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Harnessing the 80% - Narrowing the gap

> Education is a key driver of social mobility and reducing education inequality is central to this goal [1, 11]

[i]In working with postgraduate students in education – deputy head teachers, heads, principals – I tend to begin by asking them to remember why they wanted to go into education in the first place. I do this to set the scene for the rest of the course we're undertaking. And I've found, after using this exercise with a large number of groups, that the reasons all boil down to more or less the same things: wanting to inspire others with a loved subject, wanting a good start for the next generation, wanting to make a difference. All of these can be summed up by the simple phrase, "wanting to make a change, for the better". Teachers and school staff in general are, by nature, change agents.

Over the past few decades, huge changes have been made. Talking to teenagers (always a salutary experience), elicits constant comments that "School's not like it was in the olden days, Miss". Education has changed almost out of all recognition and, as we'd hoped, the vast majority of those changes are for the better. More people are achieving, more going on to further study, than ever before.

The gap between children whose families claim free school meals (FSM) and others has narrowed over the last decade; only 2% of children claiming FSMs do not achieve GCSEs. And the gap between these children and more advantaged peers has also narrowed in relation to achieving 5 GCSEs; the gap in 2002 was 30.7% and in 2012 it was 16.5% [2].

Some things, however, have not changed, or have not changed enough; the poor still underachieve in school. Even if we keep on at our current rate of improvement, by 2020 we will still have about 480,000 seven year olds underachieving in reading; one in eight children claiming FSMs will still be lagging behind their peers. And Early Years matter children who have fallen behind in reading by the time they are seven are facing a bleak academic future. Children in this situation from advantaged homes have only a 1 in 4 chance of achieving five GCSEs with Maths and English; for children claiming free school meals, the figure is closer to one in six[2]. At the age of 11, 97% of children from the richest fifth of families will achieve the expected levels at KS 2, while only about three quarters of children from the poorest families will do so [3]. Recent research has down the long term effect of such inequality. Crawford et al [1] have estimated that well over 2000 fewer children from deprived backgrounds are attending elite universities than would be the case if they had followed the trajectories of their more advantaged peers.

The sad fact is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are still far less likely to achieve in school than their peers who are better off.

The basis for this discrepancy in achievement is not found – or not entirely found – within the school gates. In fact, research would suggest that nearly 80% of the difference between the GCSE results of children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds is already set by the time they are seven years old. A great deal of this is related to things over which schools have little control.

Hart and Risley's research [4] gives a stark account of just two of the factors that contribute to this discrepancy. They observed 42 American families, over a period of two and a half years. Hart and Risely calculated that by the age of four, a child in a family on welfare might have experienced 13 million *fewer* words than a child in a working class family, and 22 million *fewer* words than a child in a professional family. The implications for literacy and vocabulary development are clear.

Children in families in receipt of welfare were also far more likely to experience discouraging feedback (prohibitions) than children of professional families. The ratio of encouragement to prohibition for professional families was 32 to five (per hour), whereas for welfare families the situation was five encouragements and 11 prohibitions per hour. Again, the implications for behaviour, self-esteem, self-confidence and readiness for learning are immense [3, 5, 6].

Even a report widely touted to show the value of private education makes it clear that what it calls the "input" factors (parental occupation – and hence, income – parental education, parenting) may have a significant effect on life achievement, "The inclusion of family background characteristics thus reduces the estimated link between wages and independent schooling by 1/3rd to ½ compared to the raw estimate, confirming the intuition that some of the factors that determine whether or not a child attends independent school also impact upon later market outcomes" [7, 27]

We've made some very impressive gains, but we're still failing too many of our children. There is a very important point to be understood in the previous sentence. "We" does not refer to schools, or certainly not entirely to schools. Rather, it refers to a much larger "we" – schools, communities, and families[1]. Although the measures that are used are often related to schools and school achievement, there is only so much schools can do. And much of what schools can do, such as intensive support, reading schemes, all the work arising from the Pupil Premium, is already being done. I'm by no means saying schools should stop improving, but I am saying that schools need to stop trying to shoulder the entire burden, and should not be seen to be the ones who should shoulder the burden alone.

As I have argued elsewhere [8], we can not narrow the gap by continuing to do what we're doing – even remaining on the same trajectory, upward though it is, will not remove the gap and will be far too slow for many of our children. It is time to think radically (in the original sense of getting back to the root of an issue) and to make significant, radical changes.

