

Schools Facing Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances: A summary of the project evaluation

This edition of Inform draws on the evaluation of a DfES project designed to raise achievement in eight secondary schools 'facing exceptionally challenging circumstances'. A fuller account and more details can be found in the DfES research report RW90, and the book 'Schools on the Edge' by – John MacBeath, John Gray, Jane Cullen, David Frost, Susan Steward and Sue Swaffield published in 2007 by Paul Chapman.

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On the edge

Educational accounts typically focus on schools in the centre of the social mainstream with much less attention to the stories of schools perpetually on the periphery. Such schools on the edge face a constant struggle to forge a closer alignment between home and school, parents and teachers, and between the formal world of school and the informal world of neighbourhood and peer group. The decline of traditional industries has stranded adults and young people on the periphery of economic life and the schools they attend often sit amid the rubble of run down neighbourhoods.

Education may be the route out of challenging circumstances if the will and skill can be found to navigate a path through the rigid conventions of schooling. Some young people manage to surmount the obstacles of both school and social conventions to achieve beyond expectation. Others follow the line of least resistance putting their uncelebrated intelligence to use on the margins of the law, lured over the edge into the twilight economy and criminality.

Some parents reject the local school and the immediacy of its problems and are able to choose schools in better neighbourhoods with 'nicer' children. They leave behind them schools which struggle to survive, year on year on the edge of viable numbers, and attempting to meet the demand for public evidence that they are able to perform just as well as any other school, despite the unevenness of the playing field.

Yet, however bleak the picture there are schools which succeed in defying the odds, sometimes by statistical sleight of hand, sometimes by a concentrated and strategic focus on those students most likely to reach the bar and, in some instances, by inspirational commitment to deep learning. These schools are, in every sense, exceptional.

The effectiveness and improvement story

The effectiveness and improvement story has been a generally upbeat one, optimistic about what schools could achieve given the right factors. It was spurred into life by the pessimism of Coleman's (1966) conclusions that the spectrum of young people's needs could not be met within a single institution and that it was unreasonable to expect schools to equalise achievement given the unequal distribution of wealth, family 'capital' and privileged access to knowledge and accreditation. Around that time Basil Bernstein (1970) wrote that 'education cannot compensate for society', primarily a reference to schools rather than to education more widely conceived. This thesis required an antithesis, and it set in train a search for the counter perspective, to offer empirical evidence which might confirm what was known intuitively and anecdotally, that schools could be better places for children and that in the right conditions a school could make a difference to their lives and learning.

There is now a body of evidence that the school a child attends makes (some) difference to the subsequent progress they make through the educational system (Gray and Wilcox, 1995; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000; MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001). However, there is no consensus about what makes a difference to schools' performance. To many people's surprise the most powerful finding to emerge from James Coleman's pioneering work was that a school's 'social mix' turned out to be considerably more important than the levels of teacher experience or resourcing. It was a finding which Rutter's research was later to echo: 'The academic balance in the intakes to schools was particularly important' (Rutter *et al.*, 1979: 178). In other words, what really mattered was whom you went to school with, a case that Thrupp (1999) has made still more forcibly. In this account the main priority for policy-makers should be to seek to influence schools' intakes.

There is a further difficulty for those seeking to use the research to provide pointers to action. Most research on school effectiveness tells us about the pattern of relationships prevailing in a school at the time it was studied. It doesn't necessarily tell us how the school got to be as it is (Gray *et al.*, 1996), and most research fails to disentangle the causal influences. For example, in the claimed relationship between a school's 'leadership' and its performance, the usual assumption is that a strong head has caused a school to do well and that, conversely, a weak head has caused it to do badly. In truth, however, strong heads can lead 'good' schools but they can also find themselves in 'bad' ones where, for a variety of reasons, their efforts are frustrated.

School improvement research sought to identify processes through which schools became effective, but it has been found that in reality improvement is messy and involves a complex interweaving of processes. Moreover, the context has proved to be of crucial importance, and the ability of schools to sustain improvement has been shown to be problematic. Most schools are unable to maintain improvement as measured by results for more than three years (Mangan *et al.*, 2005). Over a ten year period Thomas *et al.* (in press) found that less than 40% of schools might be able to deliver a second burst. For the majority of schools sustaining improvement over time seems to pose a formidable challenge.

