LONDON LEADERS

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

RECONNECT LONDON

Reconnect London

Reconnect London is a practitioner-led network which was founded in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, by a group of school and trust leaders. Working collaboratively with a wide range of partners, our aim is to improve outcomes for young Londoners who are living in disadvantaged circumstances.

The network brings together school leaders from across London, providing them with three things:

1. Better understanding of the challenges they face in their particular contexts.
2. An enhanced ability to find innovative and context-responsive solutions to these challenges.
3. The opportunity to share knowledge and expertise with peers in a way that facilitates mutual learning.

Our **Knowledge Hub** contributes to the shared knowledge base about education in London, providing deeper understanding of key issues affecting schools in the capital and ensuring good practice is identified and understood so that it can be emulated.

Our **Headteacher Network** supports and facilitates cooperation and collaboration between school leaders in the capital, providing mutual support and helping ensure that knowledge, understanding and practitioner expertise is effectively moved around the system.

Our **Innovation Lab** helps headteachers to find practical solutions to current challenges facing their schools, in order to improve educational outcomes for young Londoners, with a particular focus on those children and young people who are experiencing disadvantaged and vulnerable circumstances.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the ways in which London schools respond to the unique opportunities and challenges that exist in their local settings, with a focus on the transformational impact of context-responsive school leadership.

This type of leadership involves school leaders:

- understanding the needs of pupils and their families;
- determining which strategies and approaches are most appropriate in a particular context;
- taking action to address key issues and evaluating the impact;
- working in partnership with families, community groups, local authorities and other organisations, to maximise their ability to address disadvantage together.

Through this approach, schools are able to achieve excellence, overcome disadvantage and transform life chances for children and young people.

Previous research, including Reconnect London's report 'London Learners, London Lives,' has emphasised the need for collaboration between schools, families and communities to address the underlying causes of disadvantage. This report, 'London Leaders: Beyond the Classroom,' examines how schools are using context-responsive leadership to mitigate the impact of disadvantage. The report includes nine case studies of London schools that are succeeding in their particular contexts and explores some of the strategies they have put into place to make this possible.

The report identifies four key features of context-responsive leadership:

Commitment to achieving excellence for all pupils and to promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and social cohesion	Deep knowledge of the local context, including the circumstances in which children, young people and families are living
Context-responsive leadership	
Expert understanding of strategies that improve outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children	The ability to change and adapt leadership practices so that they are relevant for particular contexts

In addition to the case studies, the report draws on relevant literature to provide a broader understanding of the role of context-responsive leadership in education. It concludes with reflections learned from the case studies in relation to:

1. The importance of context-responsive leadership
2. The importance of partnership
3. Leadership development

Overall, the report emphasises the importance of school leaders developing deep knowledge of the communities they serve and using this knowledge to effectively respond to the needs of children and young people. The report argues that this is particularly important for schools serving communities who are experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. By taking a context-responsive approach, schools can have a significant impact on the well-being and success of their pupils and the wider community.

INTRODUCTION

This report examines the work which is done by London schools to respond to the particular opportunities and challenges that exist within their local contexts. The report argues that, as well as understanding the 'science of learning' and being able to solve complex educational problems, school leaders must also develop deep knowledge of the places and communities in which they are working, so that they can respond effectively to the needs of the children and young people they serve. This includes providing support for pupils' social and emotional development, forming partnerships with families and community organisations, cooperating with local authorities and helping children and families who are living in poverty.

Our previous report, 'London Learners, London Lives'[1], examined the impact of disadvantage on children and young people in the capital. It described some of the barriers facing young Londoners and the extent to which these have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It also highlighted some of the many schools and trusts in London who are successfully overcoming disadvantage and achieving excellent outcomes for children in their contexts. The report's recommendations focused on addressing the underlying causes of disadvantage, for example by providing economic support to the families of children living in poverty. We also recommended a greater emphasis by policymakers on collaboration between schools, families and communities, and the need for more research into models that work in relation to school-family-community collaboration.

This report, 'London Leaders: Beyond the Classroom', explores how schools achieve excellent outcomes for pupils through context-responsive leadership, with a particular emphasis on how schools work in partnership with others. This is an important area of study because the knowledge-base relating to this aspect of schools' work is less well developed than that relating to classroom practice. This is understandably the case, since the 'core business' of schools is the education of children by teachers within classrooms. There is, however, increasing awareness of the wider work of schools and the crucial role of this type of work in supporting children living in disadvantaged circumstances. This grew substantially during the Covid-19 pandemic, given the impact of enforced school closures on children's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health[2].

As well as exploring relevant literature, this report includes a series of descriptive case studies, providing examples of how the headteachers of some London schools are successfully responding to the opportunities and challenges that are present in their contexts. These case studies are drawn from schools in London, because that is where our network is based, but many of the contextual factors affecting the case study schools are also found in other parts of the UK. These examples of effective practice are also, therefore, relevant to school leaders in a wide range of different contexts.

This report contributes to the existing knowledge-base about effective school leadership, by giving insight into three things:

1. The importance of context-responsive leadership, particularly for schools working with children and young people who are experiencing disadvantage.
2. The types of context-responsive work which some school leaders are undertaking and the impact this has on their schools and the communities they serve.
3. The key factors which enable headteachers to be successful in undertaking effective context-responsive leadership, and how these might be further developed and supported.

We hope the report will be relevant to those interested in effective school leadership, context-responsive leadership and place-based change, including practitioners and policy-makers.

One finding from our previous report was that young people living in poverty often do not see themselves as 'disadvantaged', because they benefit from other advantages such as rich family resources and community support. We are conscious that labelling can lead to deficit models and stereotypes, which reinforces existing inequalities. We are also conscious that categorising pupils as 'disadvantaged' can be self-reinforcing, if it affects their self-perceptions or the perceptions of teachers and school leaders.

In this report, we have used the term 'experiencing disadvantage' as a way of trying to avoid this kind of negative labelling. In our description of schools' work with families and communities, we have also tried to avoid a deficit model and to emphasise the extent to which the success of this work is premised on the principles of mutuality and reciprocity.

The report ends with some reflections about how our understanding of context-responsive provision has developed as a result of examining the work of the case study schools, and how this might be helpful for current and future school leaders in London and elsewhere. It also sets out our intention to undertake a series of follow-up reports, including an examination of the work which is being done by schools in London to address learning loss following the pandemic.

The importance of context

Drawing on theories of place-based change[3], this report argues that the distinctive characteristics of a place, and the people living in it, are a key factor in determining the needs of the children and young people who attend school in that place. These characteristics should, therefore, be taken into account when school leaders are designing and implementing policies and strategies.

Key characteristics of London which affect the work of schools include:

- access to rich cultural heritage and resources;
- proximity to world-leading universities and research institutions;
- social, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity;
- significant levels of population mobility;
- ongoing demographic change as a result of inward and outward migration;
- extremes of wealth and poverty;
- social and economic inequality.

Within this context, London schools have achieved significant success in recent years, both in terms of raising the achievement of all pupils and in closing achievement gaps. The 'London effect' has been the subject of several previous studies, which have sought to identify the key factors determining the differences in achievement between London schools and those outside the capital[4]. There has also been ongoing discussion about the extent to which it is possible, or desirable, to try to replicate the success of London schools in other cities[5]. A key factor which has not been sufficiently explored, however, is the extent to which the success of London schools is a result of their responsiveness to the unique characteristics of the places in which they are located and the communities they serve.

This is important because previous literature has not sufficiently considered the interaction between contextual factors and the work of London schools. Burgess (2014) identifies ethnicity as a key factor in the success of London schools, pointing to research that recent migrants tend to have high levels of ambition, aspiration and work ethic[6] and arguing that 'the basis for (London schools') success lies more with pupils and parents than it does with policy-makers'[7]. In a similar way, Ross et al (2020) argue that the presence of large numbers of relatively high-performing ethnic groups, such as Black African and Bangladeshi pupils, is a key contributor to the success of London schools. These studies do not, however, acknowledge the role which might be played by schools in the creation of these 'advantage' factors.

As our previous report identified[8], there are some factors which were previously seen as creating additional challenges for schools which are now perceived to be an explanation for schools' success. This includes the example of Bangladeshi pupils, who were depicted as a 'problem' for London schools in the 1980s and 1990s[9] but who are now often seen as a high-performing group whose presence is likely to lead to a school achieving positive outcomes.

In a similar way, the presence of large numbers of pupils who speak languages other than English at home was previously seen as a challenge for schools but is now often seen as an advantage. These examples highlight the limitations of statistical analyses and the importance of delving deeper into the dynamic interactions between schools, pupils and local communities.

This report makes the case that the success of London schools may, to some extent, be attributable to the way in which London headteachers have been able to effectively employ strategies and approaches that are adapted to the specific needs of their particular school contexts. The case studies presented in the report describe how effective context-responsive leadership is a key characteristic of the work of some successful London headteachers. By responding to the distinctive strengths, needs and challenges of pupils and local communities, these schools are able to ensure that all pupils can succeed regardless of their individual characteristics. As a result, they are able to transform challenges into opportunities, helping pupils to realise their potential, achieve excellent outcomes and progress to positive destinations.

These case studies describe a small number of examples and are not designed to be representative or generalisable. They are, nonetheless, important in terms of the insight they provide. They are not presented as special or unusual cases, but as examples which reflect the kind of work which is being done by many school leaders, in many schools, in many different local contexts. The role of school leaders in shaping local contexts and communities has not, however, been the subject of a significant amount of recent research. We argue that further research is needed in this area, particularly in relation to evaluating the impact of context-responsive leadership and assessing its potential to make a positive difference to schools and communities across the UK.

Structure of the report

The first section of the report explores existing literature relating to school leadership, with a particular focus on research relating to the impact of school leaders' wider work outside the classroom. We have primarily examined literature from the UK, while also drawing on international studies which are relevant to the London context, including those from other 'global cities'.

The second half of the report explores key features of the London context, alongside a series of case studies. Each of the nine case studies describes how one school has put into place particular strategies and approaches to respond to the unique opportunities and challenges that are significant in their contexts in order to achieve excellent outcomes for pupils. The case studies do not attempt to give a full account of context-responsive leadership in London schools. Instead, they provide detailed insight into the work of a small number of schools that are achieving success and transforming outcomes for children and young people in their particular contexts.

Methodology

The literature review was conducted by Sarah Bibi, an academic researcher who is employed by Reconnect London for this purpose. She started by conducting a wide search of the relevant literature, identifying key pieces of research relating to the leadership challenges faced by London headteachers, as well as literature relating to key features of the London context.

The second half of the report examines key features of the London context, focusing particularly on diversity, poverty and social mobility. Nine case studies are provided, setting out how headteachers have put into place particular strategies and approaches in response to their local contexts. The case studies do not explore in detail the schools' success in relation to teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum, since these things are already well documented in a variety of other ways. Instead, the focus is on the schools' wider leadership of work which goes beyond the classroom and, often, beyond the school gates. This includes mental health and wellbeing provision, support for children living in poverty and the provision of extra-curricular activities and enrichment. It also includes partnership and collaboration with local authorities, universities, charities, businesses, arts organisations and others.

The case studies are not designed to be representative, but to provide detailed insight into a small number of examples, attending carefully to their specific contexts. The case studies include references to patterns and trends in the data where these are particularly relevant, but do not attempt to generalise or to apply findings to other contexts.

