Successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils

Introduction and background

In December 2017, the government's plan 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential' was announced. Its overarching aim was to improve social mobility through education and to deliver better educational and career outcomes more evenly across England. One of the core areas of the plan relates to closing the attainment gap in school. Part of the action plan envisaged a new £23 million Future Talent Programme to trial approaches and present clear recommendations on 'what works' to support the most able disadvantaged children.

In announcing the plan, the government acknowledged previous research by the Sutton Trust which had identified key aspects of the 'Missing Talent' issue. Their report identified that 15 per cent of highly able pupils who score in the top 15 per cent nationally, fail to achieve in the top 25 per cent at GCSE and that boys are more likely to be in this ‘missing talent’ group. A later report, Potential for Success, also for the Sutton Trust, found that while high attainers overall make about an average level of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 of +0.02, where the national average is zero, those from disadvantaged backgrounds fall substantially behind, with a Progress 8 score of -0.32.

This research from the DfE has been commissioned to identify and explore good practice in schools in which able disadvantaged pupils have made good progress. The research undertaken was largely qualitative in nature. It involved a scoping survey of over 400 secondary schools, followed by telephone interviews with an achieved sample of 21 diverse schools with successful experience to share. Schools chosen had better than national average Progress 8 scores for their previously high attaining, disadvantaged pupils in either 2015-16 and/or 2016-17.

Key findings

Supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils

- A key finding was that successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils was not about a single intervention, but about a suite of activities which combined to make an impact.
- A model of effective support was produced from analysis of telephone data from interviews with 21 sample schools and was refined after further feedback. The model is based on 4 elements as below.

Leadership and infrastructure

- Under this element of the model, the most academically able disadvantaged pupils are first identified. Participating schools recognised the need to use a variety of methods to do this, including: Key Stage 2 assessment data (used by 19 schools); Year 7 baseline tests (eg. SATs, CATs, reading age, used by 9 schools); subsequent annual review of teacher data (11 schools); and interviews with pupils and/or additional information from Year 7 parents (3 schools).
- The most common way of identifying the most able disadvantaged group was used by 6 of the 21 schools. It started by identifying the most able and then the disadvantaged within that group.
- A few of the participating schools used positive discrimination, for example lowering the CATs benchmark score for ‘most able’ for disadvantaged pupils. Another school talked about the need to positively discriminate in order to include a greater proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the key Stage 3 provision for ‘most able’. The rationale for this was that these pupils had to overcome more barriers.
- All of the 21 sample schools which had a clear strategy focussed on the most able disadvantaged pupils were successful, as evidenced by their above average national progress scores. One interviewee commented that ‘I do think there’s a whole school commitment to this. I think it’s definitely part of the school’s vision to support these students’.
- The schools in the sample embedded practice at 4 levels with: a named senior leader driving and reviewing practice; whole school professional development focussed on this group; the most able disadvantaged included in lesson planning; and a pastoral focus on the able disadvantaged which included cultural opportunities.

The 4 main activity strands

- The 4 main activity strands element of the model brings together interventions designed to promote protective factors or to reduce or eliminate risk factors. Protective factors promote the success of highly able disadvantaged
pupils (e.g. good behaviour, high quality teaching, good attendance). Risk factors, including poor attendance, lack of confidence and behavioural issues will hinder progress.

- Interviewees cited a wide range of protective factors which supported the academic extension of the most able group in general. Examples included: weekly mentoring sessions from a senior leader; the expectation that the most able would attend at least one after school club a week; and expecting all able pupils to take the EBacc.

- Schools recognised the need to address risk for the most able disadvantaged pupils. In one school, underachievement by 15 of the most able disadvantaged pupils in an English mock exam was addressed through an intervention involving meetings with each pupil and their parents, weekly booster sessions and follow up meetings to review progress. The intervention not only boosted achievement in the subsequent Easter mock, but it also raised the confidence of these pupils that they were capable of achieving the highest results.

- Within the cultural strand of the model, a lack of cultural capital was viewed by many interviewees as a risk factor. Most of the schools in the sample sought to address this by ensuring that academically able disadvantaged pupils were included in school trips and visits to the theatre, art galleries and concerts.