The evidence on school improvement provides some useful starting points for raising performance levels in particularly disadvantaged areas. However, much of the existing evidence is drawn from contexts where the preconditions for change were probably more favourable.

The SFEECC Project

The Schools Facing Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances (SFEECC) project was conceived to demonstrate what could be achieved in highly disadvantaged schools by applying some of the key lessons learned from school effectiveness and improvement research.

After several 'false starts' and some attenuation of its original radical vision, the project effectively began with a number of elements:

- Direct funding to each school of £150,000–£200,000 a year
- Funding to develop innovative uses of ICT such as video conferencing and interactive whiteboards, and a common website
- Training for middle managers and school improvement groups, and support for headteachers
- Training in the use of data, and a reading programme

The eight schools chosen by the DfES to take part in the project were not the 'worst' in the country, but representative of many other schools facing exceptionally challenging circumstances. One of the distinguishing features of this 'Octet' (as they came to be known) was that they had not resigned themselves to a hopeless future and they were judged to be schools that could be turned round.

In selecting these eight to take part in the project the DfES applied four key criteria.

- 15% or fewer of the students achieving 5+ A* to C at GCSE;
- 40% or more of the students eligible for free school meals;
- 39% or more on the special education needs register;
- Good or better leadership as reported in their most recent Section 10 inspection.

A consistent theme that united these eight schools was their undesirability in the eyes of local residents and all of them had lost prospective students to other more 'attractive' schools. They were all obliged to devote considerable energy to attracting both students and teachers. The impact of competition with other schools was profound, not only on the school's social mix but also on the parent constituency, with the most informed and ambitious of parents choosing other more desirable places.

While sharing common indices of disadvantage these eight schools were, in many respects, quite different. They ranged in size from just over 400 students to almost 1200. They included two faith schools and one single sex school, and three had some form of post 16 provision. Four were located in local authorities with grammar schools cheek by jowl with ‘comprehensives’. Five of the schools were located in mono-ethnic white wards with almost all of their students living locally, while the three others drew from scattered multi-ethnic communities involving young people in long journeys to and from school.

The differences among the Octet are as striking and significant as the common features that brought them together. The terminology of exceptionally challenging circumstances really only becomes meaningful when we look more deeply into the nature of the very different communities in which these schools are located.

What do we mean by exceptionally challenging circumstances?

While the local character of each community is distinctive, they have in common indicators of economic and social disenfranchisement and lack of social capital. Areas in all of these towns and cities (Birmingham, Folkestone, Grimsby, Halifax, Liverpool, London, Sunderland) show complex historical patterns of decline, erosion of work-based identity, high unemployment, insularity and disillusionment. They typically have highly transient populations, including asylum seekers, refugees and others whose lives are a series of short-term stays in different locations. The character of the local population can shift rapidly, which means that schools are in a constant process of ‘catch-up’ in order to offer the appropriate services to parents and students, and attempts to build a sense of community are frustrated.

Educational policy in England continues to stress parental choice, school performance tables, and local competition, on the assumption that market mechanisms are critical in improving schools, despite strong evidence that such forces are socially divisive. The idea that raising attainment in one school can occur with no negative effects in neighbouring schools is an optimistic one.

While some analyses have suggested that nationally schools are becoming less socially stratified (for example Gorard and Fitz, 2000), more recent work (The Sutton Trust, 2006) has suggested that schools operate within a hierarchy that is being intensified

by market policies, tending to exaggerate the differences between schools.

‘Social mix’ is a key factor in determining a school’s effectiveness and capacity for improvement and all eight schools contained a disproportionately high number of students with special learning needs (ranging from 42.2 per cent to 64.7 per cent at the outset of the project). This not only impacts powerfully on the internal dynamic of the school but also affects perceptions and expectations in the local community. In one of the Octet schools, for example, staff described the negative effects of being well known as a school for dealing with students with autism and Asperger’s syndrome.