Children, young people, spend up to 75% of their time outside of school, and younger children are often called "pre-schoolers" for a reason. Yet, as shown above, many of them have their academic (and life) chances curtailed both very early and through no fault of their own. Recent research cited by Save the Children [2] suggests that up to 80% of the difference in children's school performance depends on their home and community environments.

All of which could lead to a very pessimistic view of things. If 80% of the gap is due to non-school issues, then schools may never be able to close that gap. I'd agree with that statement, but I don't see it as pessimistic – I see it as incomplete. Schools may never be

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[1] Save the Children, in Too Young to Fail, has some very convincing economic data to show that narrowing this gap is actually in everyone's interest.

able to close the gap *alone*. We can not – and we *should* not – expect schools to close this gap. Schools have a part to play, but the games is not entirely theirs.

There is a resource for supporting children's achievement that is underutilised, and one that gives every indication of being particularly beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a recent, very thorough review of current research, See and Gorard [9] concluded that parental engagement was the only avenue worth funding, as it was the only one for which there was a reasonable (though still flawed) research base. Considering the nature, breadth and disparity of that research base, it's not really surprising that the latest Ofsted framework now inspects how schools engage with parents, and significantly, does that under the heading of leadership and management.

Ofsted inspectors are interested in how schools engage with parents. This is a part – a very important part – of the work toward closing the gap, but it is only a part. Parental engagement with schools is a stepping stone to what will actually make a difference and help us (meaning "us in the same broad sense as "we" above) narrow the gap and support many more of our young people, that is, parental engagement with children's learning [10-14].

I remain convinced that the vast majority of parents love their children and want the best for them, even if this is not immediately obvious to staff in schools. Goodman and Gregg [3] have pointed out, what may be taken as a lack of aspiration may be a hard won sense of caution on the back of previous experience, and what may be taken as a lack of engagement may be instead of lack of capacity to engagement or of understanding how to engage. Crozier has documented many other cases of parents perceiving schools as hard to reach, while schools were returning the (dubious) compliment [15, 16]. And while I am happy to take for granted that the vast majority of parents love their children and want what is best for them, all around us we have evidence that not all parents are equally able to support their children's learning or to give them the social capital to get ahead in our society [1]. Schools have their part to play here, in helping parents to help their children, in supporting parental engagement.

Research has been telling us for some time that parents engaging with their children's learning can be a powerful level toward a number of desirable outcomes: increased attendance, better behaviour, increased rates of homework completion [9, 12, 14, 17].

What is also becoming clear, however, is that supporting parents to engage with their children's learning can have longer term, perhaps more tangible outcomes. This is true in the early years [18] and continues as children age [19].

Research also suggests ways that this can be supported: start early, provide support for parents to support their children in the home, get parents involved in shaping programmes, put in extra support at transition points [20]. In doing this, staff need to work with a broad understanding of parental engagement [12], not just what they expect or what they themselves experienced [21, 22]. Schools need an accurate understanding of their parental cohorts, in much the same way that a good teacher sets out to understand the nature of the students in her care. And links need to be forged more closely between homes and schools [12], and between communities and schools, the document just cited has a "practitioner's appendix" listing interventions that work and can be adapted by schools.

There is no one, simple solution to supporting parents or to narrowing the gap; the issue is far too complex for that, and too dependent on context. But one thing is clear throughout the research – any long term, lasting success in this area is initiated and supported by the leadership in the school. This is shown very clearly in the fact that Ofsted has chosen to place its inspection of schools' engagement with parents in the leadership and management judgement. The leadership team are the only ones who can effect the sort of change that we need.

The radical change I'm advocating is simply that we, as a society (from within and without) stop seeing education as something schools own, or something schools do. We need to see education as a process *in which schools participate*, but which encompasses a much wider range of actors – families, communities, faith groups, the media, even social media. If so much of the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged takes place outside of schools, we cannot expect schools to make up that shortfall.

What we can do, however, is expect schools to engage with those other actors (and indeed, this is what the new Ofsted judgement around parental engagement in the leadership and management judgement means to do). And we can support schools to do this.

We will only narrow the achievement gap by changing practice, and we will only change practice by changing mindsets. We need to see schools as part of, rather than the entirety, of system change.

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[i] This article is based on a presentation made to the Primary Vision Conference of head teachers in Surrey, 26 June, 2014.