- The personal development strand of the model was seen as vital; there was a recognition that a lack of confidence and social skills was a risk factor. To address this, schools sought to engage academically able disadvantaged pupils in activities such as chess clubs, debating clubs and national competitions. In one school, for example, a range of external partners from the local university and local businesses were hosted by pupils who were responsible for welcoming the visitors and sustaining a conversation.

- Schools cited a number of ways in which they addressed barriers caused by material poverty. Examples included: paying travel costs to university campuses; schools buying books to give or lend to disadvantaged pupils; helping parents to understand where they could get help with university costs.

**Key partnerships underpinning the activity stands**

- Parental engagement with the group of academically able disadvantaged pupils was mainly at a personal level, e.g. following up missed appointment at parents’ evenings or option evenings.

- Overall, visits to universities and partnership work with university widening participation schemes was a major activity strand for academically able disadvantaged students. Activities included summer schools, annual visits to Oxford or Cambridge facilitated by an existing partnership or regional widening participation schemes such as ThinkHigher.

- A number of schools reported having external partnerships which supported the aspirations of the most able disadvantaged pupils in particular. One school, for example, benefitted from the provision of external monitoring by an international company which was targeted at high achieving disadvantaged pupils who were at risk of not making the expected progress.

**Monitoring and evaluation**

- Monitoring, reviewing and evaluating the impact of evaluations to support the most able disadvantaged group was normal practice in the participating schools. The first way of doing this was through data on academic progress (internal assessment results, external exams, tracking data). The second method was obtaining pupils’ views through evaluation sheets, annual surveys or interviews. Thirdly, staff gave their views on improved attainment, engagement or behaviour. Finally, schools looked at progression data to university or to Higher Level Apprenticeships.

- Some interviewees mentioned how difficult it is to directly attribute improvements in attainment to a specific activity. For this reason, qualitative data is important.

**Implementation of support**

- Schools were asked about the practical challenges they faced when implementing support for academically able disadvantaged pupils. Time was a major issue, whether it was staff taking time out of the classroom to accompany trips or time required to run activities or interventions. Pupils’ time was also an issue, particularly with regards to pupils taking time out of lessons.

- Some of the teachers interviewed cited considerable cost constraints, for example with taking pupils on visits to universities. Others, however, disagreed, stating that the additional funding their school received through Pupil Premium could be used to support a wide range of activities.

- Some schools cited lack of parental support, stating that parents of this group did not always recognise the potential of their children.

**Less effective strategies**

- A number of activities had been trialled and not continued because they were not seen as cost effective. Some were targeted on too few pupils and others were seen as too hard to maintain.

- Interviewees were sceptical of the value of ‘off the peg’ and ‘bought in’ tuition, courses or other support. Examples of this included agencies offering mathematics courses, and online tuition. That scepticism was a result of assessments of the impact of such courses. Issues were also reported with tutoring, with one school finding that although one pupil benefited from external tutoring paid for by the school, two others did not. The interviewee felt that tutoring would be better delivered by one of the school’s teachers.

**Barriers faced by schools in supporting the most able disadvantaged**

- The most frequently mentioned barrier related to school staff. It was felt that some staff were not ‘on board’ with providing enrichment activities for able children because they thought other children were being overlooked, or because they did not have the necessary capacity or capability to provide support for the cohort.

- Home backgrounds gave rise to a number of challenges such as: narrow horizons leading to low expectations; pupils fear of leaving home and mixing with others who are not ‘like them’; and pupils’ and parents’ fears of the cost of higher education.

- Interviewees explained that successful strategies depended on engaging pupils and parents as soon as they joined the school. Meetings between school staff, new pupils from the cohort and their parents/carers were held, either group events, or family-school staff meetings. Some schools were able to benefit from using specialist staff, such as home-school liaison staff, or parent support advisers.

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The full document can be downloaded from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/approaches-to-supporting-disadvantaged-pupils](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/approaches-to-supporting-disadvantaged-pupils)