Negative perceptions of schools, in part derived from performance tables and in part from local ‘intelligence’, combined to make SFEECC schools less attractive than their more favoured competitors. The stigma attached to a ‘failing’ school or school requiring ‘special measures’ compounded the demoralising effect on staff and students, particularly in some of the schools which had been constantly in the media spotlight.

Family and school

Children and young people live nested lives, writes David Berliner (2005) referring to the contextual layers of experience through which they attempt to make sense of their world. Failure to grasp this complexity leads policymakers to look for simple remedies, he suggests, so we try to improve classrooms and schools in isolation. But the young people whom we wish to benefit from these improvements are also situated in families and in peer groups who shape attitudes and aspirations often more powerfully than their teachers. For young people success in school can be less a matter of academic ability and more the ability to understand and ‘play the system’. They need motivation, commitment and perseverance in the face of failure – a legacy that may not be within the family inheritance. As we know from numerous studies (Jencks *et al.*, 1972, Epstein, 2004, Weiss and Fine, 2000), parental length of time in formal education is mirrored by the next generation.

The inflexible structure of the school day does not easily mesh with patterns of home life. Many young people, very often girls, shoulder responsibilities for their younger siblings and sometimes for parents, ill, disabled or simply inadequate to the task of child-care. With no direct links into the home environment it is difficult for schools to know what might be justifiable reasons for lateness or absence.

Students who miss lessons have little chance to catch up due to the relentless pace required to cover the curriculum, and so they fall further and further behind. The periodic structure of the school day with consecutive subjects requiring successive shifts of focus and expectation is widely accepted as an unsatisfactory way to organise learning, but has proved intractable. This rhythm, locked into the structure of the school day, is 'ruthlessly cumulative' (Pinker, 1998) and without remedial loops and sustained support it becomes progressively harder for young people to engage or re-engage.

The evaluation

The evaluation of the SFECC initiative was conducted between April 2002 and March 2005 by a team from the University of Cambridge. It was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative research has two main strands: analysis of changes in examination performance in the eight schools and comparisons with a group of similar schools. The qualitative research used interview, focus group discussion, shadowing, observation and questionnaire, to analyse the effects of the project in each of the schools, and changes in the eight schools over the three years of the project. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data gave insights into the change occurring in an individual school in order to identify themes significant to the eight schools.

One focus of the evaluation was to examine the various strands of government funded intervention. So, for example, we questioned teachers and students on the use and impact of whiteboard technology and observed its use in classrooms. We interviewed teachers who were in charge of the literacy programme and observed lessons. We interviewed young people once or twice each year about their perceptions of change and also periodically interviewed groups of teachers on specific developments such as the use of data and middle management and school improvement group training. One of the researchers attended many of the training sessions provided for school representatives.

In addition to regular discussions with senior leaders throughout the evaluation we held extended interviews with the eight heads towards the end of the project to get their story which, like all data gathered, was fed back for accuracy and further elaboration. We also interviewed DfES personnel involved with the project.

We did not, however, restrict the evaluation to the DfES inspired initiatives but tried to obtain a more holistic picture of the ways the schools interacted with the communities they serve. We were directed by the schools to practices and innovations that had a life before SFECC, leading us into interviews in the community with social or community workers and in some cases with primary school personnel.

Developing and extending leadership

Two strands of the project were concerned with developing leadership, a training programme for middle managers, and training to develop school improvement groups.

The idea of 'upskilling' middle managers and giving them a more significant role in the running of the school is a fairly conventional one, with the National College for School Leadership's 'leading from the middle' programme pursuing similar ends. Part of the rationale is that it is subject leaders who need the expertise to 'drive up' standards in the classroom, and by middle managers taking on more of the day-to-day running of the school, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) have more time and space for strategic development.

