Learning from Success

*A research paper:*

 *How strategic leadership effectively diminishes differences for disadvantaged pupils in successful Kent schools*

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***Cliftonville Primary Academy – Thanet***

***Green Park Primary School – Dover***

***Hampton Primary Academy – Canterbury***

***Queenborough Primary School – Sheppey***

***St Eanswythes Primary School – Folkestone***

***St Matthew’s High Broom Primary School – Tunbridge Wells***

**Introduction**

This paper sets out the findings from a research project in Kent over the academic year 2016 – 2017. Schools were identified from across the county, based upon their KS2 outcomes from 2016, where the disadvantaged pupils were outperforming non-disadvantaged pupils nationally for combined in reading, writing and mathematics, and there has been a sustained improvement in their pupil’ outcomes over the past few years.

The aim was to identify what these schools were specifically doing that enabled their disadvantaged pupils to make accelerated progress and attain to such a high level compared to schools nationally.

Each of the schools visited are unique in their context, they serve very different communities, are geographically dispersed across the county and are broad mix of different types of schools; maintained, academy, church schools, primary and junior. However, what is abundantly clear is that all of these schools have some commonality which underpins their approaches to leadership, teaching and learning and ethos, and it is these core values and strategic directions that have been instrumental in their success.

The sections below outline these aspects as the 5 principle areas that have impacted most significantly on diminishing differences for pupils entitled to Pupil Premium funding. Each section details both the theories and the actions that these schools have focused on, in order to bring about change in their schools and ensure their continued success.

Whilst these principles and areas of focus are not new, not necessarily innovative or even surprising, there are two factors that the research highlighted as the reasons for their success:

1. **It is the combination of these aspects, all executed through excellent leadership and interwoven into the school’s ethos and strategic vision that ensures their success. The priorities are complimentary to each other and balanced to form the cornerstones of the school’s policy on teaching and learning**
2. **Leaders are absolutely relentless in their implementation, monitoring and focus on these priorities. They are unwavering in their expectations that these aspects of the school will be consistent and invest time, finance and significant professional development for staff, to ensure that their expectations are met**

## In summary:

Each of the schools have an uncompromising focus on achievement. They use their Pupil Premium Grant to ensure that they are identifying the specific barriers of the disadvantaged pupils and meeting their needs, as well as the needs of all their pupils, to be able to access, engage with and enjoy their learning. Interventions, whilst in place for a minority are purely short term approaches to support individuals in ensuring that they are with their peers, accessing a rich, broad and exciting curriculum in the classroom the **vast majority of the time**. Consistently across all of the schools, Headteachers explained that their success in diminishing differences has been about making their **whole school approaches** work for disadvantaged pupils.

**Setting the Vision**

Each of the Headteachers are visionary, strategic leaders with an unfaltering dedication to the achievement of their pupils. They foster excellent relationships with all stakeholders and invest significantly in their staff, to ensure that leaders at all levels are demonstrating the school values.

During the visits to each of the schools, it was absolutely clear that the vision for each of the schools is not a by-line on their paperwork, but a foundation of their approach to education. All of the schools had their values displayed throughout the school and these are expectations, not ideals, and underpin their behaviour policies. Staff use the values as part of their discussions with pupils, they are integrated into the curriculum and linked directly to the foci for collective worship and whole school policies.

Pupils fully understand the expectations on them as learners and as part of the school community. As a result, all of the schools, despite significant challenges in many cases, have exceptional conduct behaviour and excellent behaviours for learning in all classes. The vision is driven by the school’s values and the leaders are relentless in ensuring that all staff model, maintain and promote the school values in everything they do.

The shared principles are:

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|  | Leaders at all levels have the highest expectations for the attainment of all pupils, and a relentless, never faltering, drive for achievement.  |
|  | The school’s ethos is absolutely transparent and shared by all stakeholders. It is visual, tangible and modelled in every aspect of school life.  |
|  | The wellbeing of pupils and staff is a high priority in the school. Every member of the school community feels valued and their achievements are recognised and celebrated.  |
|  | There is a communication strategy within the school that is exceptionally well planned and delivered. There are well established, regular opportunities for all staff, at every level, Governors, families and other stakeholders, to be involved in the decision making, planning and sharing of information about pupils. Everyone in the school has voice and everyone in the school is well informed.  |
|  | The school’s uniqueness is celebrated and the school’ values are directly related to the distinctness of the school whether it based on the school’s Christian Distinctiveness or the values determined by the leadership team and pupils, staff, Governors and parents are all completely clear about what the school stands for and what they subscribe to as member of the school community.  |

**Investment in Early Years**

All of the school leaders identified investing in Early Years as a critical aspect for diminishing differences for Disadvantaged pupils. There is a significant financial investment in the Early Years classes for both staffing and provision, and all of the Headteachers have a deep and secure knowledge and understanding of best practice in Early Years.