The case studies are drawn from schools whose headteachers chose to share examples of their work with Reconnect London after we put out a call for case studies in September/October 2022. Some, though not all, of the case study schools are active members of the Reconnect London network. Most of the case studies, which include both primary and secondary schools, are part of multi-academy trusts; one is a single academy trust and one is a voluntary aided school. All of the case study schools achieve above average outcomes for pupils and all have been graded at least 'Good' by Ofsted. Further details about each of the case study schools are included in the relevant sections of the report.

SECTION 1
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT

1.1 The impact of effective school leadership

Gathering data about the wider impact of school leaders' work beyond the classroom and their impact in particular local contexts can be challenging, because these activities tend not to be formally tracked or evaluated in standardised ways. There is a substantial body of literature about the impact of school leadership, which provides strong evidence that effective leadership is a key factor in explaining variations in pupil outcomes between schools[10]. This focuses predominantly on the impact of school leaders on measurable pupil outcomes, such as examination results. It is more difficult to ascertain the process through which school leaders make a difference to wider pupil outcomes, including social and emotional development, physical and psychological wellbeing, positive social mobility and community cohesion.

It is, nonetheless, important to find ways of gaining a deeper understanding of these aspects of schools' work, in order to:

- gain a better appreciation of the impact of the work school leaders are undertaking;
- identify existing good practice and the features which make it effective;
- determine how best to sustain and build on existing models of success.

1.2 Different types of school leadership

Despite a wealth of literature, there is no consensus about the way in which school leadership affects wider student outcomes, or the types of school leadership which are most likely to be effective in specific contexts. Leithwood et al (2004) examine different types of school leadership and their impact on student learning, defining four different types of leadership: instructional, managerial, transformational and distributive. Instructional leadership is identified as having the strongest positive impact on student achievement, defined in terms of outcomes in standardised tests. Like the majority of school leadership research, Leithwood et al's study focuses on the relationship between school leadership and student achievement, rather than considering a wider range of student outcomes, although they do highlight the importance of considering context.

In his review of relevant research, Hallinger (2010) refers to 'transformational leadership', 'distributed leadership' and 'shared leadership' choosing to focus on 'leadership for learning' and how this affects school outcomes. Hallinger's research suggests that the interaction between school leadership and student outcomes is complex and dependent on a variety of contextual factors. He also identifies a need for further research into the specific

leadership practices which are most effective in different contexts, arguing that it is important for future studies to find ways of describing successful leadership practices across different settings.

When making the link between school improvement and school effectiveness, Saunders and Stockton (2005) discuss organisational socialisation as a crucial process for leaders to undertake. They break this process into two components, the first being the process of 'technical' learning, i.e. learning about the skills, resources and knowledge bases of their schools, and the second being 'moral' development, i.e. developing the values, vision and standards that are conducive to school improvement and school effectiveness. Saunders and Stockton argue that it is through these twin processes that school improvement can become systematic and embedded for school leaders, rather than being invoked at intervals or crisis periods.

Bush and Glover (2014), meanwhile, describe nine distinct school leadership approaches including 'instructional', 'transformational', 'moral', 'distributed' and 'system' leadership. They conclude that the most successful leaders are those who can incorporate all of these approaches into their practice. Bush and Glover's analysis emphasises that, since school leadership is not monolithic, it is not helpful for leaders to try to emulate one single approach. Instead, leaders must draw on multiple aspects of different leadership styles based on the tasks and the contexts with which they are faced. School leadership involves a wide range of responsibilities and challenges; leaders therefore need to adopt different styles, strategies and approaches in order to meet these challenges effectively.

1.3 Distributed leadership and disadvantage

There is some consensus in the literature that distributed leadership may be a useful approach for schools serving disadvantaged communities. Bush and Glover (2012) suggest that distributed leadership can be particularly effective in disadvantaged contexts where there are various stakeholders with different needs and priorities. They identify specific factors which help leaders to embed distributed leadership, including role clarity and a clear understanding of the school's vision and values, as well as an unrelenting commitment to improvement and achievement. Bush and Glover cite research which shows that schools with high levels of distributed leadership had significantly higher student achievement than those with lower levels. In addition, they found that distributed leadership was associated with other positive outcomes for students, including increased motivation and engagement and improved attendance.

MacBeath (2005), meanwhile, argues that distributed leadership can lead to better outcomes for pupils living in disadvantaged circumstances. He defines a three-stage process of headship, connecting the consequential processes of 'learning', 'developing' and 'evaluating'. Macbeath also highlights the importance of organisational socialisation, the process through which school leaders learn about their school contexts and respond accordingly, describing a type of distributed leadership which is 'pragmatic' but also 'cultural', 'strategic' and 'incremental'[11]. While emphasising the importance of school leaders learning about the schools in which they are working and adapting approaches to the needs of their schools, Macbeath does not focus specifically on the engagement of school leaders with the wider context, or their responsiveness to local communities.

Harris (2004) explores the extent to which distributed leadership can provide school leaders with 'multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture'[12]. Harris argues that collaboration and collegiality are at the core of distributed leadership, and that its effectiveness is secured if school leaders are able to create conditions of collaborative and reciprocal learning and development amongst leaders and staff. This is supported by the findings of Hoppey and McLeskey (2013), whose case study analysis of a headteacher's practice in a successful inclusive school found that the most effective strategy was investment into teacher development and leadership, as well as coaching and nurturing staff so that they were able to take on leadership roles.

Gümüş et al's (2021) review of international research on school leadership for social justice, equity and diversity argues that education can play a substantial role in reducing inequality. They argue that inequality cannot be challenged effectively by school leaders without them having a deep contextual understanding of the challenges young people and their families face, whether that be food insecurity, discrimination, language deficits or low-income employment. When looking at successful social justice leaders, Gümüş et al's research found that the most effective practices were related to effective pedagogy, supportive relationships amongst staff and partnerships with local communities. This highlights how crucial it is for school leaders who work in disadvantaged communities to develop a clear understanding of the specific challenges faced by pupils and their families, so they can use this to guide their leadership and ensure it is able to have a positive impact.

1.4 Leadership of place

Riley (2013) has developed the concept of 'leadership of place' to refer to the idea that leaders have a responsibility to guide and shape the direction and development of a particular location or community. This can involve working with local stakeholders to address the needs and goals of the community, and developing strategies and initiatives to address these needs and achieve these goals. In this way, schools can harness the resources of pupils and communities and, at the same time, make a positive contribution to those communities.

Lupton (2006) emphasises the importance of interrogating the notion of 'place' in relation to discussions about educational inequality and its relationship with social mobility. While emphasising that schools should not be expected to address poverty alone, she argues that schools can affect educational outcomes and that efforts should therefore be made to maximise the potential for them to do so, for example by equalising the quality of schooling across neighbourhoods, in order to reduce gaps in educational outcomes.

Gingrich and Ansell (2014) explore the case of richer neighbourhoods having better schools. They state that it is not only that schools in richer neighbourhoods generate higher academic performances, enjoy greater autonomy and have more resources, but also that schools in poorer neighbourhoods have more stubborn and systemic challenges of poverty to overcome. This highlights the impact of wealth disparity and socio-economic inequality, emphasising the extent to which schools in poorer areas face greater challenges to achieve outcomes.

1.5 The importance of professional networks, partnership and collaboration

Threaded through the literature about effective school leadership is an emphasis on shared responsibility, partnership and collaboration. This may, in part, be the result of growing awareness of the increasingly complex nature of school leadership, with duties and responsibilities that stretch leaders beyond their individual capacities. As a result, it has become increasingly important for school leaders to collaborate with each other through various kinds of networks, groups, associations and partnerships (NCSL, 2012).

Saunders and Stockton (2005), examining the experience of newly appointed headteachers, emphasise the challenging and stressful nature of the transition into headship. They highlight the importance of effective professional development and collaborative networks for new headteachers, to ensure they are well-prepared and well-supported. The headteachers interviewed by Saunders and Stockton came from a range of schools, including some who were leading schools in disadvantaged areas. Their research suggests that the transition into headship may be particularly challenging for headteachers in disadvantaged schools and that they may, therefore, particularly benefit from supportive professional networks.

Huang et al's (2012) study examined the factors which contribute to the effectiveness of leadership development programmes for urban school leaders. They found that two of the most cited benefits by trainees were access to high-quality, expert support and guidance and effective reflective practice. Their research suggests that leadership development programmes may be more effective when they take into account the broader organisational and community context in which the leaders will be working, and when they incorporate elements of cultural competency and community engagement.

Edge (2017) suggests that the need to collaborate is particularly strong in global city contexts. Her research examines three global cities, London, Toronto and New York, identifying specific factors that are seen to be priorities for the young leaders in each context. This includes investing in staff and taking every opportunity to build relationships, to strengthen collaborative leadership and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Edge's findings reveal how challenging the leaders in the study find their roles, and highlights the danger of leadership burnout, as leaders find their professional roles incompatible with fulfilling personal lives. As a coping mechanism, they reach out and lean on others; Edge argues that it is crucial to put into place support through professional networks, to ensure help is there when needed and therefore avoid this problem arising.

1.6 The emergence of system leadership

The most significant structural change within the UK education system within recent years has been the advent of academies and multi-academy trusts. This has led to the emergence of a new type of system leadership, with increasing numbers of leadership roles involving professionals working within or across different schools. Hallinger (2018) argues that this has fundamentally changed the way in which school leadership is understood and performed in Britain. It could be argued that membership of a multi-academy trust will inevitably lead schools to be less focused on their immediate local contexts and less responsive to the needs of local communities. On the other hand, it is possible to make the case for multi-academy trusts as a new type of civic institution which can make a significant positive contribution to society.

Simon (2015) describes how the policy of academisation has resulted in a structural change to the educational landscape that has allowed system leadership to take form and be observed across the country. Simon argues that two key benefits of system leadership are increased collaboration and the active involvement of community partners. This, he believes, when taken together with other benefits, demonstrates that system leadership can improve schools and pupil outcomes. Embedded within Simon's findings is an acknowledgement that schools cannot make all the difference on their own; the concept of cross-sector collaboration is also key and should be included whenever we talk about system leadership.

From the case studies analysed by Constantinides (2021), it is clear that academisation, and the introduction of multi-academy trusts, has considerably changed the roles, responsibilities and remits of school leaders. Constantinides' findings highlight a tension between trust-level accountability and the responsiveness of schools to local contexts. One key finding was that, even though each academy within a trust is theoretically part of the same entity, they diversify their practices and procedures to respond to the needs of their pupils, communities and individual contexts. This raises questions about the impact of trust-wide vision and values; if different schools are based in different contexts, it may be difficult for them to share the same vision and values as other schools within the same trust which are located in different contexts.

There is not yet much research about how leaders are able to reconcile the potential conflict between trust-level standardisation and the need to be responsive to particular local contexts. There has, to date, been a greater focus on the role of trusts in relation to traditional conceptions of school improvement, which tend to focus predominantly on measurable outcomes such as examination results and inspection grades. The NAHT's (2020) report on school improvement[13] argues for a shift in approach with a greater emphasis on continuous improvement and collaboration between schools. NAHT's report also highlights the importance of addressing issues which are beyond the control of schools, such as health, housing and the role of communities in improving the life chances of young people.