The SFECC middle management training was not a success, and the professional development model adopted offers some useful lessons. There were no problems with the quality of the training, but the schools saw it as an opportunity for particular individuals rather than a means of strategically developing the role of key staff. Participants had a project to complete in school, but there was little follow through and projects tended to be viewed as for individuals' development rather than for the school. The training promoted the idea of mentoring, but school cultures were not conducive to this, the necessary SLT commitment was not visible and middle managers did not have the space and time to work together across subject boundaries.

By contrast, the creation of school improvement groups (SIGs) was widely seen as the most successful aspect of the SFECC project, although once again there were problems with the training model adopted. The residential aspect of the training may have helped build the SIG teams, but put pressure on individuals who were away from home and school, creating difficulties in covering for staff who were absent. Perhaps even more significantly, the SIG training, as with other elements of the project, provided professional development for teachers, enhancing their skills and confidence and so making

them highly attractive to other schools. This worked at cross-purposes to staff retention, already a major issue for several of the schools. Without professional development tied more strongly into the organisation rather than as individual enhancement, there is a clear danger of newfound expertise being lost.

The SIG was not a new initiative in every school but the project provided further impetus. SIGs are based on the idea that effective professional learning is school-based and should be linked explicitly to particular development goals. It is a model of improvement that is neither ‘bottom up’ nor ‘top down’, but may rather be described as ‘middle out’ since influence is designed to flow ‘upwards’ to senior leadership as well as ‘down’ to individual classroom level. A key characteristic is that SIG members co-ordinate development activities, involving many more colleagues in the process.

SIGs ranged in size from five to nine, typically representing a wide range of departments and involving staff of varying seniority and experience. Almost all the SIGs included a member of SLT, but a significant number were young and relatively inexperienced teachers with leadership potential. While there were attempts in some schools to use SIG membership to support ‘weaker’ teachers, on the whole the SIGs derived their credibility and strength from the contribution of effective, well-regarded members of staff. SIG training took place on six two-day sessions over a two-year period, and involved a core group of trainers offering a series of workshops covering topics such as effective teaching, formative assessment, and data to inform teaching and learning.

The challenge comes in terms of the sustainability of a group such a SIG, able to continue the level of engagement and enthusiasm achieved without the benefit of external support and training, especially as the composition of the group changes and other priorities emerge. There is a delicate balance to be struck between creating an elite group and engendering a wider sense of ownership. If the SIG model is to be successful in the long term, capacity needs to move beyond the enthusiasms of specific individuals, and the SIG’s values and practices – what it stands for and how it works – need to be embedded in the culture of the school.

After two years the SIGs had had success with developing in their schools surface practices such as icebreakers, plenaries, the three/four part lesson, objectives on the board, use of CATs data and a learning styles matrix, but they had yet to provide evidence of a deep impact on learning. Such impact

occurs in the long term and a longer term vision for the SIG would be to support teachers in moving beyond these formulaic approaches to a more challenging evidence-led pedagogy, perhaps for instance to begin to problematise the fast developing orthodoxy around ‘learning styles’.

Pedagogy

Adapting teaching to students’ needs and making them more active participants in class was one of the main foci of professional development and was widely seen as beneficial. Teachers reported increased interest and positive response from their students as they adopted more finely differentiated teaching strategies. Along with many other teachers throughout the country, staff in the SFEECC schools enthusiastically embraced ‘VAK’ (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning) and Multiple Intelligences (MI) approaches. However, researchers and learning theorists have failed to find any empirical basis for claims made for a VAK approach (Coffield *et al.*, 2004; White, 2004), and Howard Gardner has distanced himself from the evangelical embrace of MI, arguing that it was never intended to be used prescriptively in individual profiling and differentiating instruction. None the less, discussion of learning styles and intelligences did prove to be a catalyst to help teachers recognise the individuality of learners and blocks to learning.

Although the classroom focus was a given, it was teaching that was given centre stage, with much less emphasis on learning and learning theory, for which VAK and MI are weak substitutes. The assumption that improving teaching through more structured, varied, paced and targeted lessons would improve learning is a contested proposition, at least without some detailed articulation as to how that conjunction might be achieved. As the DfES viewed improvement in terms of increased attainment at GCSE, deeper learning and the impact of professional development remained unaddressed.

