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High achievement for socio-economically disadvantaged students: Example of an equitable education model in schools across five English districts



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ABSTRACT

Socio-economically disadvantaged students have poor academic outcomes compared to other peers globally. Although a relatively wealthier country, these issues of underachievement are of concern in England. This situation is particularly acute in high poverty regions, although there exists variability between schools within such regions, with some schools achieving learning success for disadvantaged students. The focus of this research study was to understand common features in these successful schools, in terms of leadership decisions and how these are operationalised by teachers to support socio-economically disadvantaged students to succeed. The study took place over 12 months, in a high poverty region in England across 5 district areas, and a sample of 30 primary schools participated. Semi-structured interviews were completed with both senior leaders and teachers within each participant school, and thematic analysis was undertaken in line with grounded theory. Results show that all schools in the sample used seven key drivers to nurture learning and achievement for disadvantaged students. Participating schools universally recognised the findings as a true reflection of their schools. The findings suggest that equity in respect of the Capabilities Approach is possible for socio-economically disadvantaged students in schools where leaders and teachers cooperatively identify and apply these seven key drivers. Discussion suggests the findings from this study with its cooperative nature, if translated into structured resources, could support other schools to succeed in ensuring high achievement for socio-economically disadvantaged students across a region.

1. Introduction

Education is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all [The United Nations Member States \(2015\)](#). The Incheon Declaration ([UNESCO, 2016](#)) resulted from a global conference in 2015 in Korea of the World Education Forum, which focused on education as the main key driver of development and in achieving the other 16 Sustainable Development Goals. The continued collaborative global commitment from the Incheon Declaration is to an education agenda with inclusion and equity at its heart, which is 'holistic, ambitious and aspirational, leaving no one behind' ([UNESCO, 2016](#)):

"Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all." (UNESCO,

Education 2030: The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action, P.7)

Despite this global commitment, there are entrenched barriers faced by children from socio-economic disadvantage which the system finds difficult to overcome. These issues are evident in the United Kingdom, a comparatively wealthier OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) country. Specifically, in England over 25% of young people from state-funded schools are classed as disadvantaged. Although the system has improved in recent years, the Department for Education continues to report concerning attainment gaps between students from disadvantaged outcomes and other peers ([DfE, 2019a](#); [DfE 2019b](#)). This gap is more acute in poorer areas of England ([Hutchinson et al., 2018](#)).

This paper reports on the first of a two-part study, which took place across five high poverty district areas in England, between 2015 and 2016 over 12 months: (1) to identify successes within the schools lo-

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cally, (2) to understand the ingredients present in local schools which together nurture high achievement for disadvantaged students, and (3) to recommend ways to share this knowledge gathered from authentic local voices across the region, and to translate findings into a standardised process for implementation as a lever for positive improvement in schools. Part I (2015-16) and Part II (2016-17) included collaborative engagement with schools, local and national experts. With variability in outcomes including for disadvantaged cohorts between schools in the region, research was undertaken to explore patterns active in a number of schools in each area who were successful with disadvantaged cohorts (Part I). In this way, Part I would provide a trusted local evidence-base from which a collaborative system of peer support including standardised reflective tools might be co-constructed between researchers and local school leaders during Part II.

This paper reports on Part I of the study and is organised as follows: [Section 2](#) outlines the Background. Here, firstly the context of a global commitment to education equity is explored, and current trends identified: in underachievement globally, and of disadvantaged students in England including in one region where the study is focused. Second, the Capabilities Approach is put forward as a framework within which to consider equity in education. [Section 3](#) presents the study research plan and the methods used. [Section 4](#) presents the findings. [Sections 5](#) and [6](#) provide a discussion of the findings and a conclusion which makes brief recommendations about the translation of these findings into practice across a geographic region.

2. Background

2.1. The global context and commitment towards equity in education

Inequity and deprivation perpetuate poverty across generations (UNICEF, 2018, p.11). Assessments from 2007-2015 data indicate that inequity constitutes a major challenge as children and adolescents from the richest 20% of households achieved greater proficiency in reading than those from the poorest 20% (United Nations SDG4, 2020). UNICEF identifies 617 million children and adolescents around the world as unable to reach minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, even though 60% of these are in school. It concludes that this learning crisis is the greatest global challenge to preparing young people for life, work and active citizenship (UNICEF, 2019).

