

Using the pupil premium effectively: an evidence-based approach to closing the gap

by John Dunford, *Whole Education*

If you ask school leaders what are their top two priorities, they are likely to say “raising achievement and closing the gap”. If you ask most politicians with responsibility for education the same question, you will get pretty much the same two aims. Middle leaders have a key role in both these objectives.

Indeed, most teachers came into the profession because they wanted to improve the life chances of young people. That was what motivated me and I know that Teaching Leaders is an organisation propelled by the same mission: “the belief that children’s success at school can be driven not by social background but by the quality and kind of education they receive”.

We are not alone in England in making this a priority. In the words of Andreas Schleicher of the OECD: “Our data shows it doesn’t matter if you go to a school in Britain, Finland or Japan, students from a privileged background tend to do well everywhere. What really distinguishes education systems is their capacity to deploy resources where they can make the most difference. Your effect as a teacher is a lot bigger for a student who doesn’t have a privileged background than for a student who has lots of educational resources.”

This is especially true of your effect as a middle leader – and it applies particularly in England, where the gap between the educational attainment of rich and poor is wider than in many other countries.

The gap grows between the ages of 11 and 16, with the average gap between the proportion of pupil premium-eligible 11 year olds and others standing at 19% for level 4 in reading, writing and numeracy. This increases to an average gap of 26% at age 16. That is to say, 39% of pupil premium-eligible students obtain five or more A*-C grades, including English and maths, at GCSE, compared with 66 % of others.

Like all averages, these figures disguise wide variations across the country and between schools in similar circumstances. The gap at age 16 in Westminster is 11%; in Wokingham it is 41%. In Southwark it is 12%; in Southend 40%.

I prefer to concentrate on the level of attainment of pupil premium-eligible students rather than the size of the gap. If you can raise their attainment, the gap will look after itself.

As a middle leader, there is much you can do to help to raise attainment of disadvantaged students, using evidence of what has been proved to work elsewhere.

1. **Keep your focus relentlessly on the quality of teaching and learning in your part of the school.** Figure 1 opposite demonstrates that highly effective teaching disproportionately benefits disadvantaged children. So, if you teach well and they learn well, the gap should narrow. Conversely, poor teaching also disproportionately affects the disadvantaged, who generally don’t receive the help at home that more fortunate children have to make up what they lose by having a bad teacher.
2. **Take a look at excellent practice in other schools.** The National College for Teaching and Leadership has a list of schools¹ that are successful in closing the gap. Pick up the phone and ask if you can visit them and talk to your counterpart and to the senior leader in charge of allocating the pupil premium and monitoring the impact of the pupil premium strategies.
3. **Use the Sutton Trust / Education Endowment Foundation toolkit²** which lists 33 potential strategies for raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, drawing on evidence from over 5,000 research studies and giving each strategy a rating in terms of effectiveness and cost. You can click on each strategy and find further details. But remember – the estimates of the effectiveness of each strategy are averages – not all Teaching Assistants make no difference!

1 http://apps.nationalcollege.org.uk/closing_the_gap/index.cfm

2 <http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/>

Fig. 1

Effect of teaching on students in years of progress

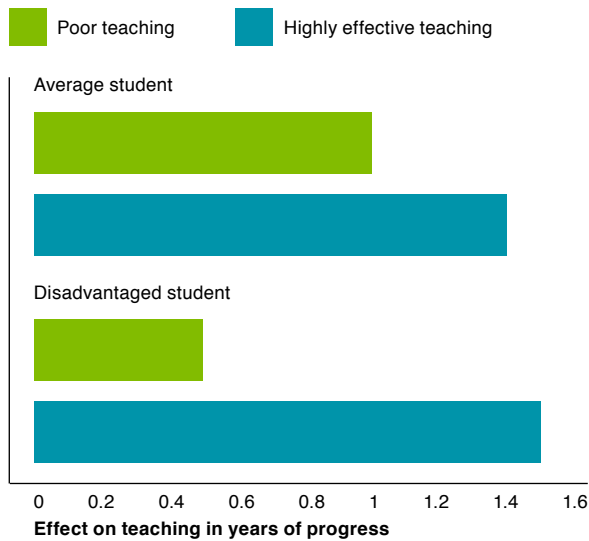
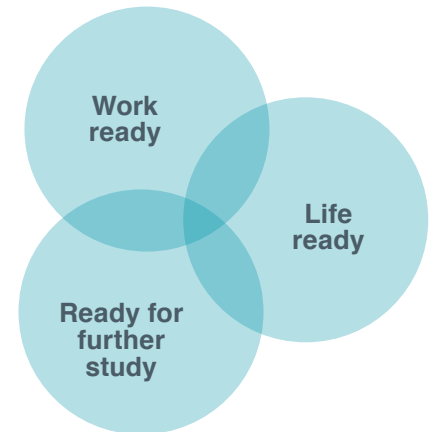


Fig. 2



- 4. Study Ofsted reports that focus on the pupil premium.** The February 2014 report³ is particularly useful in including a list of successful approaches to using the pupil premium, and a list of less successful approaches. And read the wonderful Ofsted report 'Unseen children'⁴, published in July 2013.
- 5. An important part of your responsibility for raising achievement is not only to play a part in deciding on the best focus for your strategy and being responsible for implementing it, but it is also the accountability you hold for the use of the pupil premium and for ensuring the best outcomes for FSM pupils.** That means monitoring the progress of all pupils and, in this context, monitoring the difference made for the disadvantaged pupils. Are they making faster progress than other pupils? If not, are your strategies not working? Should you be going back to the evidence to see if something else would work better? To make your strategy successful and to contribute to the school's aims with pupil premium funding, you need to ensure that all the staff for whose work you are responsible know who are the pupil premium-eligible learners and use that information professionally to encourage their rapid progress.
- 6. Plan how you can develop skills as well as knowledge in all young people.** In the words of Andreas Schleicher of the OECD: "Today, schooling needs to be much more about ways of thinking, involving creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making."

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not get the same chances to build skill levels as their more fortunate peers, so all the work you do in this field can help to close the gap.

As chair of Whole Education⁵, which is dedicated to finding ways of giving all young people a fully rounded education, I like to emphasise that, in terms of knowledge and skills, the curriculum must be both/and, not either/or. And, because you don't have time to teach knowledge and skills separately (and you can't teach skills in a vacuum anyway), think of teaching a curriculum of knowledge and skills as the warp and the weft of the same process: as young people develop their knowledge, so you map skill development onto that continuous process as explained in this video clip⁶. In that way, you not only raise their attainment, but make them work-ready, life-ready and ready for further learning.

The government has made a big commitment to the pupil premium, putting £2.5 billion into funding schools to raise the attainment of disadvantaged young people and thus increase social mobility. Not surprisingly, they are holding schools to account for the impact they make with this money and, as a middle leader, you are key to making this a success.

The government has given the profession a huge challenge. We need to make a success of it, not only to ensure that the Treasury sees that it is getting good value for money, but because closing the gap is at the root of the moral purpose of school leadership at all levels.



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3 <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/pupil-premium-how-schools-are-spending-funding-successfully-maximise-achievement>

4 <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/unseen-children-access-and-achievement-20-years>

5 www.wholeeducation.org

6 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GARxFTtb_E