop their teaching and find ways to increase consistency and make their lives easier.

Teacher 1: *'She sort of came in, observed what was going on, she was like, "Right, well let's start with just having vocabulary on the wall consistently throughout the whole school, it helps because X, Y, Z, it's quite simple." So that was the first step. Then bringing in the star stampers so it made marking easier for us.'*

Teacher 2: *'And consistent.'*

Teacher 1: *'Then we... you know, like the way that instead of working with focus groups each lesson, so you feedback throughout the lesson with all the children and the TAs do the same so then you're making your TAs more effective. It was all little things but they made your life easier, so we were quite happy to do them.'*

Teacher 3: *'Yeah, she definitely sold it to us in terms of "This will help us improve but it's also going to give you a work/life balance as well."'*

Emphasis was therefore placed on providing positive and constructive criticism as a means of improving the quality of teaching throughout the school. This was also considered to be a 'no blame' approach, in order to make teachers more open to being observed. While the approach was generally supportive and developmental, the head was prepared to deliver very tough messages about performance.

'There was a senior manager here who had got two 'inadequates' during Ofsted. I watched her and I said to people... "just show me what you can do". She still failed miserably and did things even an NQT shouldn't do. I just said to her afterwards, "I can't defend you. You're not giving me anything that I can say look, she can teach after all".'

In addition to providing coaching to teaching staff, measures were also put in place to ensure consistency across lessons and make sure all core subjects were being taught effectively, with a particular focus on English and maths.

'Make sure the literacy is an hour and not an hour and 15 minutes... So you put things in like the assembly after the first lesson or break to make sure they have to stick tightly to time. So they don't teach a one-hour lesson over one and a half hours... They were doing one science

a lesson a week and they should do two. So we got all that put in. We got a broad and balanced curriculum put in. Some of the teachers here are very creative. Put bluntly, they just taught art all the time if they could get away with it. There wasn't rigour. So I put some systems in place. But the main thing was the way the English and maths were taught.'

Teachers believed changes to core subjects such as maths were necessary, and noticed the improvements from adding structure to teaching each subject.

'For example, mathematics is an extremely core subject, but we didn't have a calculation policy for it, we didn't have scheme of work for it, and that's all changed now. After [headteacher] took over we had a calculation policy, we had a scheme for mathematics and the start of the lesson changed fundamentally. The whole school now exactly approach the subject and follow the same strategies in terms of calculation. I think that personally, after all these years and having served in different boroughs and different schools abroad and here, I think that was a fundamental change and I'm absolutely... we're all proud of where the school is at now.'

The head commented that the relationship with parents was particularly poor when she arrived. She described how she found a book of complaints in the drawer and sympathised with many of the comments. Parental engagement was improved by encouraging parents into the school and appointing a parental engagement officer.

'For the first parents, we had parents' evenings and only a few came at first. But then more started coming. I have a parent, an exceptional parental engagement officer over at [other school] and she extended her work to come over to [school name]. She's a pastor and her missionary work is helping with parental engagement in schools in rough areas, like [London districts]. She was a fantastic bridge as well. She will work with even very difficult-to-engage parents... We invited them in for transition meetings. When they started the nursery we started with a load of workshops to help them

support their children's learning. We find cake sales go down a bomb actually.'

Teachers noted these positive changes in the relationships with parents and beneficial consequences in terms of more parent volunteers and better pupil behaviour.

Teacher: *'She [the headteacher] forged good relationships with parents, she encouraged people to run courses with parents, to run workshops and stuff like that, and soon enough they came round the school and it started. We had at some points lots of volunteers, parents who were happy enough to come and give a hand voluntarily in any way, shape or form. We were given outstanding for behaviour...we couldn't have done it and succeeded.'*

In terms of the replicability of the approach, the head considered that the fundamentals would 'travel' to other schools but would require 'tailoring' and contextualisation. She was confident that the essential strategy of focusing on teaching and raising standards could be applied across all schools.

'I think the approach is replicable. I'm now helping other schools. I've helped quite a few under London Challenge. So I think that the principles of the approach involve being very positive. Anything you do is tailor made. It's not just a blanket thing, "here you go, you do this". It's tailor made to that school and its issues. With very high expectations. You focus on teaching and learning, don't you? It's about raising standards. So that principle, the content is bespoke to each school.'