ASCL's (2021) 'Blueprint for a Fairer Education System', meanwhile, emphasises the importance of an ongoing focus on addressing the disadvantage gap, in light of the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged groups. It asks how, as we emerge from the pandemic, the education system can best ensure that our most disadvantaged children and young people can thrive, arguing that this is not only intrinsically fair but in the best interests of everyone in society, since 'we are all worse off when talented people are unable to reach their potential'[14]. The report does not explore in depth the impact of school leaders on wider student outcomes, but does recommend the introduction of new accountability measures for schools, to take account of the different contexts in which schools are operating and the needs of those contexts.

The Confederation of School Trusts (CST)[15] has developed a vision for the role of 'school trusts' which emphasises the potential for multi-academy trusts to have a positive impact on the school system and wider society[16]. Cruddas identifies three key aspects of the leadership work that is done by academy trusts: trust leadership, civic leadership and system leadership. The concept of multi-academy trusts as 'civic leaders' has been further developed in follow-up papers, which have also explored the idea of trusts acting as 'anchor institutions'[17]. Central to the vision of CST is the belief that school trusts, in collaboration with other organisations, can have a positive impact on children and young people who are experiencing disadvantage, thus making 'a strategic contribution to the greater common good'[18].

1.7 Towards a definition of context-responsive leadership

Hallinger's (2010) review of the link between school leadership, pupil learning, outcomes and school improvement makes the case for different leadership styles being employed based on 'situational' (contextual) factors. Hallinger concludes that a key priority for research should be to develop greater understanding of how school environments shape leadership practice, and how leadership is exercised within different contexts.

Examining the importance of context more closely, Hallinger (2018) focused on the substantial influence of different types of contexts, arguing that a headteacher's ability to adapt their practices so that they are effective for their sociological, cultural and economic contexts leads to greater success in terms of pupil outcomes. What is particularly useful about Hallinger's work is his delineation of 'context' into distinct strands which include 'district context', 'community context', 'institutional context', 'national cultural

context' and 'economic context'[19]. This offers a clearer understanding of the multidimensional nature of context and the factors that leaders should consider when they are learning about their school contexts.

Leithwood, Patten and Jantzi (2010) apply a different framework to define context-responsive leadership. They argue that school leaders can influence pupil learning and outcomes through four pathways. The 'relational' pathway is based on how school staff understand and connect curriculum, teaching and learning; 'emotions' includes staff responses, feelings and perspectives on school-related matters; the 'organisational' pathway concerns itself with the impact and influence of a school's structural features including policies, cultures and hierarchies; and the 'family' pathway focuses on family-related factors that can affect pupil outcomes. Leithwood, Patten and Jantzi argue that the role of leaders is to identify, 'in both a contextually sensitive and research-informed way'[20], the variables on each path which are most likely to improve pupils' learning. Once they have done this, they can engage in improvement work over time focused on these particular variables. This suggests that there are different types of contextual knowledge which school leaders must develop, and also an imperative for leadership responses to be focused directly on key factors which are most likely to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of pupils.

Day, Gu and Sammons's (2016) analysis of twenty case studies of English primary and secondary schools reveals a number of context-responsive strategies that were being applied by headteachers. They highlight the extent to which the measurement of pupil success should go beyond academic grades and include broader educational purposes such as social and communication skills and wellbeing. Headteachers in the case study schools shared a number of common values and traits including openness, fairness and clarity of vision. They were seen to prioritise building and sustaining relationships of trust, internally and externally, and to have developed leadership skills and capabilities in staff through the distribution of responsibility and accountability. There was also an emphasis on creating opportunities for learning and development for staff and pupils and the effective use of evidence and data in dynamic ways to inform school improvement strategy.

Day, Gu and Sammons theorise that the most successful leaders are attuned to their contexts, and are therefore able to judge carefully which leadership strategies are most effective in the context in which they find themselves. Day, Gu and Sammons also state that 'success, then, seems to be built through the synergistic effects of the combination and accumulation of a number of strategies that are related to the principals' judgments about what works in their particular school context'[21].

1.8 Context-responsive leadership and place-based change

As well as existing educational research, our conception of context-responsive school leadership also draws on theories of place-based change, such as those outlined by Renaisi[22]. The goal of place-based change is to drive sustainable, long-term improvements within communities, through a holistic, integrated and assets-based approach which foregrounds the importance of equity and stakeholder voice.

There are not yet many organisations within the UK that are putting into place the principles of place-based change within education. Examples of those who draw on these concepts include Right to Succeed[23], the West London Zone[24] and Reach Feltham[25]. Each of these organisations is demonstrating, in slightly different ways, the importance of school leaders being responsive to their particular contexts. Emerging data[26] suggests that this can lead to significantly improved outcomes for young people living in disadvantaged communities.

Central to the concept of context-responsive school leadership is the idea that headteachers should develop a sophisticated, coherent and in-depth understanding of the specific context of their school and then use this to guide their vision, decision-making and practice. This allows them to refine their focus and direct their efforts to enhance identified strengths and address challenges. In this way, school leaders are able to deal effectively with the issues their pupils, staff and communities are experiencing. Rather than a generic or one-size-fits-all approach, context-responsive leadership is about adaptive and responsive practice.

The following section of the report sets out in detail key features of the London context and their importance in relation to shaping the work of school leaders in the capital.

SECTION 2
THE LONDON CONTEXT

London, as the capital of the UK, has a central role in the nation's political, social, economic and financial life. It is also a major global city which is home to many of the world's largest financial institutions and a hub for international business and trade. London is a vibrant, creative, cosmopolitan and influential city with a rich history and a diverse range of cultural influences. London has a highly mobile population, with continuous demographic change as a result of inward and outward migration. Amongst 9 million residents, more than 300 languages are spoken and, according to the 2021 Census, more than a third of Londoners were born overseas[27].

London is also a place of socio-economic inequality. In what has been described as a 'patchwork of deprivation'[28], neighbourhoods of different deciles are pushed up closely next to each other and extremes of wealth and poverty co-exist side by side, often on the same street or even in the same building. There are significant differences between inner and outer London boroughs and between the east and west of the city. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the extent of poverty and inequality within the city was both exposed and exacerbated, with those living in the most disadvantaged circumstances by far the most adversely affected[29].

London has:

- About 9 million people (14% of total UK population)
- About 1.4 million children (20% of children in the UK)
- 1.15 million children in state-funded primary and secondary schools
- 3,250 schools (15% independent, 85% state-funded)
  - 1,798 state-funded primaries (10.7% of English primaries)
  - 518 state-funded secondaries (14.9% of English secondaries)
- 32 local authorities (12 inner and 20 outer) plus the City of London
- About 150 multi-academy trusts (and some single academy trusts)

In this context, school leaders face numerous challenges and opportunities. They must create a sense of belonging and cohesion amongst diverse communities, fostering a sense of stability and security amidst high levels of diversity and pupil mobility. They must ensure that children living in poverty are able to thrive, despite the material deprivation they may be experiencing outside of school. They must harness the linguistic skills and cultural knowledge of those pupils who speak a language other than English at home. They must constantly learn about the local area, the needs of families who join the school, or who travel in from other parts of the city, always seeking to overcome barriers to achievement and to do their best to enable all children to achieve excellence and ensure they are able to realise their full potential.

School leaders in London benefit from the city's abundant cultural and artistic heritage, which has the potential to significantly enrich the lives of young Londoners. This heritage is not, however, always easily accessible and schools must work to open up opportunities to all young people. They must also navigate the tension inherent in the reality that London's cultural heritage, like its diversity, is inextricably intertwined with the British Empire and its history of colonisation and slavery. In recent years, awareness of this has increased within the UK education system, along with a strengthened commitment to challenging prejudice and discrimination and foregrounding equity, inclusion and anti-racist practices.

London is known for being a liberal, open-minded and progressive city, with a long history of welcoming migrants and celebrating the diversity of their cultures, lifestyles and beliefs. It is also home to a wide range of organisations and communities that promote social justice and equality and has a long-standing tradition as a centre of political activism. There are tensions and divisions, however, both within and between different communities. In recent years, far-right political parties have continued to gain seats, particularly in outer London boroughs. The city was also deeply affected by a series of terrorist attacks linked to Islamist extremism between 2005 and 2019, leading some people to feel less safe and to question the city's openness and inclusivity. In this context, it is crucial that school leaders are able to contribute to community cohesion and combat polarisation and social division.

This report explores some of the ways in which headteachers in London are responding to the opportunities and challenges faced by children and young people in the particular contexts in which they are working, all of which are shaped by the wider London context. The next section explores in more detail three key aspects of this context: poverty, diversity and social mobility.

SECTION 2.1 POVERTY

Child poverty in London

Child poverty continues to be one of the most significant and fastest growing issues facing schools in the UK. There are an estimated 3.9 million children across the country living in poverty, which equates to a child poverty rate of 27%[30]. London has the second-highest overall child poverty rate of any region, at 35%, with the rates in some London boroughs above 50%[31]. This means that, in some London schools, more than half of the children in every class are experiencing child poverty. The situation has been exacerbated by Covid-19, with many children and families adversely affected by the pandemic, leading to increases in the number of children living in poverty, not only in the UK but around the world[32]. Poverty in London has a 'doughnut' distribution, with wealthier areas in the outer suburbs, though there are pockets of deprivation in both inner and outer London. In all London boroughs, the high cost of housing makes a significant difference, with the percentage of children living in poverty rising substantially once housing costs are taken into account[33]. This, in turn, contributes to the high proportion of poor families in London who are experiencing 'deep' or 'persistent' poverty[34].

There is a significant concentration of child poverty in east and south east London, with more than 50% of children in Tower Hamlets and more than 40% of children in Barking and Dagenham, Hackney, Newham and Waltham Forest living in poverty in 2020-21[35]. In Greenwich, where our first case study school is located, the child poverty rate is estimated to be 42%. The schools in these areas, nonetheless, have some of the best pupil outcomes and the smallest disadvantage gaps. It is therefore important to learn more about how this has been achieved, and to examine the approaches that schools have put into place to support children and young people who are experiencing disadvantage.

The impact of child poverty

Research by the Child Poverty Action Group[36] highlights some of the ways in which children and young people are affected by the experience of living in poverty, including:

- increased likelihood of experiencing physical and mental health problems;
- more likely to live in overcrowded or substandard housing;
- less likely to find it easy to concentrate and learn in school;
- more likely to experience poor nutrition;
- reduced access to extra-curricular activities and enrichment;
- increased likelihood of having low self-esteem and self-belief.

More recent research carried out by Teacher Tapp for the Sutton Trust revealed that increasing numbers of teachers in England are seeing pupils coming to school hungry and without warm clothing[37]. This highlights the direct impact of poverty on children's ability to learn in school, with teachers reporting children being tired and unable to concentrate in lessons, as a result of the financial pressures affecting them at home. This inevitably means that many children living in poverty are not able to access the curriculum, learn effectively or fully participate in school life.

It is clear that, despite considerable focus on the issue by educators and policy-makers, the disadvantage gap remains a significant issue. There is also growing evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on children living in poverty. Our previous report, 'London Learners, London Lives', examined the impact of poverty on young Londoners and the extent to which this continues to be a key factor in determining educational outcomes. Tuckett et al (2022) found that the disadvantage gap in GCSE grades widened by 0.10 grades (or 8%) in 2021, with disadvantaged pupils around 1.34 grades behind their peers on average. This marks the largest annual increase in the disadvantage gap since 2011 and suggests that the pandemic had a greater impact on the learning of disadvantaged pupils. Tuckett et al, like others, recommend continuing to support education recovery as a priority for policy-makers, with a focus on supporting those who have been the most adversely affected by the pandemic.