Leaders spend significant time within the EYFS settings. Children and staff are observed regularly and barriers identified swiftly and robustly acted upon. In all of the schools, the SENCo or Inclusion Manager spends time regularly engaging with children in EYFS to identify any areas of Special Educational Need or other needs. Leaders ensure that the provision is enabling children to overcome these barriers and the support and curriculum are meeting their needs. All of the schools invest significantly in high quality Speech and Language support focused specifically on the EYFS and have their own trained staff, dedicated to engage in intervention within the classroom to address these early learning barriers.

The shared principles are:

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|  | Leaders invest significantly in additional staffing for EYFS classes to ensure that there are strong role models, highly trained Early Years support staff and teachers delivering an excellent Early Years curriculum. |
|  | There is a detailed, planned strategy for engaging with parents from transition into the school, throughout the EYFS to establish strong relationships, develop communication and support families in over-coming any barriers related to school. This includes regular opportunities for parents and carers to come into school, daily communication with parents, targeting those harder to reach, building relationships with Family Workers employed by the school and home visits.  |
|  | A well planned, informed communication strategy based on the needs of the families e.g. using texting, Facebook, twitter etc. to share detailed information about the children with their families. This approach enables school to nurture positive relationships and promote the positive elements of the school in order to build trust.  |
|  | Staff know the children exceptionally well. They gather relevant information about the interests of the children, their backgrounds and experiences and use these to build scaffolds for learning within the environment. Opportunities and provision are centred around familiar settings for the children and engage them within play and talk that can then be developed and built upon in a non-threatening way.  |
|  | The environment for early learning is incredibly language rich, both inside the classroom and in the outside learning provision. High quality materials, books, displays and media are used to deliberately extend language, promote talk and develop vocabulary. Highly skilled staff model, promote and expose children to the highest quality language through expert modelling and engagement.  |

**Relentless Focus on Quality First Teaching**

In all of the schools visited, the most common feature of the strategic leadership was the absolute focus on teaching and learning. All of the Headteachers spoke passionately about their intrinsic role of ensuring that all teaching was at least good and that there was a strive for outstanding teaching across their schools.

Leaders at all levels in all of the schools are leaders of learning. Modelling and promoting best practice is a key part in all of their roles, and their passion for excellent teaching is both obvious and instrumental in ensuring that their vision is achieved. All of the Headteachers maintain a relentless focus on the quality of teaching in their schools and invest in ensuring that their policies and procedures enhance practice and ensure consistency.

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|  | The shared principles are: |
|  | Leaders have embedded systems and structures for regular monitoring across the school which includes a forensic analysis of individual pupil data on a highly regular basis, consistent monitoring of pupils’ books, learning walks and pupil conferencing and includes leaders at all levels. The information gathered is skilfully analysed and used to inform every element of practice within the school, continually developing and shaping the future actions in a timely manner.  |
|  | Continual Professional Development is an inherent element of the strategic plan. The needs of all staff are analysed from effective monitoring, and bespoke packages of CPD are designed to continually improve practice. In all the schools this includes peer to peer mentoring or coaching for both teachers and support staff, regular narrated book sampling and lesson visits, whole school CPD for new initiatives, regularly revisited and revised, as well as including visits to share best practice from others.  |
|  | All of the schools have invested significant time in developing their marking and feedback policies and have consulted widely, researched and trialled a range of strategies to ensure that their feedback to pupils is effective and making a significant impact. All of the schools invest in individual feedback to pupils for teachers to review learning alongside the pupils and ensure that there is a deep understanding for each pupil about what they need to do to improve.  |
|  | There is a whole school, consistent and embedded approach to teaching pupils about learning: learning about learning and thinking about thinking is entrenched in the daily practice of all the teachers. Whilst using very different approaches, all of the schools promote metacognition and use it as a tool for developing pupil’ independence, learning confidence and strategies for learning.  |
|  | Leaders are outward facing and display a thirst for collaboration, sharing best practice and developing new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Middle Leaders play an essential part in implementing and monitoring new ideas, visiting other schools and investigating what is working well. All of the schools value their collaborative working and ensure that regular reciprocal visits with local schools, and beyond, are used as a vehicle to review and amend their own practice. These schools are constantly evolving.  |

**Designing a curriculum that meets the needs of all learners**

The curriculum in all of the schools visited is incredibly rich, diverse, unique and based entirely around what leaders believe are the fundamental ingredients for primary education. The National Curriculum is central to the school’s curriculum but its design, implementation and delivery is personalised to the needs of the pupils and is enhanced at every opportunity with meaningful, language rich experiences that bring learning to life.