With regard to the sustainability of the changes, the head considered that keeping focused on children's outcomes was crucial, combined with an emphasis on training the next generation of leaders.

'It's sustaining it and reinforcing it and keeping them focused on the right things, and the quality of teaching continues now. I mean I think the last round of observations was about 80 per cent outstanding. We don't necessarily get the 6 plus across the board; that's always a bit of a fight. But

you usually get some 6 plusses. It's keeping them going despite the fact that what we're getting at the bottom end is a massive challenge. We've been flooded with some really SEN children, which is quite difficult. But I'm old now... so my priority now is to coach up the next generation of leaders. Or coach up people to take over. That's going quite well as well.'

The head believes the governing body was strong, but that its effectiveness was circumscribed by the quality of the data they were provided with. The chair of the governing body was unusually well-qualified, having been an Ofsted lay inspector for ten years and a national leader of governance; the local authority asked him to take the position. The chair described a good working relationship with the head, working closely together to improve the school and ensure the governors were fully involved in development planning. The restructuring of the leadership team was seen as a joint achievement. The chair was proud of the governors' changes in ways of working, which were characterised by a more systematic approach.

Chair: *'We looked at the committee structure just as we looked at the senior leadership structure. I don't think there was one before [the head] came, it was a bit hit and miss and so governors talked about it and agreed what the new structure should be. We set up phase leaders which had never been done before ... and the teachers actually grew into the post; because they were inexperienced, they hadn't done it before and they grew into the post. Then governors made their visits more structured rather than just coming in and saying how nice it is and off they go, but more structured visits and reporting back on them. We got some governor visit forms and things like that. I produced a governor handbook for them which brought together all their policies. We put the school development plan in it, and also the policies that governors are responsible for, as opposed to the school policies.'*

The chair approved of the head's measured approach to change and the strong emphasis

on coaching. The collaborative relationship with another high-performing school was singled out as an important way of demonstrating 'what excellence looked like' to staff.

'Well I've seen various models of headteachers ... some go in and say, "It's not right, get rid of it and we'll do it a different way and throw everything out and start again." Well [the new head] came in and said "They're not bad teachers, they want a bit of coaching and a bit more fostering and building up their self-esteem and a bit more direction on what they should be doing." I suspect that many of the teachers didn't know what a good lesson was before [the head] came but by linking with [other school name] they were able to go and see what an outstanding lesson was. There are occasions when teachers from this school went to [other school name], saw

'Well [the new head] came in and said "They're not bad teachers, they want a bit of coaching and a bit more fostering and building up their self-esteem and a bit more direction on what they should be doing'

an outstanding lesson and come back to [the head] and said, "Can I do it that way?" She said, "Of course you can do it that way," because the teachers here were very much left to their own devices. I gather they didn't used to plan in the year group together and there's no coordination. They only saw each other at break times, whereas now there's a lot more interaction and they're more corporate, the teachers.'

Case study 5: 'Why I love working here'

- **Year groups: Year 7 to sixth form**
- **School Type: High School**
- **Number of pupils: Average**
- **Pupil premium: Lower than average**
- **Other: More girls than boys**

The headteacher in this school set out to convince staff that it was possible to go from special measures to good in 18 months. There was a sense of great urgency and energy about her approach. Even before she formally started work at the school, she instigated a development plan to ensure measures to improve were being put in place as soon as possible after the school went into special measures. The head identified weak leadership within the school and corroborated this with teachers by requesting staff to complete a survey to identify areas for improvement.

'The staff were aware of the weaknesses, yes, and what was interesting, and I didn't obviously

realise that at the time, the school, obviously, was very much in turmoil, it hadn't had strong leadership so it was wandering all over the place, as happens. There was no accountability, and there was also a power struggle between the unions and the school leadership.'

Through this urgent audit process an agenda for action was agreed based on a consensus that the school needed much improved accountability systems.

Teacher: *'We were certainly aware that there were certain staff who were getting away with ... there wasn't accountability of all staff. I personally felt aggrieved by the fact that certain staff who we knew weren't doing what they should have been doing weren't dealt with. They could have been, but I don't think they were, and I think the consistency with the staff was an issue. There was a lot of inconsistency, within certain departments, certain staff who weren't doing what they should have been doing and weren't held to account.'*

Teachers recalled there being a lack of consistency across departments, with limited information-sharing opportunities available.