The role of schools in addressing poverty and inequality

While schools cannot address the problem single-handedly, it is clear that school leaders do have the power to achieve improved outcomes for the poorest pupils. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was increased awareness about the extent to which schools can make a positive difference to children and young people who are living in disadvantaged circumstances. In many

cases, schools are already making a significant difference, often through working in partnership with pupils, families and communities.

The majority of research in this area in the last decade has focused on evaluating schools' use of the pupil premium to improve outcomes for pupils who are eligible for this additional funding. Macleod et al (2015), for example, identified a large number of strategies being used by schools to try to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. They found a significant amount of variance between schools, with the most successful focused on improving the quality of teaching as well as addressing attendance and behaviour. They also found that more successful schools tended to support pupils' social and emotional needs and improve engagement with families. Like other similar reports, the authors conclude that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to closing the attainment gap, and that a range of tailored measures are needed to meet the needs of each school and its pupils.

> In their guidance for schools about effective use of pupil premium funding, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) recommend a three-pronged strategy focused on:
>
> 1. High quality teaching
> 2. Targeted support
> 3. Wider strategies[38]

The EEF suggest that the third strand, wider strategies, can help with non-academic barriers to success in school including attendance, behaviour and social and emotional support. Given the impact of the pandemic, addressing these barriers is now an even greater focus for schools, alongside their work to improve the quality of classroom practice. The EEF also emphasise the importance of schools giving careful consideration to the strategies that are most likely to be effective in their local contexts. As well as examining the evidence base for the effectiveness of any intervention, it is crucial to consider how appropriate the approach is likely to be for the particular needs of the children and families served by the school.

> Bradley and Howes (2020), in a guidance booklet produced by the Child Poverty Action Group, identify several evidence-based strategies that schools can use to support children living in poverty, including:
>
> • the provision of extended services;
> • reducing the cost of the school day;
> • enhancing the pastoral care that is provided by schools.

Bradley and Howes highlight the importance of schools taking the time to listen to children, young people and families, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the ways in which poverty impacts on them. They also emphasise the importance of schools working in partnership with other local organisations, including community groups and the local authority.

The case study which follows sets out how one primary school in south east London put these principles into practice, through an effective set of strategies to support families living in poverty.

CASE STUDY:
Alderwood Primary School, London Borough of Greenwich

Context

Alderwood Primary School is a one form entry primary school in Greenwich, south east London. The school is part of the Compass Partnership, a multi-academy trust which includes several primary schools and a special school in London and Essex.

The school is located in an area with significantly higher than average levels of social and economic deprivation. At least one third of children in the local area live in poverty, partly as a result of high levels of unemployment combined with high housing costs. More than half of pupils at the school are eligible for free school meals and nearly two thirds are eligible for the pupil premium. A quarter of children speak English as an additional language.

Key strategies

Alderwood's headteacher, Katie Cutajar, has an inclusive vision which emphasises the importance of being responsive to the needs and circumstances of children and their families. One way in which this is realised is through the school's designated specialist provision for children with autism. Having this provision within the school is significant, given the school's size, and means that there are two or three children with complex special educational needs within each class. The inclusion of children with complex needs within the school community helps bring to life an ethos which has at its heart the importance of understanding and empathising with the needs of others.

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To further increase its ability to respond effectively to the needs of the local community, the school recently took part in the Child Poverty Action Group's 'Cost of the School Day' project. This involved a team of researchers working with school staff, children and families to gather detailed intelligence about the impact of poverty and disadvantage. As a result, the school gained new insight into the experiences of the community and has been able to develop new strategies to ensure children and families have the support they need.

A key issue highlighted by parents was the importance of good communication from the school about upcoming activities involving additional costs. Although parents were keen for children to participate in activities such as charity fundraising or school trips, they found it difficult to do so when they did not have advance warning or a good understanding of arrangements. Families with more than one child reported facing a considerable burden of additional costs including regular £1 donations for charity activities and requirements for fancy dress costumes, as well as contributions to school trips.

Awareness of these issues has led the school to be more intentional and strategic in its approach. Staff have created a calendar of events, which goes to parents at the start of the year and gives a clear explanation of not only what will be happening but also how much it is likely to cost and whether the money raised will be for the school or a recognised charity. This helps parents on low incomes to budget effectively, because they are aware of additional costs in advance. Some events or activities have been removed because they did not have clear educational benefit but were, nonetheless, placing additional burdens on families. If additional events have to be added, the school ensures this does not involve any extra costs for families. For example, during the Queen's Jubilee children took part in activities in class involving making red, white and blue decorations, rather than being asked to dress up or bring in additional materials.

School staff have recently instigated a drive to normalise the use of second hand uniform, both to reduce stigma and improve sustainability. This has been strongly supported by the Chair of Governors, who attends uniform sales and purchases second hand uniform for her own children. The school has also started a 'swap shop' for costumes in advance of key events such as World Book Day and Christmas Jumper Day. This has contributed to a school-wide focus on environmental impact and the importance of reducing waste, as well as supporting families who are living in poverty.

The school's family support worker is key to driving forward this agenda and continuously reminds staff about key issues. She has introduced a confidential online form, which parents can use to request uniform items from the school if they are having trouble affording it. Before key events, such as Christmas jumper day, she runs craft workshops where children can make headbands or other accessories to wear on the day, ensuring all can participate regardless of their ability to purchase additional items.

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Another key development has been the setting up of the 'Early Start Café', where the school provides a free breakfast for three mornings a week for any children who want it. This was set up after a realisation that many parents were working in jobs involving shifts or long hours, which required them to leave the house before the start of the school day. Initially targeted at key children with attendance or punctuality problems, the provision is now open to all and is extremely well-attended. Although families are not asked to pay, the school has been inundated with contributions from parents who send in children with loaves of bread and other breakfast items. Significant improvements have been made by children attending the breakfast provision, who now have a more calm and settled start to the day.

Impact

With support from the Compass Partnership, the school has been able to create a calm, focused learning environment where all members of the school community feel a sense of value and belonging. By developing a deeper understanding of the views and perceptions of children and their families, they have been able to adapt provision to better meet everyone's needs.

In 2021, Alderwood was graded 'Good' in all areas by Ofsted, after converting to academy status in 2017; its predecessor school was judged to require improvement.

The school is also now achieving above average outcomes for pupils, including those experiencing disadvantage, and has also seen significant improvements in pupil attendance despite the challenges of the pandemic.

The impact of long-term disadvantage

There is increasing awareness in the UK of the impact of long-term or persistent disadvantage, in light of evidence about the adverse effect of long-term poverty on a wide range of outcomes for children, including school achievement and the disadvantage gap[39]. Persistent disadvantage involves individuals or families experiencing extended periods of poverty, unemployment and other forms of social exclusion. In education, the most common way of examining persistent disadvantage is to analyse experiences and outcomes of those pupils who have been eligible for free school meals for at least 80% of their school lives.

The EPI's report on disadvantage gaps in England (Tuckett et al. 2022) highlights both an increase in persistent poverty amongst disadvantaged pupils and a widening of the gap between those experiencing long-term disadvantage and those with more short-term experience of poverty. This is in the context of widening disadvantage gaps across the system. FFT Education Datalab's (2023) analysis of the long-term impact of persistent disadvantage, meanwhile, finds that those experiencing long-term disadvantage are less likely to achieve level 3 qualifications, to undertake degree level study or go on to positive destinations, and more likely to be in sustained receipt of workless benefits. Their analysis also shows that London has the highest proportion of long-term disadvantaged individuals of any part of the country[40].

The importance of identifying and supporting children who fall into this category is increasingly seen as a key issue for schools. The case study which follows explains the approach that is being taken by one primary school situated in an area with high levels of long-term disadvantage.

CASE STUDY:
Van Gogh Primary School, London Borough of Lambeth

Context

Van Gogh Primary in Lambeth, south London, is located in an area with significantly higher than average levels of socio-economic deprivation. In 2020-21, 26% of households and 39% of children in the local area were living in poverty. The area surrounding the school has some of the highest levels of violence and recorded gang activity in London. Despite this, housing costs are extremely high and there has recently been a rise in evictions and homelessness. These external factors affect children in direct and indirect ways, placing particular demands on the school as it seeks to transform educational outcomes.

The school serves a diverse population, with 16 different nationalities represented within the school community and 42% of pupils speaking English as an additional language. Just under half of children are eligible for free school meals and 53% are eligible for pupil premium funding, more than double the national average.

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Van Gogh began in 2018, as part of the Dunraven Educational Trust (DET), after the predecessor school was judged 'inadequate' and requiring 'special measures' by Ofsted. Key areas identified for improvement included the safeguarding and welfare of pupils, as well as the quality of teaching and learning. Under headteacher, Nadine Bernard, and with the clear support of DET, the school's approach combines academic rigour and high expectations with a recognition of the additional support which many children need. As well as high quality classroom teaching and a broad and balanced curriculum, there is a strong emphasis on nurturing children, teaching them how to demonstrate positive behaviour and rewarding them when they make progress.

Key strategies

At the heart of the school's approach is close partnership working with families and the wider community. The school's family support worker is in daily contact with those facing the most difficult circumstances. She runs weekly sessions on a Friday morning, focused not only on sharing information about what is happening in school but also supporting individual needs such as housing, managing finances, reducing energy costs and other key issues. For the school, this is both about strengthening relationships and building capacity within the local community.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the school faced a significant challenge with a number of children who, after the traumatic circumstances they had experienced, were not ready to return to mainstream classrooms. Rather than excluding them, or moving them into alternative provision, the headteacher established a full-time nurture provision within the main school building. In this way, children were given the time and space they needed to re-adjust to the school environment; all have now been successfully re-integrated into mainstream classrooms.

Up to one third of children in each year group are on the SEN register and the SENCo is therefore a crucial member of staff in the school. Wherever possible, SEN children work in mainstream classrooms with additional support from teaching assistants or adaptive technologies. Personalised approaches are in place to support individuals and the school works closely with outside agencies to ensure all children have the help they need. This includes one child whose family experience is turbulent and who is receiving intensive support to help with the complex emotional and psychological repercussions of this.

Emphasising inclusion does not mean that the school accepts poor behaviour. Instead, staff have been able to establish a calm, purposeful atmosphere by giving children the responsibility to shape their school community in a positive way. A wide range of leadership opportunities are available, not only for the most confident or academically high achieving, but for all children. Each class has two 'learning ambassadors' who greet visitors as they enter the classroom, explaining the topic they are studying and its place within their programme of study. Playground

ambassadors and peer mediators wear high-visibility jackets emblazoned with their role, so that other children can easily see them and seek support if they need it.

The school is intentional about enabling children to build confidence, become more articulate and develop a sense of belonging. Children are encouraged to write letters to their teachers and post them into the red letterbox stationed in the corridor outside the headteacher's office. Once a week, it is emptied and the letters responded to: any concerns are addressed individually, while words of praise or significant achievements are read out in assembly. Postcards and phone-calls home focus on positive recognition of children's progress. When a child does something wrong, they are required to reflect on their actions and the impact. As well as appropriate sanctions, staff focus on reflecting a child's actions back to them and asking them to think about how they can improve in the future.