To change this situation nations aligned in their commitment to The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) to work towards quality education which is central to ensuring a full and productive life. There is a continued global call for equity in education to remove barriers for disadvantaged children, as exemplified in the UNICEF Every Child Learns: Education Strategy 2019-2030. For UNICEF, this means focusing on children excluded on the basis of gender, children with disabilities, the poorest, ethnic and linguistic minorities, migrant and displaced children, and children affected by emergencies. (UNICEF, 2019, p.28). Equity for children is both a stand-alone goal of the United Nations where 'every child has an equitable chance in life' (Goal 5) and a cross cutting theme for the five goals, for example to Goal 2, where 'every child learns'. The purpose of these goals is to overcome key barriers that hold children back, deny them the agency to shape their destinies and prevent them from fulfilling their potential (UNICEF, Strategic Plan, 2018-21. p.11).

2.2. Ongoing inequity for disadvantaged students in England

In England, researchers suggest reducing the disadvantage gap between students in high poverty areas and their peers, by promoting a strategy of poverty alleviation, including ensuring a quality teaching workforce, early and sustained additional support for those who are behind with attainment, access to a broad curriculum including out-of-class experience, and promoting wellbeing to adulthood

(Hutchinson et al., 2018). Since 2011, there has been focused additional government funding for schools in the Pupil Premium (mostly defined on the basis of a student's eligibility to free school meals (FSM)), aimed to enable schools to nurture disadvantaged students and improve outcomes. In 2019 in England, 26.5% of students in state-funded schools at age 16 and 31% of students at age 11 were classified as disadvantaged by the Department for Education (DfE, 2019a; 2019b). As measured by the disadvantaged attainment gap index, a positive shift resulted for the disadvantaged cohorts in England, where in 2019, the gap at age 11 was 12.8% lower than in 2011 (DfE, 2019b) and at age 16 was 9.1% lower than in 2011 (DfE, 2019a). Nevertheless, these young people living in socio-economic disadvantage continue to have lower outcomes than other peers, there being a 20% gap at age 11 and 25.2% gap at age 16 between disadvantage students and all other students. In 2019, at age 11, only 51% of disadvantaged students reached the expected standard in all of reading, writing and maths compared to 71% of all other students (DfE, 2019b); whilst at age 16 only 24.7% of disadvantaged students achieved the required standard of grade 5-9 in English and mathematics, compared to 49.9% of all other students (DfE, 2019a).

The gap in education outcomes between disadvantaged students and other peers is of particular concern in poorer areas of the country such as Northeast England, where the gap is more acute (Hutchinson et al., 2018).

2.3. The context of a high poverty region in England

The gap between disadvantaged students and their peers in general widens between the age of 11 and 16 years, and there is concerning variability both across the system in England, and within the system at the district area level. For example, the Northeast has had amongst the biggest relative decreases in the attainment gap at age 11, where in some areas the gap reduced by up to 5.6 months relative to other areas with a similar starting point. However, the Northeast has also been an area with the fastest growth in gap between attainment at 11 and 16 years. The gap here increased by up to 17.9 months relative to other districts, for example London, in areas where there are similar numbers of persistently disadvantaged pupils (Hutchinson et al., 2018). As the evidence indicates, although the Northeast region now performs better at the primary stage, it still fails to translate this into performance in secondary school, with poor rates of progress across the region (Andrews et al., 2017).

Despite this continued difficult situation in Northeast England, districts in the area sought to identify local success, and to articulate the patterns found therein into a model of inclusive equitable education common to these settings.

2.4. The capability approach: Towards equity in education for socio-economically disadvantaged students

The Capabilities Approach was first developed by Sen (1992, 1993) and Nussbaum (1993, 2000) as a radical challenge to the conventional approach to welfare economics. It can be defined as an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorising about basic social justice, where the key question is considered to be: What is each person able to do and to be when given real opportunities? The approach so defined takes each person as an end worthy of dignity and considers whether individuals have the required opportunities to develop their capabilities to do and to be in order to flourish.