Teacher: *'There wasn't the same level of consistency back then; each department was doing their own thing, whether that was really successful or whatever. And you might have thought, as you said, that you'd know from the results how different subject areas are getting on, but you didn't really know that much.'*

The headteacher had considerable presence and excellent communication skills. Teachers recalled in a somewhat awestruck way how she had initially presented the agenda for action to the whole staff for the first time. There was an intense clarity and conviction about her analysis and the route map she offered staff.

Teacher: *'Do you remember the first time we were in the hall when she spoke to us all, and at the end of it I was like, "Oh, wow!" "This is what we need to do bam-bam-bam." And you're like, "Oh right, it's clear..." There was a clear focus. She knew what needed to be done. And she said, "Right, this is what we're going to do to tackle that, and that's what we're going to do to tackle that, and this is our ultimate goal and this is how we're going to do it." And so people were well aware of what it was going to take to get us out of being in that 4 category.'*

We interviewed the chair of the governing body, who accepted the Ofsted judgement that previous provision was inadequate. He had been at the school at the time of the critical judgement and greatly welcomed the new head's emphasis on accountability, data and distributed leadership. The chair described the narrow insular perspective of the governing body before the arrival of the new head:

Chair of Governors: *'The governing body had never been outside the school, I'd never been outside the school... so we never really got an opportunity to look at where we were and say things like "Why don't we just do this?", you know, "why don't we do that?"'*

He was a huge admirer of the new headteacher, describing her as 'fantastic'. The lack of openness and accountability was also noted in discussions with the chair, who indicated that he basically did not know what was going on in the school before the new head joined.

Chair: *'Honestly it was such a relief. I mean being chair of governors, I must have been here for about two, maybe three years with the old head, and just ploughing through nothing and I'd be thinking "what the hell is going on" because I've never been used to that. My whole working career, I've changed things and got on with things and done it, I've got people to walk on water, you know what I mean, just by saying "come on, we've got to do this".'*

'Do you remember the first time we were in the hall when she spoke to us all, and at the end of it I was like, "Oh, wow!" "This is what we need to do bam-bam-bam." And you're like, "Oh right, it's clear..." There was a clear focus.'

Although the chair of the governing body remained in place after the critical inspection he brought about very substantial changes to the membership of the board. He also talked enthusiastically about his visit to observe the governing body of an outstanding school, which was much more data literate.

The head was concerned about dealing with under-performance. The approach to transformation going forward was focused on urgent leadership and teacher development programmes. The headteacher wanted to offer maximum support before making a judgement about the capacity that under-performing individuals had to improve. The situation was complicated, from the headteacher's perspective, by the role of the teacher's union.

'But the key issue is leadership, so you've got to develop leadership capacity in the school, and then remove all the barriers so that the quality of teaching can improve, the accountability obviously improves and therefore, you know, the curriculum and everything else needed to improve...there were probably 15 inadequate teachers, who had been inadequate for a long time, who happened to be all the union staff. So I went in there and put all the support programmes in place, and then by the time I'd got there at Easter they'd had a full term of support programmes, and as the data was starting to come through in June, it was much easier for me to then hold meetings with certain staff with clear evidence from that year to say that they hadn't moved forward.'

Throughout the interview the headteacher expressed a strong personal interest in understanding more about leadership styles through keeping up to date on extensive research and undertaking formal training. In her opinion, the training had equipped her to know how to adapt accordingly to different styles, *'which you need to go in and out of to get the outcome that you want, and obviously working alongside other people who are in the school'*.

The school set out to benchmark almost every aspect of practice against an external measure of excellence. Every head of department had a link with an outstanding school in the area. Specialised peer reviews were conducted with a challenge provided by an outsider from a school with distinctive expertise. One teacher described this system of expert peer reviews:

'The other thing we had as well was reviews: I've had a pupil premium review, I've had an SEN review, I'm at the moment doing a teaching assistant review, so we've reviewed every area and we've been paired up obviously with an outstanding school so the pupil premium review was with [school name], which is outstanding, and they came and did a review of pupil premium, and then they gave me ideas, so we've had a lot. And then for the SEN review I had a SENCO who's led an outstanding department,

and a pastoral review, so we've had outstanding schools and leaders working with us to look at what we've got in place, audit it and see what we need to change.'