The school's approach is tailored specifically to the needs of the children and the community it serves, many of whom are facing extremely difficult circumstances in their lives outside of school. Many families live in social housing, often in overcrowded conditions without access to outdoor space. As a result, the school has adopted the 'Outdoor Play and Learning' (OPAL) approach, which emphasises the wide-ranging benefits of outdoor play and learning through nature. They have recently increased the amount of outside space available to children and the type of activities on offer during break times, including a large sandpit, chosen because the headteacher was aware that many children have never been to the seaside.

Impact

Through a context-responsive approach, the school is opening up opportunities that would not otherwise be available to children, and helping them to develop the social, emotional and psychological attributes needed to succeed in the world outside of school. This, in turn, has a positive impact on school attendance, achievement and progression. Everyone who visits Van Gogh Primary comments on the warm, supportive atmosphere and high expectations evident in the school.

The school has attendance rates above national average (95.23% compared with 94%). The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in reading is higher than the national average (81% compared with 59%) and achievement in writing and maths is rising rapidly. There have been no permanent exclusions or suspensions for the past two years. It is still relatively early days for this 'new' school, but the results are already extremely promising.

The link between poverty and mental health

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in children's mental health referrals, amidst evidence that the pandemic has had a wide-ranging negative impact on the wellbeing of children and young people across the UK[41]. Mansfield et al (2022) found that exposure to the pandemic led to high levels of depression and lower levels of life satisfaction. Like other studies, they also found that girls were more adversely affected than boys, which is particularly concerning given the high rates of mental health difficulties that existed amongst adolescent girls before the pandemic.

Since the start of the pandemic, there has also been increased awareness about the extent to which poverty can be both a cause and a consequence of mental health difficulties. Davie (2022) cites evidence of a strong link between increased rates of poverty and inequality and increases in rates of mental health difficulties including depression, serious mental illness and suicide.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, there has been a substantial rise in demand for enhanced levels of mental health and wellbeing support for pupils, which has been challenging for many schools. The case study which follows outlines how one London school has approached this issue.

CASE STUDY:
Ursuline High School, London Borough of Merton

Context

Ursuline High School in Merton, south-west London, is a successful and well-established Catholic school with a very good reputation. As a faith school, it draws from a wide catchment area across south London and therefore serves an extremely diverse and wide-ranging group of pupils. The school achieves above average outcomes at all key stages and has consistently been graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted.

Key strategies

The school works in close partnership with a wide range of local agencies and service providers. Key partners include the local authority, children's social care, the NHS and the police. Provision is multi-layered and involves both school staff and external partners. It is also carefully tailored to meet the needs of pupils. As a result, comprehensive provision is in place to help pupils with their emotional, psychological and wider health needs. The focus is on early identification and intervention, to prevent more serious issues occurring.

Like many girls' schools, it has relatively large numbers of pupils experiencing issues relating to mental health, including anxiety, self-harm and eating disorders. As a result, they have prioritised these areas and the headteacher, Julia Waters, has proactively sought opportunities to further develop and improve the school's provision. For example, they recently took on leadership of the local Mental Health Trailblazer, which has led to a greater understanding of related issues amongst school staff and faster access to additional support for pupils.

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Based within the school's dedicated 'wellbeing centre' is a team of professionals focused solely on pupils' health and wellbeing. This includes a full time social worker, who is based in the school as the result of a partnership agreement with the local authority. A clinical psychologist works to support pupils who have been diagnosed with specific conditions or disorders. She works alongside a mental health lead, a full time wellbeing coordinator, a school counsellor and a care coordinator, who works with those pupils who are under the care of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The school's community police officer also works closely with the wellbeing team and the school's senior leadership team, within the guidelines and ethos of the school.

The school's pastoral team and SENCo work closely with the wellbeing team, to signpost appropriate support and ensure each pupil receives the most appropriate help in a way that is suitable for their particular circumstances. They also deal with day to day pastoral issues such as attendance, which has been a key focus following the Covid-19 pandemic. A comprehensive whole-school attendance strategy, working in partnership with parents, includes daily phone-calls, home visits, letters to parents and a close working relationship with the school's community police officer and the school's social worker, who intervene in more serious cases. As a result of this intensive intervention, attendance is now almost back at pre-pandemic levels and significantly above national average.

There are, nonetheless, some pupils who are not easily able to manage a full day at school, as a result of experiencing particularly acute difficulties with mental health and wellbeing. A small number of pupils each day work within the school's inclusion base, a reintegration programme which prepares vulnerable pupils to rejoin mainstream lessons. In this space, specialist teachers provide a calm, nurturing environment where pupils can complete their schoolwork without the pressure of being in a mainstream classroom. Staff are in daily contact with pupils' families and this helps ensure they are aware of any issues and can respond in appropriate ways.

The school is extremely responsive to the changing needs of its pupils. They are committed to constantly improving provision; a weekly strategic meeting helps the senior leadership team to review policy, impact and strategic direction. This leads to flexible, agile provision which changes when pupils' needs change. For example, after a recent request from pupils, they have set up a racial trauma working group in order to give pupils a safe space to talk about their experience of racism and discrimination. They have also created a 'safe space' group, for learning and discussion about sexuality and gender identity.

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The headteacher is conscious that the school is an extension of the world, and that the things which affect young people outside the school gates also have an impact on them within school. Having in place such comprehensive health and wellbeing provision ensures that pupils are able to come to school every day, safe in the knowledge that, if they are experiencing difficulties, they will quickly be able to access the additional support they need.

Impact

The impact of the school's work to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing contributes to its achievement of a wide range of positive outcomes. The school's Progress 8 score is well above the local and national figure, both for all pupils and for those experiencing disadvantage. After an initial dip in attendance following the pandemic, the school has now succeeded in re-establishing attendance rates that are significantly above national average in all year groups, with no significant attendance gap for disadvantaged pupils.

In 2021, Ofsted inspectors commented:

Leaders are committed to pupils' well-being. A well-qualified team provides excellent support for pupils' mental health. Pupils know they are cared for. Leaders listen to pupils and act on their feedback.

Leaders are knowledgeable about the local risks to their pupils. They work closely with external agencies, including the police, to keep pupils safe. Leaders and carefully selected external partners provide high-quality training to all staff. Staff know how to deal with any concerns about pupils. Leaders make sure that these are recorded and followed up promptly.

Effective partnership between schools and local authorities

It is crucial for schools and local authorities to work closely together, to maximise their ability to understand and effectively meet the needs of local communities. Since the introduction of multi-academy trusts, the role of local authorities has changed and new models of partnership have emerged. The case study that follows describes one such arrangement, involving schools within one particular local authority working together to address disadvantage.

CASE STUDY:
Southgate School, London Borough of Enfield

Context

Southgate School is a large mixed comprehensive school in the London Borough of Enfield, in north London. Approximately 20% of pupils at the school are eligible for free school meals and more than a third speak English as an additional language. The school is part of a multi-academy trust, Middlesex Learning Trust, along with two other local secondary schools. It is a popular and successful school, graded 'good' by Ofsted, which regularly achieves above average outcomes for pupils.

The local area surrounding the school faces some significant challenges. Since 2016, Enfield has gone from being the 12th to the 9th most deprived London borough, with 27% of households living in poverty and one in three children living in poverty. The borough has the busiest police station in London and has recently seen an increase in gang activity and a rise in youth violence. To address these significant challenges, a new partnership between schools and the local authority has been developed, the Enfield Learning Excellence Partnership (ELEP).

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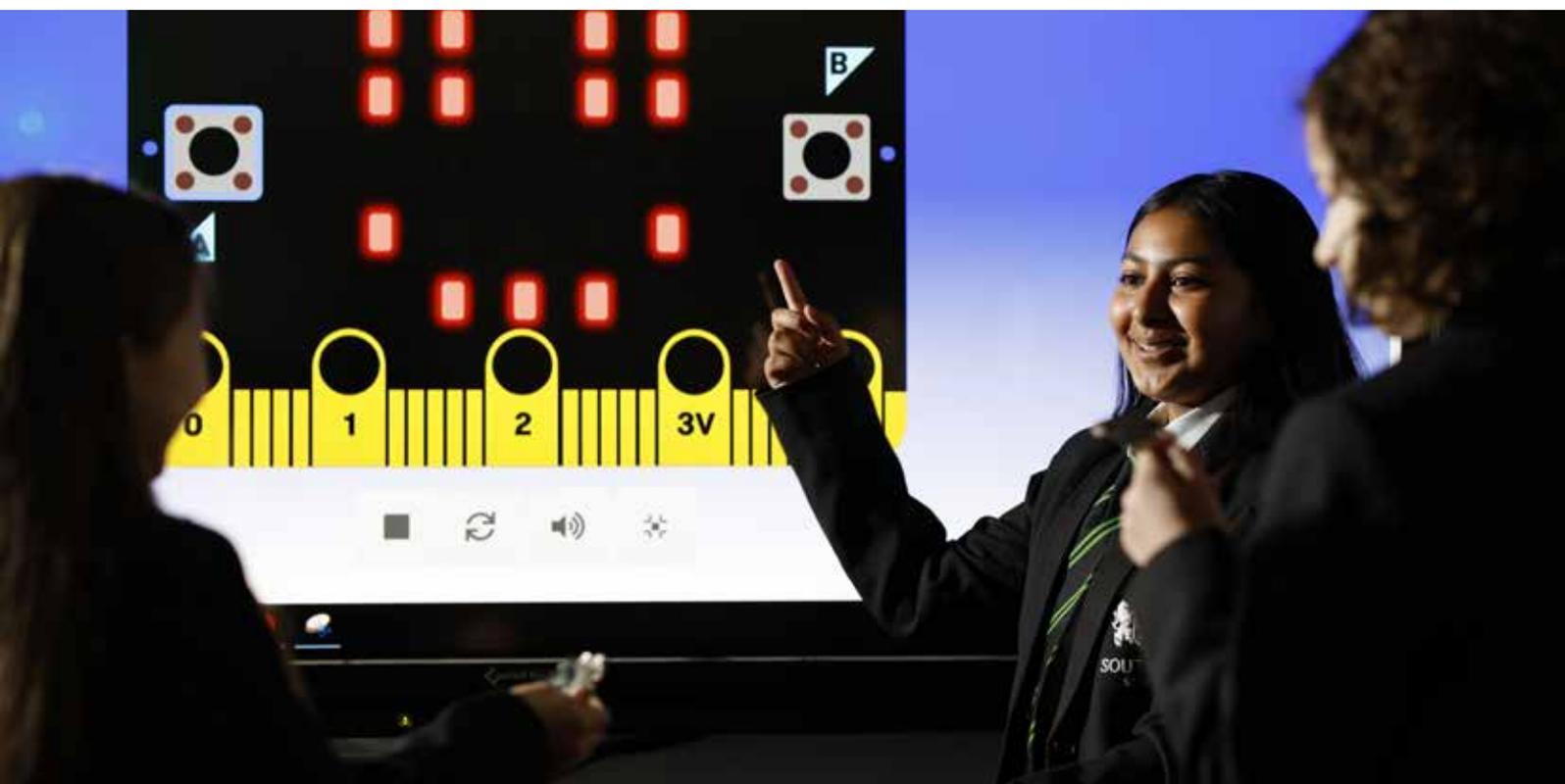
Key strategies

The success of this initiative is a result of determination from both schools and the local authority to work together in ways that improve the life chances of local young people. It includes maintained schools and academies, and there is a particular emphasis on improving outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. To address key issues that are affecting the local community, the partnership aims to create opportunities for mutual learning and the sharing of good practice. It seeks to build expertise and capacity amongst teachers and leaders, through the implementation of high quality evidence-based approaches that can help to overcome educational disadvantage.