The literature considers and defends the significance of various versions of the Capabilities Approach in fields including economics, law, health, and education (Anand, 2005; Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010; Law & Widdows, 2007; Nussbaum, 1993, 2011; Sen, 1993, 2009; Terzi, 2010; Walker, 2006; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Other examples of the Capabilities Approach can be found in various disciplines including economics (Sen, 2009) and health (Anand, 2005; Anand et al., 2005), in an attempt to improve the ability to flourish of vulnerable groups

such as the young, elderly, disabled, and dispossessed. Others specifically focus on changing existing injustices in society in relation to gender discrimination (Nussbaum, 2000), or poverty through gender disadvantage (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Although the Capabilities Approach has not received the same attention in education which it has in health and economics, educationists have employed the Capabilities Approach in a variety of areas including educational policy analysis and pedagogy (Cockerill, 2014) particularly in tertiary education (Flores-Crespo, 2004, 2007; Walker, 2006), disability and special educational needs (Broderick, 2018; Terzi, 2010). Others have applied the Capabilities Approach to issues of social justice in education, in particular as an attempt to achieve gender equality (Unterhalter & Aikman, 2007). In general, these writers engage with the Capabilities Approach as developed by Sen (1992, 1993) and Nussbaum (2000) in respect of human freedom for capability development and its relation with education.

The Capabilities Approach recognises human diversity and that these differences can be sources of inequality. Sen outlines diversity in three ways: (a) in terms of personal characteristics such as physical and mental abilities; (b) in terms of external circumstances such as political, social and cultural arrangements into which we are born; and (c) in terms of our ability to convert resources into valued functionings (what we can do or be), for example being able to read and write (1992). These differences are sources of inequality and injustice conferring disadvantages or advantages depending on areas such as socio-economic status. This kind of diversity means that distributive patterns of resources and opportunities can be unjust and unequal. For example this lack of equity is evident in England today where socio-economically disadvantaged children have fewer opportunities to access learning and achieve poorer learning outcomes when compared to their other peers.

Within the Capabilities Approach equality is measured in the realm of capabilities, such that the central factor in the search for justice relates to equalising opportunities for expanding an individual's capabilities, through improving individual functionings 'doings and beings' (Sen, 1992, p. 40), which result in a particular outcome or achievement (eg. reading, writing, communication, Literacy etc.). According to Sen, the question 'equality of what?' is pivotal in the search for justice. In attempting to theorise equity in education, the Capabilities Approach provides a useful metric for examining inequalities in education, and for working towards equity which includes specific additional support for particular students. In line with Broderick (2018) it is helpful to frame the question of equity in education for a specific group in the context of capabilities using four questions. These include the following: What is equity in education in the context of capability development about? Why should we think of equity in education in the context of capabilities? Who should be considered? How should we ensure we make equity in the context of capabilities happen? Although this framework of questions for Broderick focuses on inclusion in education with respect to disability, it is helpful to use the framework when focusing on socio-economically disadvantaged students. Regarding 'the what', equity is about equalising opportunities for expanding an individual's capabilities. In respect of 'the why', the capabilities approach which drives improving individual functionings (eg. reading) promotes a framing of education systems which facilitate the goals of the United Nations ensuring that every child learns (UNICEF, Strategic Plan, 2018-21). In respect of 'the who', since the capabilities approach is focused on individuals, the goal in education is to nurture capability development in each and every learner in the context of their social situation. This means that individual difference and need must receive specific attention, as well as maintaining an overarching focus on a curriculum offer for all learners. The 'how' focuses on the processes and practices required to meet the needs of all pupils to learn and flourish, whilst giving focused support to individuals who require it ensuring the development of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils. This framework of questions about equity in education in the context of capabilities allows school leaders and teachers to focus on disadvantaged students as a priority, to have a shared vision and purpose with respect to ensur-

ing equity in education for socio-economically disadvantaged students, that underpins all process and practices in schools, to ensure these students have equal opportunity to develop their capabilities, to learn and flourish.