An emphasis on more distributed leadership sat alongside the focus on teaching quality. The head believed that increasing the extent of distributed leadership was essential if improvements were to be sustainable. She considered that the previous head had not trusted his senior leaders, who in turn did not trust their middle leaders. In response to this issue, the head put in place personal leadership development plans for each of the senior leaders, and met with them regularly to go through progress against the plans. She also organised a training programme for middle leaders:

'To support that, I put leadership programmes in place, which was key, for the middle leaders... But I brought in two fantastic consultants who I'd worked with – who had worked for the National College and were both headteachers – to deliver middle leadership training programmes and senior leadership training programmes, and they were absolutely fantastic because then I could concentrate as well on other things.'

All of these plans and programmes of support were underpinned by the vision of what was needed to be an outstanding school. A relentless emphasis on the elements of the Ofsted categorisation of best practice was central to the way the new head drove change:

'And I wanted the word "outstanding" to be in the vision. So I put "we have got a burning ambition to be an outstanding school", because that was the truth, and then I had to sell that ambition and inspire the staff to be able to do that... So then I put in the vision underneath that, and then I put the school's priorities in, and I had them put up on massive hardboard painted, a massive thing throughout the school so everybody could see it. When the students and staff walked in, they could see it. So they knew exactly what their priorities were, so every child being known, you know, excellent leadership across the school,

100 per cent of lessons as good and outstanding, all of those things, reduce exclusions, improve behaviour, be at the heart of the community. So there were about six key things which went on everything.'

Discussions with teachers suggest that the head was successful in persuading staff that transformation was possible. One teacher indicated that the head provided not only clear focus but also the support and resources needed for improvement.

Teacher: *'The support of the staff was one reason why I love working here, because even though it's a very difficult time for everybody, all of the teachers and the senior leaders seem to work together and support each other – everyone wanted the school to be good and so the support was definitely there; we had all of the focus that we needed, we had all the resources we needed to get there, and we pulled together and got through. So when we did get the 'good' I felt it was well-deserved.'*

Creating a quality-assured, robust and accessible student tracking system was a top priority for the headteacher from the outset. She wanted to ensure all staff were actively engaged in measuring pupil progress. Distinctive features of her approach included the immediate introduction of 'data breakfast meetings', at which student progress was discussed during brisk early morning discussions. The data system she introduced centred on two distinct areas: achievement data (that occur every half term with every department, head of department and their staff) and pastoral data (relating to attendance, absence, punctuality, behaviour including call-outs and exclusions with pastoral managers). The student tracking system was the centrepiece of the head's new accountability system.

'So I meet with every department four times a year for the data input and we know exactly where every single child is, at the moment now, from a "progress made" perspective. So we hold the department and the teachers to account for every single child, and they have to say where the child is, that has to be robust, so it has to have been

quality assured, it has to be age related and it's got to be rigorous, which is what happens within the department. I had every department quality assured in the summer by Specialist Leaders of Education, but we've got the confidence to say that, so that's absolutely key, and then we meet four times a year to go through where every single child is. So if they're not making the progress, why are they not making the progress, is it teaching and learning or is it something else. So we put the right study support in place.'

Rigorous data collection, professional development programmes and lesson observation all contributed to increased accountability. It was clear from discussions with different stakeholders that all parties believe the new accountability system brought significant benefits.

Teacher 2: *'There was a clear focus; she knew what needed to be done. And she said, "Right, this is what we're going to do to tackle that, and that's what we're going to do tackle that, and this is our ultimate goal and this is how we're going to do it." And so people were well aware of what it was going to take to get us out of that 4 category.'*

Teacher 3: *'Staff are well aware that there's full accountability; there's nowhere to hide in this school. Everybody knows clearly, "If you're not doing your job, you will be dealt with", whereas we never ever had that before.'*

Teacher 3: *'The governing body became much more involved on the ground level. So there is a governor attached to each department; they have regular meetings, regular contact. There are discussions, they come into the department and you kind of show them round and show what you're doing and they'll ask you questions about progress and various things like that now, which didn't happen before.'*

In order to sustain all these changes, the head emphasized the need for continued openness and consistency across the school.

