WHAT WORKS IN RAISING ACHIEVEMENT: LESSONS FROM A DECADE OF LOCAL AUTHORITY RESEARCH

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Over recent decades considerable attention has been devoted in studying what works in raising achievement in schools. For example, research into good practice in raising achievement of Black Caribbean (Demie 2005, Ofsted 2002), Black African (Demie 2013), Outstanding Schools (Demie and Lewis 2010, 2013) and LAs (Woods et al 2013, Demie 2014) have revealed a dramatic rise in achievement in the Local Authority (LA) that is worth learning from. A review of this literature shows that there is a need to look more closely at why some schools and LAs in areas of deprivation do well against the odds.

This case study explores an extraordinary transformation of Education in a Local Authority and examines the success factors behind outstanding improvement. It draws lessons from a decade of research undertaken in Lambeth LA and asks the following questions: Why are the schools achieving so well? What are the factors contributing to this success? What are the lessons for school improvement?

Three complementary methodological approaches were used. First, GCSE attainment data and Ofsted judgments were analysed to explore changes. Secondly, using ethnographic approach, detailed case studies were carried out to hold discussions with headteachers and staff to gather evidence on how well all pupils were achieving and the factors contributing to this. Thirdly, pupil, parent, governors, former Directors of Education and elected lead councillors’ focus groups were undertaken to ascertain their views. This was further triangulated with the findings of the case studies to identify examples of good practice.

The research findings confirm that attainment at GCSE has risen much faster in Lambeth than nationally and is now 6 percentage points above national average. This is a huge improvement compared to a decade ago when its schools performance was 20% below the national average. There are a number of reasons why the schools and LA are bucking the national trend. The research identified the reasons for improvement, which includes ambitious leadership at all levels, effective school improvement service, high quality teaching and learning, high expectations, effective use of data, effective partnership, targeted support to challenge underachievement and extensive use of staff from local community. Each of the above good practices is explored in detail in the paper. In conclusion, the study argues that the improvement in the LA's schools in the last decade is an exceptional achievement and a good example of a success story that is worth learning from.