We also found evidence of the interactive potential of whiteboards being missed, with teachers using them for traditional didactic teaching or simply deploying them as a projector screen, often leaving students passive and frustrated. The hardware and software were only of pedagogic value when teachers had the knowledge, confidence and expertise to use them and to invest time in the considerable planning needed to exploit the full potential of the resource. Where whiteboards were not embedded in a wider pedagogic repertoire – as simply another tool in the repertoire of skilled teachers – concerns were expressed by teachers and

heads about whiteboards being used for their novelty value and a danger of ‘death by whiteboard’.

A focus on literacy

It is widely accepted that children have difficulty in learning if they are not proficient readers, a need poignantly illustrated by one Year 7 student:

When I get told to read in class I don't feel confident ...
I get all shaky and scared in case people laugh at me

The DfES's answer was to introduce a secondary school version of a programme written for primary age children, which they were simultaneously piloting elsewhere, but had little independent evidence of its success. ‘Ruth Miskin Literacy’ (RML) (now a commercial programme called Read Write Inc.) is a reading, spelling, vocabulary and writing programme for slow or hesitant KS3 readers, which promises to take children to a decoding age (as opposed to a reading comprehension age) of 12 years. It does this by means of a highly prescriptive sequence of activities, programmed into a one-hour lesson four days a week for a year. Students are taught in groups of between eight and 16 which do not include students with behaviour problems or specific learning difficulties, and no student is supposed to join the programme part of the way through the year.

Between 20 and 30 teachers were trained and many of them commented, often with surprise, on the success of the programme, both in terms of their own role and in terms of the way that students engaged with the activities. Others remained sceptical. Four of the schools judged RML to be highly successful with claims for clear evidence of increased reading ages and marked improvement in attitude. However, not all SFECC schools were so positive and some were vitriolic in their dislike of RML and its highly prescriptive approach. Critics (including HMI) observed that students resented being taken out of their normal classes, and that a school's ‘normal’ literacy and SEN programmes were likely to be of demonstrably greater benefit in increasing reading ages. The content of the RML programme was seen as being decontextualised, with little relationship to the curriculum. The rigidity of the programme was criticised both as a uniform one size-fits-all approach to learning, and for the lack of latitude for invention or adaptation by teachers. Where there was success it was generally ascribed to the skills of the individual teacher, who had managed to build over time a

warm and supportive relationship with a small group who, in their ‘special’ relationship increased in self-esteem. In one school one teacher was highly successful with RML while her colleagues were not.

The ambivalent responses to RML and claims for its success are hard to unravel, and raise questions as to the key elements that contribute to success. Possible explanations might include: teacher's own belief in the programme; the intensity of focus; high expectations; praise and reinforcement for success; small class size; the quality of relationships; the Hawthorne Effect. Nationally, the pendulum has swung and phonics programmes are back in political favour (Rose, 2006). Furthermore, the reported success of synthetic phonics in Clackmannanshire (Johnston and Watson, 2003) has re-ignited the debate over preferred approaches. Other commentators, meanwhile, suggest that this is a ‘war’ between analytic and synthetic phonics which misses the essential point that there are a host of differing ways of helping children learn to read (Wyse, 2003).

Using data effectively

Aligned with the focus on teaching and learning were developments in the use of data. A key aim of the project was to encourage the formative rather than simply summative use of data. Some saw a tension with data serving two distinct purposes – the use of disaggregated data to enhance teaching and learning, as against the use of aggregated data for whole school management and accountability purposes. The fact that the DfES was asking the schools to supply extra attainment data each half term for accountability purposes did not help. However, the possibility of using data to give information at group or class level, allowing schools to plot student trajectories of progress, was seen as useful. In the event, the spreadsheet developed by the DfES did not actually work, and schools worked on their own data systems. An HMI reported:

All eight schools within the project have focused on the use of data as a tool for raising standards, using a specific software programme. The software has been problematic, but the school continues to make good use of assessment information, using other software. Teachers are provided with a range of useful information on the pupils in their classes, and there is a clear expectation from senior staff that this information will be used to inform teachers' planning and teaching.