'Obviously consistency across the whole school is key isn't it, consistently good and outstanding teaching, so every lesson counting, every policy

being implemented in a consistent way right across the school. But I think every school is working on those things aren't they?'

This was considered important at all times and not simply when Ofsted judgements were about to be made. The next step was about ensuring the whole school is aspirational and works towards being outstanding:

'So we're setting aspirational targets for every single child, so we know that if we meet these targets we will become an outstanding school.'

Looking back, teachers who had lived through the changes endorsed the reforms. They compared the way subject teachers were isolated in the past with the whole-school professional dialogue about teaching quality that was taking place today. They described a revolution in the use of data, with the data breakfast meetings at the heart of the new approach. The approach to professional development was democratic: everyone was expected to have some expertise to share with the group. This emphasis on democratic expertise went some way beyond standard notions of distributed leadership. Every teacher was expected to be a leader.

'Everybody had to decide on a leadership role for themselves, and at every Friday briefing somebody would talk about what they're doing for their leadership role and they were an extension of these aspiring middle leader programmes, or new leader programmes. People were put in charge of like, literacy across the curriculum and so they would get up on a Friday and talk about what they had done and the impact of it, and so that just became a regular feature really.'

Teachers in the focus group spoke positively about the head's approach. They described her style as *'100 miles an hour is all I can say; whirlwind, full-on, very driven'*, but were also keen to point out how far the transformation had been *'a team effort'*. There was an intense sense of collective satisfaction about the way the school had changed.

'A lot of staff feel really proud of the changes and also knowing that the students are getting what they deserve: the best that we can give them. Although it's been exhausting, I think it's been worth it. Although we get tired and grumble sometimes, we all do feel that the changes being made, no matter how difficult, are really worthwhile and benefiting the pupils and that's why we do our job, so it keeps us kind of happy.'

'A lot of staff feel really proud of the changes and also knowing that the students are getting what they deserve: the best that we can give them. Although it's been exhausting, I think it's been worth it.'

The teachers perceived a restlessness to the head's style and believed she was determined not to be complacent simply because the school had achieved a 'good'. The focus now was on the next steps in the school's journey. Even in the immediate aftermath of the good judgement, the head made it clear that there could be no complacency.

'I remember the next briefing that we had after we got the result. It was like, "Okay, priorities for this week are: blank, blank, blank," so it just continued as it was.'

The head had made it clear that in order to achieve the next phase of improvement further changes would be required.

'There are still changes being made, you know, the pastoral system at present is being enhanced again...she's not just resting on her laurels; she's very passionate and she expresses that with all of us and wants to take us on the journey to be outstanding. And we won't do that if we just keep doing what we're doing. We know we've got to add to it, embed what's good and keep going and add more things to it in order to get to that "outstanding".'



Case study 6: 'We're going to be like a firewall and I'm going to take the pressure off the staff'

- **Year groups:** Early Years to Year 6
- **Number of pupils:** Average
- **Pupil premium:** Average
- **Other:** Slightly larger enrolment than national average

The interviews collected in the course of preparing this last case study convey different perspectives on the same story. The headteacher and chair of governors focus on the school's weaknesses and the approach taken to address these challenges.

In many ways their story mirrors that of other schools. The school was judged inadequate after a period of weak and changeable leadership. There was a long history of underachievement. The new headteacher described how the school had failed to achieve a good grade from Ofsted for 30 years.

The new substantive headteacher reviewed the situation and found that none of the teaching at the time was good.

'We did an initial needs analysis...The greatest concern was the quality of teaching ... three quarters of the lessons were graded as inadequate. There probably were good teachers here, but we didn't see any of that good teaching jumping out. It was also a school that was quite dysfunctional in terms of understanding budget ... and health and safety. The whole thing was actually at kind of a rock bottom, and that was obviously replicated in the results.'