3. The study

This paper reports on research undertaken across five district areas in northern England.

The study sought to answer two research questions:

1. Are there comparative key drivers present in schools across district areas, which underpin high quality provision for all young people, including for the most disadvantaged cohorts?
2. Do these key drivers align with the existing literature about the structures and practices which support high quality provision for all young people within schools, including for disadvantaged students?

3.1. Sample and recruitment

A purposive sampling process was undertaken including 217 primary school settings across five district areas. From this sample across the 5 districts, schools were selected for participation based on their proven track record of above national average pupil performance at age 11 in terms of percentage attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils (ie. In England, 70% of disadvantaged pupils achieved level 4 or above in all of reading, writing and mathematics, compared to 85% of all other pupils. DfE, 2015). The list of schools was then refined further using local information from district education officers from within the five district areas. These provided information about schools with regards to whether they were preparing or awaiting imminent school inspections, or faced staffing issues which may make it inappropriate for the school to be approached to participate, owing to time constraints. In total 60 schools were selected and invited to participate in the study, and 30 participated.

3.2. Methods

During this study 30 primary schools were visited and participated in semi-structured interviews, including a one-to-one interview with the headteacher, and two small group interviews with senior leaders and teachers respectively. Participating schools were contacted via email by the research team explaining the purpose of the study and informed of the length of the visit (2 to 2.5 hours in school in total) and asked to construct a timetable that suited the school to include the various interviews. Each school was visited by two members of the research team and a standardised question proforma was used for data collection.

A standardised proforma of questions for use with senior leaders and teachers was designed to structure the one-to-one and small group interviews in schools. Field notes were taken by a team of three researchers during the interviews (working in pairs per interview). Notes were emailed to the headteacher, senior leaders and teachers interviewed for validation as a true representation of the conversation following each interview.

The interview questions focused around two over-arching themes:

- What strategic decisions are being taken by the school leadership to drive high achievement for the disadvantaged group?
- How are these decisions being operationalised in classrooms by staff and with pupils and their families?

At the end of the school visit schools were also invited to complete a 'best practice' case study. Schools were not given a standardised template for the case study, and instead were given complete freedom to share what they identified as 'best practice'. The case studies had a dual purpose: (1) to be shared with schools during Part II of the study, and

(2) to be used by the team of three researchers to check the previous data collected from the visit for internal validity focusing on accuracy of fit, and for external validity deepening understanding of the findings through the combination of multiple readings.

3.2.1. Instruments: Standardised interview question proforma

The interview question proforma was designed to collect qualitative data about the school's approach to delivering high achievement for all students, with a focus on socio-economically disadvantaged cohorts (classified as eligible for Free School Meals). These were designed for a one-to-one interview with the headteacher, and two small group interviews, one with senior leaders and another with teachers. The proforma of questions was composed of three elements: contextual school data, distinct interview sections for the leadership and teachers, and a section about programs used to promote the high achievement of pupils which was mentioned with leadership and discussed in detail with teachers. See [Appendix A](#) for the Interview Question Proforma.

3.2.2. Data collection and analysis

The interview process of the study comprised three distinct sets of interview data collection points.

1. First, the standardised interview question proforma was piloted in three primary schools during collection point one. The interview question proforma was refined at this point, prior to use with 27 schools.
2. Twelve primary schools were then visited and interviews with the headteacher, senior leaders and teachers were completed by the researchers during data collection point two. Following collection point two the data was coded into emergent themes in respect of the two research questions by the team of three researchers individually, and then revised by the researchers as a group, enhancing internal validity.
3. Fifteen primary schools were then visited and interviews with the headteacher, senior leaders and teachers were completed by the researchers during data collection point three.

The findings from collection point two were further checked for plausibility at the end of each school interview in the fifteen schools visited at point three, using respondent validation checking for the viability of the interpretation of emergent themes.

Following collection point three the data was again analysed by the researchers individually and then discussed as one group using the key themes from collection point two.