The partnership has developed a strategic approach which enables local schools to take a systematic approach to tackling key issues. For example, local schools recently identified a key challenge relating to the under-achievement of boys who are eligible for free school meals. The first step was for the partnership to convene a school leaders' briefing focused on this issue, to which all schools were invited. This was followed by schools undertaking a self-evaluation and a data analysis exercise. Subsequently, the partnership arranged half-day visits to ten schools to examine their work with disadvantaged pupils more closely, with support from an expert in the use of pupil premium funding.

The next phase of the project involved short reports being created for individual schools about their work in this area, including interviews with key personnel. Commonalities from these reports, which included recommendations for further improvements, were published and shared across the partnership. Case studies of good practice were shared at the ELEP meeting and through the Secondary headteachers meeting which has moved to prioritise the sharing of best practice over discussing 'business'. All schools that participated were provided with expert input about key issues, including reflections from other schools who become strategy advocates. Following this initial stage of the project, schools continue to attend ongoing meetings to ensure their work to address this issue continues to move forwards.

Working with school leaders and the local authority in this way, the partnership has been able to build a comprehensive picture of the use and impact of strategies to address disadvantage in the local area. Their aim is to ensure that high quality, evidence-informed practice is codified, shared and understood by teachers and leaders in the local area, in a way that helps them to address disadvantage. Key outcomes of this work include the identification of high quality practice, as well as recommendations for further improvements, for individual schools and the local authority.

Impact

Local schools involved with the ELEP partnership have seen a positive impact on achievement and attendance. Both teachers and leaders have reported increased confidence, as they build the expertise necessary to address key issues which they are increasingly encountering, post-Covid, in their professional contexts. It has been so successful that it is now moving into the third phase of its operation, with plans for further growth into the future.

SECTION 2.2: DIVERSITY

Diversity in London

With a population that includes people from almost every country in the world, London is a place with significant levels of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity as well as economic, social and political variation. This presents both opportunities and challenges for London schools, as they work to support and include children and young people from a wide range of backgrounds, to capitalise on pupils' linguistic and cultural knowledge, and to overcome existing barriers to achievement. The success of London schools in this context is increasingly relevant for headteachers throughout the UK, given the extent to which ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious diversity is rapidly becoming the norm across the country[42].

One of the most significant issues with which schools have had to grapple in recent years is the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage and the intersection of poverty and inequality with issues of ethnicity, religion and race. It is clear that families with black and minority ethnic backgrounds have a much greater risk of being in poverty than others[43] and that, for some children, this has an impact on their achievement at school. There are also, however, many children and young people from families with diverse ethnic heritage who are able to achieve well within London schools and who go on to successful professional destinations.

The diversity of London schools is seen by some as a significant advantage. Burgess (2014) ascribes the success of London schools almost entirely to 'ethnic composition'[44]. The main reason for high levels of achievement in London schools, he argues, is that London has a high proportion of 'high performing' ethnic groups and recent migrants, who have been shown to have higher ambitions and aspirations and a better work ethic than pupils from white British backgrounds[45]. Blanden et al (2015) also highlight the importance of ethnic composition in relation to the improved performance of disadvantaged pupils in London, while acknowledging that this does not fully explain the growth in attainment over time in the capital, relative to other areas of the country.

This research clearly demonstrates that there is a correlation between ethnicity and achievement, and variation between different ethnic groups. The extent to which this is a cause, rather than an effect, of the success of London's schools, however, has not yet been sufficiently explored and requires further exploration. More recent research suggests that the picture is more complex, with Plaister and Thomson (2019) demonstrating that a 'London effect' continues to be evident even when ethnicity is taken into account.

What is clear is that London continues to have an extremely ethnically diverse population, with more than two thirds of pupils identifying as being from an ethnic minority (non-white-British) group[46]. This means that knowing how to support the achievement of pupils from a wide range of backgrounds, with different languages, cultures, religion and heritage, is crucial for London headteachers. The case studies which follow provide examples of schools that are successfully doing this in a range of different contexts.

Identity and belonging

Raffo et al (2007) argue that creating a positive sense of identity and belonging, through positive engagement with place, is crucial to the success of disadvantaged pupils. Raffo (2011), similarly, argues that a strong sense of identity cannot be achieved by a young person without knowledge of a particular place and how they belong to it. This is important for London schools, which must ensure they become places where young people feel they belong, that they are included and have a voice. Since schools clearly cannot do this alone, it is important for them to work closely with local authorities, community groups and others, to ensure young people and their families can develop a positive sense of belonging.

London has a long history of diversity and migration, which has made a huge contribution to the city's rich cultural heritage. It is also, at times, a place of tension between different groups. This was evident, for example, in the London riots of 2011[47], after the murder of George Floyd in 2020[48] and after the strip-searching of Child Q in Hackney in 2022[49]. One of the challenges for headteachers in this context is to create cohesive school communities where all children and young people can feel a sense of belonging. To do this, schools must create an inclusive culture where anti-racism practices are embedded and robust approaches are in place to tackle other forms of prejudice and discrimination. Schools serving diverse communities must also ensure that parents are engaged constructively with school life, regardless of barriers such as language, ethnicity, religion or migration status.

'Super-Diversity'

The term 'super-diversity' refers to the existence of significant levels of diversity within a population, as a result of globalisation, migration and other factors, specifically in relation to language, culture, ethnicity and nationality. Vertovec (2006) coined the term to describe the London context, which at that time was, he argued, experiencing a new type of diversity, characterised by the presence of multiple, intersecting dimensions of difference. Vertovec used the term to highlight the extent to which traditional models of diversity, which often focused on a single dimension of difference, were no longer sufficient to capture the complexity and nuance of diversity in contemporary societies.

The case study which follows sets out the strategies and approaches which have been used by one London school to create a positive sense of cohesion and belonging amongst a diverse school community.

CASE STUDY:
Woodside High School, London Borough of Haringey

Context

Woodside High School is a large mixed comprehensive school in north east London. It serves an extremely diverse population; within the school, 50% of pupils speak English as an additional language and almost 40% are eligible for the pupil premium.

Some pupils are drawn from communities which are well-established in the local area, including those with African-Caribbean, Turkish and Bangladeshi heritage. Others have arrived more recently from other locations including east Africa and eastern Europe. More than twenty different languages are spoken by pupils and there is no single dominant ethnic or religious group. A key focus for the school, in this context, is to create an inclusive environment where all pupils feel a sense of belonging. To do this, they work closely with a wide range of partners, including the local authority, other schools, charities and community groups.

Key strategies

The school's headteacher, Angela Wallace, is part of the Haringey 'SAFE taskforce', funded by the Department for Education, which aims to reduce rates of exclusion and gang involvement in the local area. As part of this initiative, she works closely with the headteachers of other local schools, including those leading alternative provision, to ensure support is targeted at those who are most in need. Meanwhile, a social worker based at the school works directly with vulnerable pupils and their families.

Many families in the local area are facing challenging social and economic circumstances. More than a quarter of residents earn below the living wage and more than a third of children are living in poverty. Creating a positive sense of identity and belonging in this context can be challenging. The school therefore works closely with a wide range of partner organisations to ensure that families and young people have the help they need. This includes 'Football Beyond Borders', who use sport to improve social inclusion, and 'Sister System', who support local young women to navigate the care system.

When new pupils arrive at the school, there is often a need to undertake extensive detective work in order to ascertain where they have come from, which languages they speak and how best to engage them with school life. This is a key part of the school's role, in the view of the headteacher, because it is the only way they can identify the issues which are facing young people and their families outside of school. For example, there have been some groups of recent arrivals with particularly low rates of attendance owing to term time holidays. By engaging with the community, the school was able to make parents and families more clear about the importance of all pupils attending school every day during term time and only travelling abroad during school holidays. As a result, attendance has increased significantly.

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The school has been proactive in recruiting members of the local community, including parents, to work in the school. This has several benefits, including the provision of stable employment for local families. In addition, it helps ensure the school has access to reliable and trusted translation when they need to meet with parents who do not speak fluent English.

The school also takes a personalised approach to managing behaviour. Following the disruption of the pandemic, they found that many young people needed extra support with self-regulation. As a result, they adapted their behaviour policy to place greater emphasis on regular routines and clear expectations. For example, they have placed reminders on pupils' desks about the school's expectations for behaviour and conduct. This has helped to re-establish a calm school environment, following the return to school after lockdown.

Impact

These strategies have helped the school to create an inclusive community where all pupils are valued, have a voice and feel a sense of belonging. It has also enabled the rapid re-establishment of routines and expectations following the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a significantly adverse impact on the local community. As a result, attendance is rapidly improving and exclusions are kept to a minimum.

The experience of migrants and refugees

There are many things that schools can do to create cohesion amongst diverse pupil populations and to create a sense of belonging and community amongst all pupils. This includes promoting and adopting inclusive practices, creating a welcoming school culture and ensuring that all pupils are seen, heard and valued. Schools can also help to facilitate interactions between diverse groups of pupils, for example by organising activities and projects that bring them together. They may also involve parents, families and community organisations, using local resources to create opportunities for pupils to learn about different cultures and communities.

While many children and young people in London schools have experience of migration, a small but significant number also have experience of being refugees or asylum-seekers. This presents particular challenges, relating to language proficiency as well as the likelihood of children having suffered various kinds of trauma. When looking at ways to achieve the successful integration of migrants and refugees in global cities, the United Nations University (2014) recommends the establishment of networks for the sharing of experiences and the building of partnerships between communities and institutions, as well as an expansion of the vocabulary used when discussing issues of migration and refuge.

The case study which follows describes the provision put into place for new arrivals, including refugees and asylum seekers, at one London school.

CASE STUDY:
Southfields Academy, London Borough of Merton

Context

Southfields Academy is a large mixed 11-18 comprehensive school in Wandsworth, south London. The school serves an extremely diverse community, with half of pupils speaking English as an additional language (EAL). More than a third of pupils are eligible for free school meals and 43% are eligible for the pupil premium. A fifth of pupils have identified Special Educational Needs (SEN), including 80 with Education, Health and Care Plans. The school also has a resourced SEN provision for hearing impairment and speech, language and communication needs.

Around 15 years ago, the school was asked by Wandsworth local authority to establish a provision for an increasing number of Year 11 pupils in the local area who were new arrivals to the country. This started with one group of 15 pupils and now accommodates up to 150 pupils. Known as the 'International Group' (IG), the majority of this cohort are refugees or asylum seekers. The school provides a bespoke curriculum for these pupils, giving them the opportunity to develop proficiency in English and to gain the qualifications they need to move on to further academic or vocational study.

Key strategies

The IG curriculum is run on six levels, in response to the different educational experiences of the pupils. This includes an intensive accelerated programme, in which some pupils take GCSE examinations in one year, as well as a basic skills provision for those who are new to English or to secondary education. IG pupils also receive personalised pastoral provision, tailored to meet their particular needs. Some spend a year in this provision before joining mainstream classrooms within the school; others remain within the IG provision for longer to secure a baseline at Level 1 or Level 2. Some then progress to 6th Form courses, either Level 3 technical or vocational provision or A-levels.