The perceptions of the school, from those inside and outside, were not positive. The headteacher relayed a powerful anecdote that captured the low standing of the school in the eyes of both parents and staff. He explained the reaction of one of the school's teaching assistants when her own daughter failed to get a place at her school of choice and was instead allocated a place at the school where she worked:

'One of my TAs always says to me that when her child got a place here she just burst into tears because she didn't want her child to come here. And I always think that is a really good example of how the school was: it was portrayed as very much a failing school, and the last on the list that you would want to ever send your child to.'

The teachers and chair of governors echoed the fundamental truth of this story. The chair said the Ofsted judgement was 'no surprise'. Both governors and teachers associated the weaknesses with a long history of poor leadership.

'[Teachers] appeared just like rabbits in headlights, having lots of things chucked at them, "do this, try this, do that", and there was no clear plan of how to move the school forward. For one term we had an interim acting headteacher who was appointed by the local authority. You had a feeling that he was really just sort of fighting fires, there wasn't any huge direction. I also had a feeling that the governors were not perhaps getting as much information as they should have had, and I think some of the governors were feeling under pressure too; that the finger was being pointed at them as not being adequate either. There was anxiety evident within the school.'

One teacher provided vivid testimony regarding the level of turmoil and leadership turnover that the school had experienced, and the sense of chronic enduring crisis:

'I joined the school seven years ago in 2009 when it was in a satisfactory position according to Ofsted. Since then I've had four headteachers, two Ofsteds and countless local authority reviews.'

Other staff endorsed this view and commented on the baleful consequences of frequent leadership changes:

'At that point we had an interim head, so the substantive head when [teacher name] and I joined had gone. There was an interim head in post who had only been here...I think he'd been here five or six weeks when they came, he hadn't been here long, had he? So obviously he hadn't had time to affect any change, really. He'd started to stabilise, I think, perhaps, but he was in a difficult position; he was only here for two terms. I think as staff, I know I felt very unsure about what was going to happen at that point. We didn't know what the future was, where the stability was going to come from, and that was difficult.'

The focus group of teachers considered that when the new headteacher was appointed things began to change for the better. They were particularly impressed by the clarity of thinking and the emphasis on supportive leadership and staff development through coaching.

Teacher 1: *'[The headteacher] came in with a very clear vision. That was the first vision that we'd had in some time. I remember one of the first things he ever said was "we're going to be like a firewall and I'm going to take the pressure off the staff". One of the first things I remember, we'd just converted to an academy, there were no advisers coming in anymore, nobody coming in telling you how to do your job. The only person telling you how to do your job was [the headteacher].'*

Teacher 2: *'And therefore it was consistent because it was just him, and I think he did unify on a whole-staff level and from a senior leader point of view, he unified the SLT. We were all on the same page, which helps because then when we're having conversations with staff, it all matches, and I think that's important.'*

Teacher 3: *'He went over to coaching, didn't he, more? That was the first bit.'*

Teacher 4: *'Yes, and mentoring.'*

Teacher 3: *'So he took away judgement, so there was...'*

Teacher 4: *'Ofsted judgement, yes.'*

Teacher 1: *'There was no grading, and it was all about "we're going to coach". That was the first*

'[The headteacher] came in with a very clear vision. That was the first vision that we'd had in some time.'

training I'd ever had on how to observe at that point so someone came in...'

Teacher 2: *'And he said he wanted people to reflect, not observe, didn't he?'*

Teacher 3: *'Yes, but it was all about the conversation afterwards, wasn't it?'*

Teacher 2: *'People became less scared of it, because it was developmental, it wasn't judgemental.'*

The headteacher was well versed in thinking about organisational change. This provided a theoretical framework for change management. He stopped using Ofsted grades in internal lesson observations because of the demotivating consequence of repeatedly telling a colleague that their performance was 'inadequate'. He talked about the need for staff 'to fall in love again with teaching'. He invested in tablet computers for all staff as a way of both symbolising his commitment to them as professionals and the need for them to be operating as a first-class 21st century school. He understood the need for both 'quick wins' and sustainable – but harder to achieve – transformation.

'And you have got your quick wins which are low effort/high impact. You have then got your high-impact and big-effort things which are your long-term plans. And you have got your things that you shouldn't really be worrying about, and then your kind of low-impact and low-effort things. And I think the things we focused on really quickly were the high-impact stuff that is quite easy to do.'

