THE CHALLENGE OF RAISING STUDENT ATTAINMENT IN SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DEPRIVED COASTAL REGIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ‘COASTAL ACADEMIES’ IN ENGLAND.

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Over 2000 secondary schools have (or will be) converted to academy status in England in 2014. Academies are independent, non-selective, state-funded schools managed by teams of independent sponsors rather than the local authority. The programme has been controversial, with supporters identifying policy freedom enabling faster improvement in results than other state funded schools, and opponents believing that it is a form of back-door privatisation that will lead to greater social segregation.

While there have been large-scale evaluations of the academy programme (e.g. Machin and Vernoit, 2011) and qualitative research on different aspects of the programme (e.g. Gunter, 2011), little attention has been paid to secondary academies in coastal regions in England. These coastal academies typically have a specific range of challenges similar to those in multicultural inner city and rural schools, including high levels of socio-economic deprivation and unemployment, limited parental involvement and low expectations. Building on research undertaken in 2012, this project aims to provide an understanding of the challenges faced by secondary ‘coastal academies’ and offer tentative strategies for raising student attainment based on the strategies and outcomes examined.

In 2012 the researchers conducted a qualitative investigation of three coastal academies in England that had converted from national challenge schools to academy status under the Labour administration. In 2014 the project was extended to six schools and, through an examination of academy documentation and publicly available data and interviews with the principal, a senior leader and four teachers, yielded rich data on each academy's strategies, processes and outcomes. Themes emergent from analysis focus on the task of raising student attainment through tackling the ‘culture of under-attainment’ (Woods et al, 2007:239) and include: leadership (MacBeath, 2005); the culture of each institution (Glover and Coleman, 2005) including sponsorship engagement and attitudes towards continuing professional development; and student outcomes. The findings offer insights into the particular challenges for raising student attainment faced by coastal academies and develop an understanding of the ways in which leadership teams respond to local circumstances; draw upon the expertise of sponsors/governors and provide opportunities for staff inclusion and development.

Selected references