The SFECC spreadsheet led eventually to the development of a fully fledged database system

called START but this was only after the project was finished, and had it been fully developed earlier it might have increased the impact of data management and use within the project itself.

Networking with ICT

The most signal failure of the project was the use of ICT to exchange information and expertise among the eight schools. At the outset of the project there were high hopes that the eight schools would benefit from a website and video conferencing to collaborate, network and share good practice. In the event things turned out quite differently.

The DfES promoted video conferencing as having huge potential for dialogue on pedagogy across the schools, as well as the more usual ‘talking heads’ conversations amongst the different SLTs. The schools signed up for the vision, timetabled an early afternoon finish for a weekly sharing of curriculum and practice, and went through the costly business of buying and setting up the equipment. However, due to a variety of technical problems the system was never operational, and it could be argued that these were beyond the control of the DfES. Nevertheless, video conferencing had been talked up as high tech and exciting, and the schools had taken a lot of effort to install the equipment. The consensus among the schools was that all the technical aspects ought have been sorted out before the project was started.

A question of attainment

How well did SFECC perform after three years of costly and intensive intervention? We experimented with a number of different ways of grouping the measures of performance but eventually concluded that the measures of trends over time and value-added should probably be given prominence. Having analysed varying combinations of data we concluded that the schools could be divided into three broad groups:

A) where there was evidence of a positive change in performance on (most of) the indicators which suggested that the changes had been substantial and also provided some signs of upwards trends over time and of improvements in value-added;

B) where there was evidence of a positive change in performance on (some of) the indicators but where the scale of improvement was less substantial and there was less evidence

of upward trends or improvements in value-added; and

C) where the evidence, whilst generally indicative of some improvement, did not amount to convincing evidence of changes in performance over time or of increases in value-added.

Grouping the schools in this way did not prove straightforward. Eventually we concluded that two schools fell into Group A where there was evidence of substantial improvement in GCSE attainment over the period 2001–05 including signs of upward trends on the key indicators. Two schools fell into Group B where the scale of the improvement was generally in an upward direction, while the remaining four fell into Group C where the evidence for change was generally rather modest.

We then looked at a comparison group of 23 schools in similar circumstances facing similar challenges but which had not been the subject of government intervention. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: Proportions achieving 5+ A*-C GCSE grades (or equivalent) in the SFECC, comparison and national schools 2001–2005

Year	National	SFECC	Comparison Group
2001	50.0%	13.2%	15.5%
2002	52.0%	17.2%	18.8%
2003	52.9%	20.7%	24.3%
2004*	53.7%	23.5%	26.8%
2005**	57.1%	33.7%	33.5%

Notes:

From 2004 a wider range of qualifications have been included by the DfES in the 5+ A-C grades (or equivalent) indicator.

**The 2005 percentages are for pupils at the end of Key Stage 4, *not* aged 15 as previously. The figures in this table have been weighted to take account of differences in cohort size across the schools.

Both groups secured similar improvements over the period, which were ahead of national trends (probably in large measure as a result of the wider range of qualifications brought into the calculation of key targets). However, there was no difference between the SFECC schools and the comparison group overall.

Applying lessons from school improvement research

Can governments change schools? The SFCEC intervention was premised on the notion that if everything we have learned about school improvement could be applied to schools on the edge, with funding, support and training, these schools would show dramatic gains and wider policy lesson would be adduced. These assumptions are captured in the publication *School Improvement – Lessons from Research* (Hopkins *et al.*, 2005) which summarises four key points, all of which were embodied in the approach to the Octet schools, all of which are none the less open to debate.