In addition to a less judgemental and more supportive professional environment, teachers were also given important information about the school and the pupils:

Teacher 1: *'We have many more meetings, don't we, during the school day when we're here, because in the past most meetings would have happened after school when we wouldn't be here.'*

Teacher 2: *'Yes, Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. There's a briefing on a Monday which is lovely because we actually all get together.'*

Teacher 1: *'You feel a lot more involved in what's going on.'*

Teacher 3: *'And that makes staff feel more valued straightaway.'*

Teacher 1: *'Absolutely.'*

Teacher 2: *'On Tuesdays we would have the data meetings, wouldn't we, and again we wouldn't always have been privy to that kind of information before. But now we are, which although sometimes it might not always be relevant to us, it's still nice to know where we've come from and where we're heading.'*

Teacher 4: *'And I think you sometimes feel you can do a better job if you have a better insight into what's going on.'*

The chair of the governing body described with approval the new head's positive agenda. She talked about his wish to give the teachers *'the tools to do the best job that they could'*. She endorsed his view that the school leadership should avoid a deficit model and should instead focus on *'enabling them to realise that they weren't failures as teachers'*. This strategy paid some rapid dividends in her view:

'It...was a revelation to all of us how quickly the children stepped up to the mark.'

Both the chair of governors and the focus group of teachers reflected on the next phase of challenges for the school. One teacher described how *'brilliant'* the headteacher was at the *'big picture stuff'* that had been essential for the first phase of the reform. The question was, now that aspects of *'the big picture'* were sorted, what next?

The teachers and the governor suggested that it was important that the school's improvement should not be too key-person dependent because the current headteacher might well move on at some point. The challenge was to ensure that changes were embedded and underpinned by a truly collegiate approach. One teacher expressed some anxiety about this next phase:

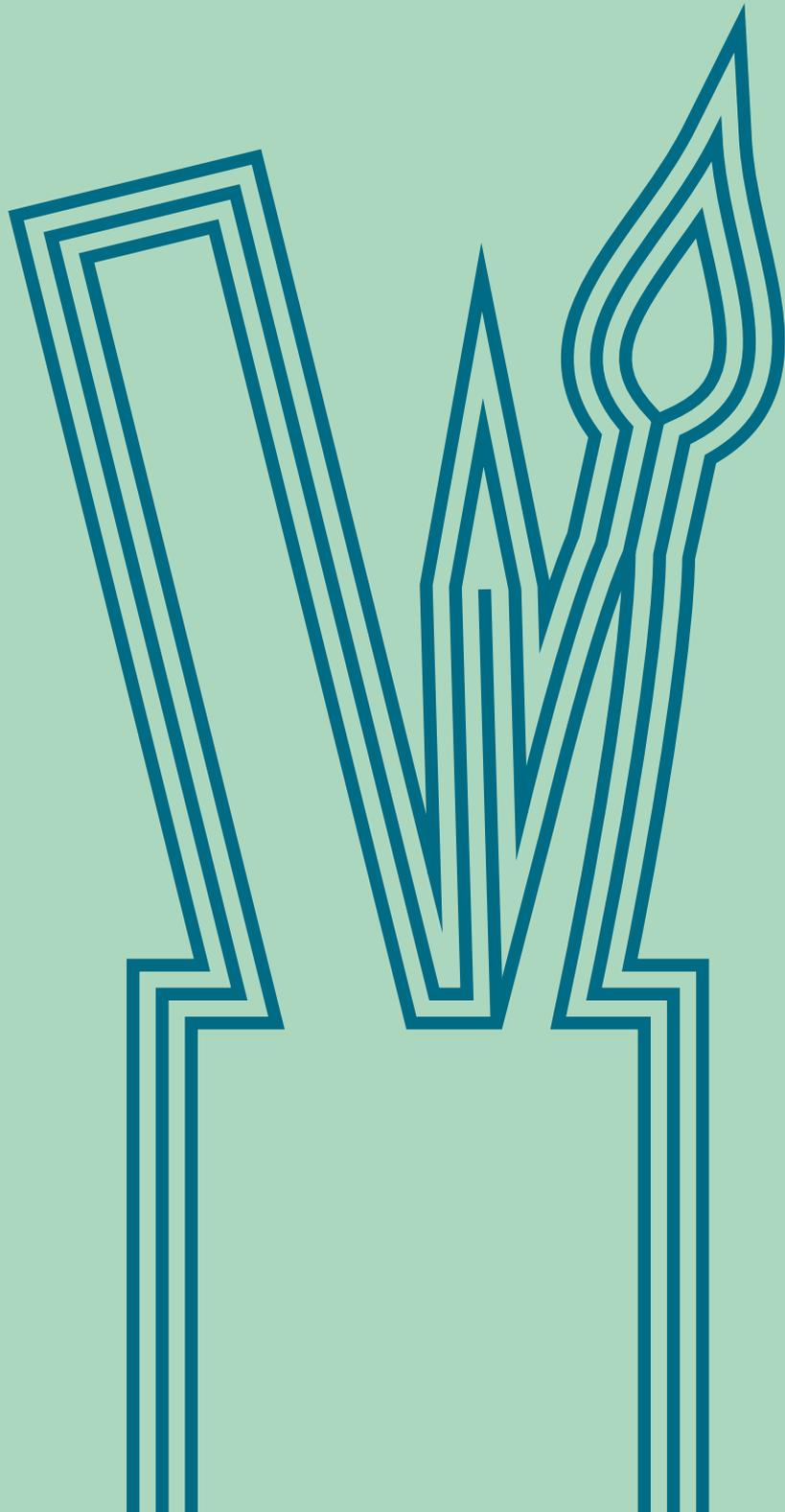
Teacher: *'And are we going to have another transition? That's my fear now, having just got to where we've got to.'*