The term 'International Group' was chosen deliberately to convey a sense of aspiration, as a way of raising the status of pupils and avoiding a deficit mind-set. As well as leading the IG curriculum, the school's International Department is responsible for the integration of newly arrived EAL pupils in Key Stage 3 and raising the profile of the EAL community within the school. The focus is on supporting pupils to achieve their potential, regardless of language needs. The impact is significant; many IG group pupils who join the school in Key Stage 4 move on to Level 3 courses and many go on to achieve top grades at A-level and attend competitive universities within the UK.

Recent success stories include a female Afghan refugee who achieved Level 3 BTEC Health & Social Care and is now studying psychology at Oxford and another female, an unaccompanied minor from Eritrea, who joined the IG in September 2021. She made exceptional progress, gaining grade 8s in Maths and Further Maths and grade 7s in Science GCSEs in summer 2022. Another male pupil joined the school in September 2020 after arriving in the UK from Southern Sudan as an unaccompanied minor in February 2020. He spent two years in the IG, gaining grade 7s in maths, history and science and a grade 8 in Further Maths. He is now undertaking an Access to Higher Education course so that he can go on to study science at university.

Pupils within the International Group come from a wide range of countries including South Korea, Brazil, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Egypt and Uganda. In recent years, increasing numbers have arrived as refugees from countries including Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Sudan and also Ukraine. Some enter the UK with their families as part of refugee resettlement programmes; others arrive as unaccompanied minors from the Calais camps with no family support. This latter group are usually living in foster care or semi-independent living and have often experienced severe disruption to their education. They face huge challenges settling into life in the UK and therefore need a significant amount of additional support.

Pupils within the International Group at Southfields have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as a result of their already high levels of vulnerability. Many have found it difficult to deal with the high levels of uncertainty which have pervaded day to day life during this time. As a result, the school has seen an increase in the number of pupils exhibiting high levels of anxiety, emotional distress, and trouble with concentration. The volume of safeguarding concerns has grown exponentially, with a particular increase in anxiety and mental health issues. Attendance to school has been affected, although the school's intensive engagement with families has had a positive impact on this.

At the heart of Southfields' IG provision is the belief that being new to the UK, or to learning English, should not be seen as an obstacle to academic achievement. By providing a personalised curriculum and the additional pastoral support which IG pupils need, the school enables young people to overcome significant challenges in order to achieve their potential.

Impact

These strategies have enabled the school to achieve excellent outcomes for all pupils, including those who have recently arrived from overseas or who are in the early stages of learning to speak English. At the school's most recent Ofsted visit, inspectors commented on the fact that all pupils, regardless of background, leave with a secure future, owing to the school's commitment to meeting pupils' diverse needs. They also recognised the contribution of the International Group to enriching the school's cultural life, the culture of mutual respect which the school has been able to create and the meticulous way in which the school follows up safeguarding concerns.

The importance of leadership, representation and voice

The case study that follows examines how one school in Tower Hamlets used innovative provision in the arts to improve outcomes amongst a diverse group of pupils in an area with high levels of child poverty and disadvantage. This provision has been developed over a 15 year period, as part of the school's drive to increase pupils' confidence, enhance their leadership skills and help to develop their creativity. It was designed to support pupils' development of a positive sense of place, both within the local community and within wider British society. It also aimed to give pupils an opportunity to use their voices to make an authentic contribution to discussion of key issues affecting them and others in society.

This particular approach was taken because of the school's analysis of the needs of its pupils and their families. The majority of pupils are drawn from the local Bangladeshi community, who face significant levels of socio-economic deprivation and other forms of disadvantage including racism and islamophobia. In this context, the focus on arts provision was deliberately chosen as one key way of supporting the development of pupils' confidence, creativity and leadership skills.

CASE STUDY:
Mulberry School for Girls, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Context

Mulberry School for Girls is an 11-18 comprehensive girls school in east London. It is situated in an area with extremely high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, with rates of child poverty in the local area at above 50%. More than half of pupils at the school are eligible for the pupil premium and more than two thirds of pupils are recorded as speaking English as an additional language.

Key strategies

Key areas of focus for the school are the development of pupils' confidence, creativity and leadership skills. To achieve this, for the last 15 years, the school has committed to the provision of specialist teaching and extra-curricular provision in the arts. It has also developed a wide range of partnerships within the arts and creative industries to support this provision. This has contributed to pupils achieving excellent outcomes in a wide range of ways, not only within the arts but across the school and beyond.

The school has a team of specialist non-teaching staff who lead the arts provision. Formed in 2006, the core team has been supplemented by a range of practitioners including playwrights, directors, film-makers and technicians. This team curate a thriving and varied extra-curricular programme of flagship projects which enable all students to continue their creative learning journey beyond the classroom. This includes numerous enrichment projects including Eco-fashion, Anime Film Club and Technical Theatre. The arts team is also firmly integrated within the

wider ecosystem of the school, providing support to the arts faculty team as well as to other departments and school subjects, including school performances.

The school has developed a tradition of taking shows to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and in 2009 became the first ever state school to win a Fringe First Award. In August 2022, the school participated in its sixth fringe festival, taking two plays, one performed by a student company and the other by its alumni theatre company. All the plays taken to Edinburgh are pieces of new writing commissioned by the school, written in collaboration with the pupils to ensure they have ownership of the piece and with pupil voice at their core. Every student in the school has the opportunity to take part and they are not selected based on auditions but through a holistic approach that takes into account creativity, passion and commitment.

As well as performers, the Edinburgh team includes technicians, film makers, a catering team, assistant directors, production assistants and stage managers, all of whom are either current or recent pupils at the school. A key goal of the project is that the participants learn to work as a cohesive company within which everyone is equal. The school describes the project as a 'creative traineeship' and part of the process involves pupils learning about the various career opportunities that are available within the creative industries.

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The Mulberry Alumni Theatre Company was established in 2014 to create a safe and creative space for former pupils to come together, nurture their creative talents, take part in evening workshops and devise original performances with the support of a professional team. The company focuses on developing new writing and new voices. It works in collaboration with artists and arts organisations who have similar values, to deliver projects which address issues of voice and representation.

The school has recently launched the Mulberry Production Arts Academy. This creates a pathway into design-oriented and technical career paths in the creative sector, by providing students with the opportunity to gain industry relevant skills from leading practitioners. A key aim is to address the current skills shortage in the UK's production and technical arts workforce, as well as the lack of representation from diverse groups within the cultural and creative industries. The academy is being run in partnership with the National Theatre and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Impact

The arts provision described in this case study is part of a wide-ranging programme of work that has contributed to significantly improved academic achievement at the school over the last 15 years. Attendance is above average and pupils achieve significantly above average outcomes in external examinations, with a smaller than average disadvantage gap. The school has twice been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted, with inspectors commenting in the school's most recent inspection:

Students' social, moral, cultural and spiritual development is exceptional. Mulberry girls are highly ambitious, confident and principled. Students are very aware of their rights and responsibilities as young women growing up in twenty-first century Britain.

SECTION 2.3: SOCIAL MOBILITY

The challenge of social mobility in London

Social mobility is a key measure of the extent to which society is able to provide young people with equality of opportunity and the ability to realise their full potential. It is also crucial for economic growth, social cohesion, individual well-being and social and political stability. Although academic attainment is comparatively higher in London than in other parts of the UK, positive social mobility for disadvantaged pupils remains a significant challenge. Only 17% of London's professional jobs are occupied by people from low-income backgrounds, compared with the national figure of 30%. Knowledge-based industries such as law, finance, medicine and life sciences show greater polarisation, with a smaller number of employees from working class backgrounds and a significant pay gap for professionals from low-income backgrounds compared with those from more affluent backgrounds.

One reason is that the professional job market seems to favour candidates whose parents are in professional occupations, with evidence showing that 54% of all professional jobs in London are occupied by such people. Additionally, the high rents and costs of business administration in the city means that most jobs are created at either the top or the bottom of the job ladder, leaving a void in the middle which does not provide sufficient opportunities for professionals from low-income backgrounds.

These findings paint a bleak picture of how the educational success of London pupils is not currently being translated into employment or professional success, particularly for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recent research suggests that the problem is even more significant, and more entrenched, for those experiencing long-term disadvantage. A key challenge for London schools is to find ways of reducing the possibility of this becoming an obstacle for their pupils.

According to Sturgis and Buscha (2015), targeted education policies do not necessarily lead to higher rates of intergenerational social mobility. They claim that low rates of social mobility have remained persistent for the last 120 years despite increased efforts to improve them. Shifting the focus from education policy, Hoskins and Barker (2018) make a strong case of increasing the attention paid to family background and heritage to improve social mobility, as research suggests that both educational and professional success is closely linked to familial wealth and social class.

Transforming social mobility through school and university partnership

The two case studies which follow describe innovative partnerships between schools and universities in two different local contexts. These types of partnerships can play a key role in transforming social mobility, by providing pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds with increased access to higher education and career opportunities.

One aim is to bridge the gap between school and university, providing young people with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in higher education and their future careers. Young people also benefit by gaining insight into the university system and learning more about how to realise their career aspirations and ambitions. Partnerships between schools and universities can also provide teachers and staff with professional development opportunities.

Partnerships can take many forms, such as mentoring programmes, careers events and workshops. Existing evidence[50] suggests they are most effective when they involve sustained, ongoing relationships based on mutual benefit. It is also crucial that they are flexible and responsive to local contexts. The following case studies set out two examples of this.

CASE STUDY:
Mulberry Academy Shoreditch, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Context

Mulberry Academy Shoreditch is a mixed 11-18 comprehensive school in east London. It serves a diverse local community, with more than 60% of pupils speaking English as an additional language. Two thirds of pupils are eligible for the pupil premium, which is more than double the national average. Within this context, the school has established a reputation for excellence in extra-curricular provision, including its recently established 'Inspirational Societies' programme.

The area in which the school is located has changed significantly in recent years, with rapid gentrification leading to increases in the number of local residents working in the creative industries as well as in technology and financial services. Many pupils attending the school, however, live in disadvantaged circumstances and are the first in their family to attend university. The school therefore provides not only an excellent academic education but also the opportunity for pupils to develop social and cultural capital, knowledge of progression routes and awareness of future career options.

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Key strategies

The 'Inspirational Societies' programme starts in Year 9 and involves pupils choosing to be one of six societies, each linked to a particular area of study and a specific university:

- History Society – with Kings College London
- English Literature and the Arts Society – University College London (UCL)
- Science Society – Imperial College London
- Economics Society – London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
- International Studies and Politics Society – School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)
- Social Sciences Society – Queen Mary University of London (QMUL)

The areas of study are deliberately chosen to reflect subjects which pupils may not yet have encountered at school, but which are common at university. The universities involved have been selected because they are high-status, prestigious places where pupils and their families aspire to study. The goal is to excite pupils about the subject matter, give them a thirst for lifelong learning and introduce them to university life. The design of the programme reflects research evidence that early experience of higher education has a significant impact in terms of ensuring young people can go on to achieve their aspirations.

The annual launch of the Inspirational Societies programme is a high-profile event at school, with attendees from partner universities and a formal presentation of pupils' society badges. This is followed by a formal

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reception, at which pupils are encouraged to network with guests as a way of helping to build their confidence about their ability to navigate formal events. Members of each society then take part in a year-long programme of events including talks, visits, activities and trips. In summer 2022, pupils from all six societies took part in an international trip to Athens as a culmination of their involvement with the programme during the year.