Firstly, it is ‘at the level of the individual classroom teacher that most of the difference between schools seem to occur’ (2005, p4). The implication is that the emphasis of school improvement should be on teachers and their work in the classroom. This premise is derived from effectiveness and improvement studies, which show, perhaps not surprisingly, that the teacher effect is more significant than the school effect and that much effort can be wasted on things that have little to do with teaching and learning. Whether this holds as true for schools on the edge as it might elsewhere is a question. Even if teachers are accepted as being the prime focus for school improvement efforts, the question remains how best to achieve this. How can government-led intervention strategies reach every teacher in a school? And to what degree can all teachers be transformed not only in skill and disposition but also in the risk taking to confront inappropriate curriculum and testing? Would this imply direct and intensive ‘training’ of every teacher, bearing in mind the continual turnover of staff? Cascade training with key staff as mentors and trainers? Creating resource and support for collaborative lesson planning, peer observation, rigorous and sustained self-evaluation? The SFCEC intervention did focus much of its energy on classroom practice, but primarily through the training of senior and middle leaders and school improvement group members. None of these in themselves, or in concert, could effect the depth of penetration on students’ learning needed to revitalise and energise disaffected and alienated young people.

The second premise is that, ‘what pupils learn in school is partly dependent on what they bring to school in terms of their family and individual social and economic circumstances. Deprivation is still by far the biggest deterrent of educational success’ (p6). Juxtaposing ‘partly dependent’ and ‘biggest

determent’ is to sit uncomfortably on the fence. At one end of the spectrum there are children with such strong family support from the earliest age that they arrive at the school gates able to read fluently, already with a wealth of knowledge of the world, eager to learn and impervious to frustrations that classroom learning often entails. At the other end of the spectrum are children so starved of affection and emotional support, in some cases so psychologically damaged as to make ‘access’ to the curriculum an irrelevance. As we know, where young people lie on that spectrum is closely correlated to socio-economic circumstances, and although every exception tests the rule, there are conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, which no amount of excellent teaching can repair. Given this, there are strong arguments for investing effort on the wider community, on the kind of inter-agency support now advocated by *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters* policy initiatives. Yet the SFCEC project was entirely focused upon the schools, largely ignoring their local communities.

The third premise is that ‘sustained improvement over a period of years is unusual, and of course, year to year some schools will fall back’ (p6). This implies that school improvement efforts should concentrate on sustainability (the issue picked up in the fourth point), and that year-on-year improvement is neither to be expected nor necessary for a trajectory of sustained improvement over time. Yet great store has been placed on a school’s annual test results, which are themselves only a very limited measure of a school’s achievements. Struggling schools in general and schools involved in SFCEC in particular were subject to frequent monitoring for example by HMI inspection, and the pressure for short term tangible evidence of ‘improvement’, notably in the form of GCSE results, was immense. Such intensity of pressure may work at cross-purposes to the fourth point, that of achieving sustainability.

Fourthly, ‘schools that generate sustained improvement tend to act strategically, first self-reviewing and reflecting, gathering and using appropriate evidence, and then act collaboratively, to build capacity for further improvement’ (p7). This is in contrast to what Gray *et al.* (1999) refer to as tactical approaches – ways to increase outcome measures with the focus on the short term, precluding real longer term gains – ‘responding simply at a tactical level presents problems for sustained improvement’ (Gray *et al.*, 1999, p145). The dilemma of the Octet schools, and all schools in similar circumstances, is that tactical measures are an imperative for survival. It is schools on the very

edge of acceptable performance that have to prove themselves in the currency of GCSE and point scores. As headteachers frequently testified, they have very short term and political targets as well as trying to build capacity in the longer term, couched by some senior leaders as a moral conflict, which they wrestled with on a daily basis. To deploy the best teachers and invest the greatest efforts in those young people most likely to pay extrinsic dividends at the expense of those unlikely to meet the critical benchmark? To pit the continued survival of the school against the welfare of some individual children? For the most committed and idealistic of senior leaders these were dilemmas that ran like a thread through their everyday thinking and practice.

If governments can change schools these are the dilemmas they have to understand and confront, not with an accretion of new initiatives but with an acknowledgement that some of their funding, curriculum and testing policies constitute a problem rather than a solution for schools in exceptionally challenging circumstances.

