

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite significant efforts to narrow the attainment gaps between disadvantaged children and other pupils the gaps at both local and national level remain large and resistant to change.

The relatively low expectations and aspirations of many disadvantaged children, and their families, are often cited as contributing factors towards their underachievement. However, the expectations of schools are also important factors in determining educational outcomes. Until recently, it has been difficult to quantify these expectations.

There is evidence that many schools, inadvertently, have lower expectations for disadvantaged children than for other pupils. In these cases, there is likely to be a significant impact on the achievement of the disadvantaged children and consequently the gaps.

2. BACKGROUND

In 2011 Wirral conducted research into the causes of its KS4 attainment gap, which is one of the widest in the country.

An unexpected finding was that many schools were setting significantly lower attainment targets for disadvantaged children than for their peers. This is because the target-setting procedure, whether for the end of Year 7 or for the end of KS4, involves using attainment at KS2 as the starting point for each child. Since disadvantaged children generally achieve less well at KS2 than their peers, their starting points were lower and therefore so were their targets. It didn't matter whether secondary schools used Fischer Family Trust estimates, 3 levels of progress or some other variant as the basis for setting targets - the effect was the same. Attainment gaps are, to a large extent, an artefact of target-setting processes that are based primarily on prior attainment.

It is reasonable to say that attainment targets are an explicit statement of educational expectations, and therefore it was possible to conclude that in these cases schools had lower expectations for disadvantaged children than for other children. The key point, however, is that these schools were completely unaware of this.

A sample of primary schools showed a similar pattern.

The differences in the attainment targets for the two groups of children were large. At KS4 they were typically of the order of 25%, which is about three quarters of the final gap.

There is a large body of research that shows children's attainment is very powerfully influenced by their teachers' expectations.

It was concluded that a major reason why the gaps were so resistant to change is because many schools were actually setting attainment targets to generate a gap, albeit inadvertently so.

In 2012 the local authority invited those secondary schools that had significant numbers of disadvantaged children to participate in a project to test whether targets did indeed have the suspected effect on attainment. Three schools agreed, and the conditions of the project were simple:

a) for the new Year 7 (in September 2012), the schools were required to set attainment targets for disadvantaged children that were, on average, equal to those for other pupils;

b) schools were required to submit termly assessment data to the local authority.

Since disadvantaged children, generally, were being set targets that were higher than they would otherwise have been, the chances of their being 'off-track' to achieve them would increase – crucially in the early part of their secondary education. This would make it more likely that they would attract extra support/intervention, in turn increasing the likelihood that they would catch up. There were no recommendations made as to which interventions should be used.

It should be noted that a crucial element of the project was that, because of the elevated targets for disadvantaged children, more support would be given to those of them deemed 'off-track', and at an earlier stage than would normally have happened.

If the hypothesis regarding expectations were true, it would have been expected that, at the first data collection, disadvantaged children were lagging significantly behind other children but, as time went on, they would show signs of catching up.

This is precisely what the data showed. Based on historic data, the pupils involved in the project have a forecast gap at the end of KS4 of 22%. By the end of the first year, the gap in the teacher assessments was only 6%.

There was no cost to the schools to implement the project. Furthermore, the project has been discussed with several HMI, who have expressed their support for it.

CONCLUSION

Schools should compare the attainment targets they have already set for their disadvantaged children with those set for other children. If there is a significant difference between the two, schools should consider equalising them.

For future cohorts, schools should ensure that the attainment targets for disadvantaged children are broadly equal to those for other children.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Forum notes the report

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