The involvement of university partners is key to the success of the Inspirational Societies programme, with university staff providing talks, campus visits and taster sessions. Alumni from the school's Sixth Form who are studying at partner universities are also encouraged to be involved. By introducing younger pupils to subjects which they may wish to study at university, the societies help them to see how their GCSE and A-level choices are relevant to the next stage of their studies. This also contributes to pupils' motivation, as it helps them connect their study of subjects at school with the world of academia and employment.

The Inspirational Societies programme is making a positive difference to the ability of pupils at Mulberry Academy Shoreditch to be successful in their lives after school and to realise their ambitions and aspirations. As a result of this, and other similar initiatives, the school is opening up the world of higher education, transforming pupils' life chances and improving social mobility in the local area.

Impact

The provision described in this case study forms part of the school's work to develop pupils' ambition and aspiration, within a context where many families face challenging socio-economic circumstances. Despite these challenges, pupils at the school achieve better than average outcomes, with a smaller than average disadvantage gap. The school has above average rates of pupil attendance and has been recognised in a number of ways for its efforts to support and develop pupils' future career aspirations. During the school's most recent Ofsted report, inspectors commented:

Excellence describes many aspects of Mulberry Academy Shoreditch and what it provides for its pupils. For example, there is a huge range of out-of-class activities aimed at enriching pupils' learning and experiences. Opportunities for pupils and sixth-form students to learn about career options, including universities, support leaders' aim to ensure that all leave school well prepared for the future.

CASE STUDY:
London South Bank University Group, London Boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth

Context

South Bank Academies is a small multi-academy trust in south London, part of the innovative London South Bank University (LSBU) Group. The group, led by LSBU, includes schools, higher education, research, apprenticeships and further education provision. LSBU's Vice Chancellor, Professor David Phoenix, places a strong emphasis on the university's civic mission and its role in transforming educational outcomes in the local area under the banner 'No Barriers to Brilliance'. A key focus of the trust's work within the group is to build partnerships which develop social and cultural capital and support local young people to progress into high value destinations.

Key strategies

Integral to the work of the LSBU Group is the active involvement of university staff in collaborative projects with pupils. The projects take various forms, but the overarching ambition is to enhance pupils' employability prospects and broaden their horizons.

One of the schools within the trust, South Bank University Academy, has developed a 'Day 10' enrichment programme: the timetable is dropped one day in every ten to support social and cultural capital development activities and innovative enrichment programmes. These take various forms such as pupils coming to the university to take part in project-based learning activities in partnership with industry. Hosting these projects at LSBU gives young learners exposure to a university environment, access to world-class facilities, and support for their learning from university pupils and staff. Working on these projects is also immensely valuable for LSBU university students as they have the opportunity to interact with young learners, co-deliver with industry partners and become more confident in their own subject expertise. This enhances their university experience and increases their employability skills, providing significant mutual benefit.

In May 2022, LSBU hosted the regional 'Big Ideas' competition, organised by the 'Solutions for the Planet' team. This involves 11-14 year old pupils being connected with local businesses, to develop creative solutions to sustainability issues identified by pupils as being relevant to their local area. The university is providing funding for pupils from London South Bank University Academy to take part in the competition, as well as support with digital skills training, pitching, business case development and the development of prototypes.

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LSBU has also led LEGO robotics projects, co-created by LSBU pupil ambassadors. Pupils have learnt about the railway industry with employer partner Thales, gaining an understanding of the inner workings of railway systems and the role of coding in helping trains to run on time. They built LEGO robots using Spike kits provided by LSBU, where they applied coding to imitate train actions and manoeuvres. Pupils will also visit Thales' Beckton railway site to give them first-hand experience of industry in action. This type of project gives pupils insight into an industry with a significant local skills gap, and the chance to develop practical knowledge and capabilities in a real-world context.

Another popular Day 10 project is hairdressing. Year 9 pupils have had the opportunity to work with a professional hairstylist to learn specific hairstyling techniques and apply them on each other as models. As well as developing industry-specific skills over a planned sequence of sessions, this has helped pupils to better understand their own hair types and needs, contributing to increased self-esteem through a focus on self-care and well being. Through working with an industry professional, pupils have had the opportunity to engage with small businesses within the local community and develop a better understanding of entrepreneurship.

At South Bank UTC elsewhere in the trust, there are a range of innovative engagements in operation, including with LSBU and employer partnerships. Amongst a range of other initiatives, leaders have invited sector-specific professional bodies, for example in engineering and health, to engage with pupils and offer them free affiliate or associate memberships. This helps immerse pupils in professional conversations at an early stage and has been hugely popular with Sixth Form pupils.

Impact

The LSBU Group's hands-on approach ensures that all pupils in the trust's schools have access to educational opportunities that not only improve school outcomes but also transform their future life chances.

The programmes of work described in this case study both reflect LSBU's commitment to supporting the local community, reducing inequality, addressing disadvantage and contributing to sustainable growth. This work has contributed to the university being recognised in a number of ways for its commitment to this work[51]. The schools and colleges within LSBU group are also achieving excellent outcomes for pupils, including high progression rates to positive destinations.

KEY REFLECTIONS

Key reflection 1: The importance of context-responsive leadership

Each of the case studies included in this report explores how effective context-responsive leadership has been enacted in a particular London school. The four key characteristics of this leadership approach, as described in the case studies, are:

Commitment to achieving excellence for all pupils and to promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and social cohesion

Deep knowledge of the local context, including the circumstances in which children, young people and families are living

Context-responsive leadership

Expert understanding of strategies that improve outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children

The ability to change and adapt leadership practices so that they are relevant for particular contexts

This type of leadership requires in-depth understanding of local contexts, including not only pupil demographics but the realities of the circumstances in which pupils and their families are living. In most parts of London, this includes an appreciation of how children are affected by poverty, inequality, diversity and mobility. It also requires school leaders to have the ability to find evidence-based solutions that make a positive difference to the children and young people they serve.

The case studies demonstrate how context-responsive leadership can support schools' achievement of success in relation to a wide range of areas. Context-responsive leadership is not, or not only, about kindness and empathy, but about the ability to effectively employ practical, evidence-based strategies which deliver results in terms of improved outcomes for pupils. This may include improved academic achievement and also a range of other outcomes, including those relating to mental health and wellbeing, leadership skills, language development, self-confidence, leadership skills and progression to positive destinations.

Key reflection 2: The importance of partnership

Each of the case studies describes schools working in partnership: with families, local authorities, universities, charities, businesses and more. This is an increasingly important aspect of schools' work and crucial to understanding how they can contribute to addressing disadvantage.

One thing that was evident, during the Covid-19 pandemic, was the extent to which schools have come to play a crucial role in the social safety net, supporting children and their families in a way which goes far beyond educational outcomes. Schools cannot single-handedly solve social problems, but they can make a significant difference when they work in partnership with others. Alongside their expertise in teaching and learning, school staff have a great deal of knowledge about how to work effectively with children and young people, and their families. They are already making a significant difference in many contexts in ways that go far beyond academic achievement.

Schools are the one place where children and young people come together physically within a building every day. They are also places with deep roots in local areas and deep connections with local communities. They can, therefore, be a key location for the provision of additional support for children, young people and families. While schools cannot themselves provide all of these services, and should not be expected to, they can achieve a great deal through working with others in local partnerships.

Key Reflection 3: Implications for leadership development

The work which school leaders do is complex, challenging and multi-faceted. To undertake the role successfully, leaders need effective training and ongoing professional development. This must include a focus on the leadership of teaching and learning and the development of evidence-informed classroom practice. There should also be opportunities for school leaders to develop the ability to adapt their leadership practice to the contexts in which they are working.

Working in a context-responsive way requires leaders to be flexible, agile and innovative, so that they can adapt their leadership practice to suit changing local circumstances. To do this successfully, they need appropriate training focused on:

- understanding the concept of context-responsive leadership and existing evidence about effective practice in this area;
- developing leaders' ability to apply the principles of effective context-responsive leadership in different contexts;
- helping school leaders understand how to evaluate the impact of the approaches and strategies they put into place, beyond the impact on academic achievement.

These skills may be particularly important for school leaders serving communities where large numbers of children are experiencing disadvantage, but are likely to also be relevant in other contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to increased appreciation of the wider work of schools and the impact of this on educational outcomes, as well as on the health and wellbeing of children, young people and local communities. There is now a renewed emphasis on the importance of schools being able to meet the diverse needs of all pupils, including those who are experiencing disadvantage. There is also growing awareness about the importance of schools and other institutions attending to the nuance of local contexts and the needs of local communities.

This report provides some examples of the work that London schools are doing to respond to the particular needs of their pupils and the local contexts in which they are situated. This kind of context-responsive work is complex and demanding. It involves engagement with social, political, economic and cultural issues. It sometimes requires school leaders to eschew short-term gains for the sake of longer-term, more deep-rooted improvements. While it is possible, in certain circumstances, to make rapid improvements, it is more often the case that this type of place-based change must be undertaken over a lengthy period of time. It is not always easy to measure the impact of context-responsive leadership, but it is a key ingredient in the success of many schools.

The case studies set out in this report demonstrate how schools in different contexts, with different pupil demographics, working within different types of schools, are successfully undertaking context-responsive leadership. The headteachers of the case study schools are highly skilled at understanding the various factors that shape a school's environment and using this to inform their leadership decisions and practices. This includes building relationships with community stakeholders, collaborating with other organisations, and implementing specific initiatives and approaches that are aligned with the needs and goals of their schools and local communities.

In the case study schools, this wider work is not seen as extraneous, supplementary or a departure from core business. Instead, it is a key part of the process through which school leaders are able to gain a deeper understanding of their school communities and put into place provision which meets children and young people's needs. It is this work which enables school leaders to create community cohesion, to instil a sense of belonging, to promote equity and inclusion and to capitalise on the rich religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity which exists within London schools. It is, therefore, fundamental to their success in their contexts.

Partnership and collaboration are key to the success of this work and have a multiplier effect, enabling schools to achieve much more than they would be able to do alone. This is an area which we believe should be a greater focus for policy-makers as they seek to improve the UK education system. As Miller et al (2022) argue, collaborative relationships are an important way in which we can increase the resilience of the education system and ensure it is able to withstand future shocks and stresses.

As the UK starts to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, we need to develop a positive vision for the future of our school system which acknowledges the importance of context-responsive leadership, collaboration and partnership. Although we should not expect schools to solve all of society's problems, it is possible for schools to have a transformative impact on the lives of children and young people who are living in disadvantaged circumstances. To ensure they can do so, we must strengthen the connections between schools and the wider community, support the development of networks and partnerships, and ensure all schools are able to successfully undertake the type of context-responsive practice that is described in this report.

We also need to examine more closely the ways in which schools have adapted their approaches to curriculum and classroom practice following the pandemic. This will be the subject of a follow-up report by Reconnect London, which will be published in June 2023.

NOTES

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Mulberry Schools Trust

Mulberry Schools Trust is a multi-academy trust which
was founded by Mulberry School for Girls based in Tower
Hamlets, east London. The trust currently includes eight
primary and secondary schools, as well as the East London
Teaching School Hub and the Mulberry STEM Academy,
a partnership with Mercedes-Benz Grand Prix Ltd. The
trust's CEO, Dr Vanessa Ogden, is a National Leader of
Education and co-founder of Reconnect London.

Dunraven Educational Trust

Dunraven Educational Trust is a multi-academy trust in
south-west London. The trust comprises three primary
schools, one secondary and one all-through school. The
trust's CEO, David Boyle CBE, is a National Leader of
Education and co-founder of Reconnect London.