Nine lessons for policy and practice

Much of what happened during the life of the project was, in reality, not that distinctive nor was it unique to the eight schools. Many exciting things were already happening in these schools, and had the project started from where the schools were, rather than from its own menu of interventions, SFECC would have had been constructed differently and might have had a different kind of impact. What the project did achieve was to provide a catalyst for schools to review their existing practice, and to test new ways of working. In the conclusion in the final chapter of the book *Schools on the Edge* we attempt to tease out some of the broader lessons.

1. Intervening in schools on the edge is a long-term proposition. Judged in terms of conventional criteria, the investment is risky, and the failure rates historically have been high – higher perhaps than policy-makers are aware of, or care to admit. Furthermore, dividends are slow to emerge. Almost all schools on the edge require considerable and sustained investment.
2. There are systemic reasons why some schools are on the edge. These are not easily addressed by purely *educational* interventions. They require more joined up social and economic policy. Every Child Matters goes some way to recognising the need for more coherent delivery of services but is obliged to work within local infrastructures, which do not address wider systematic issues.
3. The longer a school has been floundering, the longer it will usually take to get back on its feet. As a rule of thumb, if the period of difficulties stretches back ten years, it is likely to take five to get back on track and perhaps seven to be confident of longer term success. Five years is seen by policy makers as a long-term horizon, on the other hand children have to take five years to get through either the primary or secondary stages of schooling. We should be cautious about collapsing time.
4. There are few easy generalisations to be made about the contexts and challenges facing schools on the edge – each school is likely to experience different and occasionally unique problems. Lumping them together and attempting to prescribe common remedies is unlikely to be helpful.
5. The fight for some semblance of stability has to be accepted as a never-ending struggle. The mind-set of many of the key participants in schools on the edge (whether they be school leaders, teachers or pupils) is that of ‘temporary residents’ – in due course they will move on, perhaps sooner rather than later. ‘Fail-safes’ need to be built into planning, and resourcing will always be more demanding and expensive than in schools where stability can simply be taken for granted.
6. Few schools are adept at introducing and managing innovations successfully. This capacity is massively under-developed in schools on the edge. However unpalatable, the key lesson for policymakers is that change takes time to plan and implement, and the stage at which most projects end or wind down is often precisely the point at which the feasibility of potential investments can begin to be assessed – possibly for the first time. Demanding that these same schools simultaneously respond to the short-term pressures imposed by performance tables and Ofsted monitoring can produce the institutional equivalent of schizophrenia. The main legacy in schools on the edge of the ‘show-quick-results-at-any-cost’ mentality has been a series of failed investments, each in turn adding to the view that ‘it might work elsewhere but it won’t work here’.

7. Seeking to prescribe the ‘what and how’ of school improvement in widely differing institutions and social contexts can be counter-productive. Change starts to take root in schools when the staff collectively began to get hold of a ‘powerful idea’. That idea could take a variety of different forms. Policy-makers need to become more adept at drawing up menus of the most promising ideas, which schools may approach as ‘a la carte’, while ordering ‘off-menu’ should be also examined and appraised on its merits.
8. Taking a broader view of leadership is essential. A ‘charismatic’ or ‘heroic’ headteacher may, in certain circumstances, be needed but the risk is that the template for leadership can be drawn too narrowly, and may in the longer term prove counter-productive. In this respect the setting up of a School Improvement Group is significant in distributing leadership. It can create space for teacher leadership and team leadership to emerge and contribute to teacher-led improvement.
9. School improvement groups take a variety of forms but tend to be composed entirely of teaching staff focused on professional development, learning and teaching and school-based issues. If they are to have a wider impact their membership would be enhanced by including other people with a broader community perspective. Whatever their constitution, however, the biggest challenge is to take young people’s views about teaching, learning and their connectedness to their lives, in and out of school, more seriously.

A society that is committed to offering all its citizens equal opportunities has no choice about whether to have policies for schools in ‘exceptionally challenging circumstances’. Stated baldly, the gap between schools serving mainstream communities and those on the edge is not just large but, in most people’s view, unacceptably so. The moral case for intervention should be taken as read, but approached with sensitivity, support, receptiveness to research and a firm grasp on the lessons of history.

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