The chair of the governing body in a separate interview tackled some of the same issues relating to sustainability. Her priority was securing the irreversibility of reform through collective action.

'You know, you have an inspiring and enthusiastic headteacher...but it wouldn't necessarily be maintained if there weren't a number of individuals who buy into that and who want to see it continue. Previously I have seen inspirational headteachers who've come in and done wonderful things turning a school round, but everybody is in awe of that and thinks "actually, it's all them, I have had a small part to play in this".'

Chapter 6

Final thoughts



The key question driving this study was ‘How do headteachers in rapidly improving schools explain the changes that have taken place in their schools?’.

Chapters 1 through 5 have explored this question from a range of perspectives: in Chapter 3 through the voices of headteachers who completed the survey, in Chapter 4 through the voices of those headteachers who took part in interviews, and in Chapter 5 through the voices of governors and teachers. Chapter 1 draws all the data together and presents an overview. This final chapter makes some summary points.

There is a high level of consensus amongst headteachers that rapid school improvement is driven by:

- **A framework for rapid school improvement.** This framework emphasised the need for school leaders to: urgently address teaching quality, commandingly drive improvement and build leadership capacity over time, motivate and monitor, be technically skilled but personally determined and resilient, build coalitions and support change.
- **Improving the quality of teaching.** The majority of headteachers saw the problem not as universally weak teaching, but an unacceptable variability in teaching quality across their school. Most agreed that delivering in-house professional development programmes – including on data literacy – and building trust with teaching staff were the best ways to ensure a more consistent and equitable spread of good teaching quality within the school. Collaborations with other schools also sometimes played a part.
- **Strong ‘emergency’ leadership and longer-term growth in wider leadership capacity.** Directive leadership styles during the ‘emergency’ post-inspection period should evolve into more sustainable models of leadership by developing schools’ internal leadership capacity. Building the foundations for longer-term and continuous improvement also includes enhancing the leadership capacity of the governing body.
- **Having the authority to affect change.** Without the authority to make significant changes, school leaders would have found the process of rapid school improvement difficult. In some cases this lack of power was among the reasons they had not been able to improve the quality of the school. School leaders accepted the fundamental accuracy and fairness of the Ofsted inspection judgements, which provided a mandate for change.

The report’s findings are encouraging. The Education Development Trust thanks the individuals and schools that have taken part. The dramatic changes to the quality of education these schools have achieved are of great value, and

The majority of headteachers saw the problem not as universally weak teaching, but an unacceptable variability in teaching quality across their school

learning from these stories of rapid school improvement is important. The direct experience of implementing rapid school improvement is of immeasurable interest to schools still facing these challenges. The fact that there is consensus about how (and why) these changes took place is grounds for optimism.



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