All of the leaders spoke of the importance of all staff having the highest expectations of learners in all they do. There was a consistent message about challenging more able in all areas of the curriculum and never having a ceiling on the learning of any child, whatever their background. Headteachers all explained that enriching the experiences provides pupils with the chance to excel, build confidence, develop vocabulary and aim higher.

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|  | The shared principles are: |
|  | The school curriculum has been expertly designed through analysis of learning, research, whole school consultation and constantly evolves to meet the needs of the learners in the year groups at the time. It is underpinned by the school’s vision and ethos and embodies the Headteachers’ philosophies of education. As a result, the curriculums in these schools are unique but they are all equally rich and broad and highly cross-curricular in nature.  |
|  | All of the schools have invested significantly in the foundation subjects and wider curriculum. Pupil Premium monies have been consistently used to enrich the opportunities for the arts and music, spiritual and cultural education and languages. Many of the schools invest in specialist teachers, tutors and experts to teach or provide experiences in these areas and use the Pupil Premium funding to ensure that the disadvantaged pupils are given opportunities that their circumstances might otherwise prohibit.  |
|  | There is a significant investment in wider experiences. All of the schools are exceptionally proud of the opportunities their pupils receive within school, and these include substantial trips, visits, visitors and other experiences. Leaders described incredible experiences of visits to the opera, the theatre, London, visits from authors, musicians, actors, sporting heroes, links with Royal Shakespeare Company, the ballet, Parliament and many more. Learning in all of the schools is made meaningful.  |
|  | Sports and outdoor learning play a significant part in the curriculum. Leaders link the Sports Premium to the needs of their pupils, particularly the disadvantaged and are creative in their approaches to enriching outdoor sporting and active learning opportunities. All of the schools described a focus on competitive sport and opportunities to take part in a range of sporting opportunities. All of the schools use programmes such as Forest School to enhance the curriculum particularly for disadvantaged pupils. There is also a commitment to offer wider sporting opportunities to those commonly found in primary schools e.g. horse riding, canoeing, fencing, lacrosse etc.  |
|  | Leaders are insistent that the core subjects are taught consistently, but that learning is always modelled and based on the concrete first. The curriculum provides first hand experiences that pupils can draw upon to apply into the English and mathematics.  |

**Communication and Literacy**

All of the schools identified literacy and communication as the most consistent barrier to learning for their disadvantaged pupils and have spent time and energy developing whole school approaches to supporting children in overcoming these challenges. Headteachers described weak vocabulary, poor role models, a lack of cultural capital and experiences and a resistance or hesitancy to engage in literacy as the key issues their disadvantaged pupils were facing.

All of the Headteachers identified the importance in highly trained and skilled Teaching Assistants in the development of literacy and communication. In all of the schools, the support staff have a detailed knowledge of the children in the classes they support and use intervening at the point of learning to ensure effective progress within lessons reducing the need for intervention.

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|  | Leaders support staff at all levels in ensuring that they model rich language, grammar, sentence construction and enhance pupils’ vocabulary in all aspects of the teaching within the school. Oracy and talk are promoted constantly and often pupils are paired with pupils who can model strong use of language during lessons across the curriculum. Pre-teaching is used consistently to provide pupils with the language they need for learning.  |
|  | Reading is a fundamental element of the curriculum. All of the schools invest in reading interventions to ensure that pupils read regularly to adults. Libraries are beautiful spaces within all the schools and a love for reading is fostered from the Early Years. Reading schemes are developed to include real books as well as structured, scheme books and throughout the curriculum pupils are exposed to rich, culturally diverse and engaging texts. Pupils are read to daily in all year groups.  |
|  | Writing is taught progressively and based around experiences and rich texts. Pupils are taught to self-edit as an explicit skill throughout the school and spend significant time redrafting (not rewriting) and improving their work. Peer to peer marking is commonly used to support the improvement process and writing is developed in a cross curricular way in all the schools. All of the schools invest time in talk for writing, drama, creative approaches and meaningful dialogue prior to the writing process to support pupils in developing their confidence and readiness for writing.  |
|  | Phonics is taught systematically, daily and is appropriately differentiated to ensure that the vast majority of pupils achieve the expected standard in phonics before they leave KS1. The importance placed on this element to the curriculum provides the pupils with secure building blacks for early reading and writing that have had a successful impact on outcomes.  |
|  | Staff are continuously trained on the development of basic skills and support staff are highly effective in intervening at the point of learning to develop language, reading and writing skills within the classroom.  |