The findings arising from the analysis of interview data from collection point two and three, were again tested for validity against the in-depth case studies which schools leaders completed post school visit. The draft report of the findings was further tested for validity with a core group of four headteachers from the pilot school visits, local academics, and with Sir John Dunford, former government Pupil Premium champion.

Data collection was thus undertaken at three points with groups of schools (n=3; n=12; n=15). The interview question proforma was piloted with three schools, following which it was used with 27 schools. Data analysis was undertaken after data collection point two and three in line with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Triangulation of data from the school visit interview question proforma and the free-style school case studies provided a rich narrative, and the various data collection points checked for internal validation (Glazer & Strauss, 1999). Denzin, 2009 Based on Denzin, external validity was sought through triangulation of the data (2009). Therefore, both methods triangulation of data, and triangulation of sources using various data collection points were used to secure the findings.

3.2.3. Ethics, participant privacy and confidentiality

The study was approved through two ethics procedures, and was not part of a university study. The research study was therefore approved by

the school headteacher within each participant school by email prior to the study, and by the five district area Local Authority education leads with statutory responsibility for the participant schools.

The privacy of the participants interviewed was protected through a series of confidentiality measures: school headteachers agreed to participate by email and were informed about the confidentiality of the data collected. Prior to the interviews all participants interviewed were briefed about the purpose of the research verbally by the researchers, the process of data collection, and the process by which data would be handled, and anonymised prior to reporting. Participants were notified of their ability to ask for the data to be removed from the dataset, up to the point of analysis. Additionally the schools were sent an information sheet about the study and the two key questions prior to the interviews. The interviews were not recorded to ensure an atmosphere of trust was established from the outset during each interview. Instead, to avoid bias during data collection, fieldnotes were made by the interviewer using a standardised structured question proforma, and two researchers collected fieldnotes on each interview together. The interview notes (compiled of the two researcher's notes) were then sent to the schools and validated as a true representation of the conversation by the headteacher, senior leaders and teachers interviewed, prior to analysis. All identifying information was deleted for data analysis. Only the three researchers who undertook the interviews in schools had access to the interview data transcripts for analysis purposes. The research was approved by the schools and district areas in which it took place, and adhered to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

4. Findings

The findings from the data analysis indicated that was a common pattern found in respect of the key features present in all the schools visited in terms of the decision they make to ensure high achievement for all students which included an unrelenting focus on socio-disadvantaged students, and how these decisions are operationalised. There was a unified cooperative approach from the headteacher, senior leaders, and teachers interviewed within each school as to the key features required to ensure that disadvantaged students succeed. Seven Key Drivers (KD) with distinct characteristics emerged consistently from the interviews with school leaders and teachers, as being particularly significant to ensure the high outcomes achieved for disadvantaged students.

The seven key drivers and their characteristics presented below were the summary of the evidence from the interviews undertaken in the 27 schools. The school interviewees validated the content of the fieldnotes taken by the researchers during the interviews as a true representation of the conversation. In addition, these schools were also sent the findings once analysed in the form of the seven key drivers and their characteristics stated below. The findings presented below were validated by all the schools in the sample as a true representation of the key features in their schools to achieve high achievement for all students with particular focus on socio-economically disadvantaged students.

4.1. Seven key drivers (KD) and their characteristics

KD1: Strategies are driven by an equity model of school provision.

Equitable strategies drive decisions and practice uncompromisingly in these schools, with 'high expectations of every child'. Student provision is constantly reviewed to gain maximum effect from available resources, and staff are encouraged to experiment and innovate, as they seek new ways to meet student needs. Schools change tack when actions are not effective and resources are directly targeted to meet student need, with focus on disadvantaged cohorts. A definitive collective moral purpose pervades the work of all adults and ensures a secure focus on the needs of all learners, resulting in an uncompromising drive to deliver high quality teaching and learning for all students (which includes regular review of student needs).

In terms of school provision and pastoral support with families, teachers reported intelligence led resourcing as highly effective in meeting learner needs (eg. diagnostics are used to assessed elements of student reading which require further support and research-based interventions are put in place for these students). To achieve this approach, teachers reported that the high investment in their staff training results in the timely acquisition of specialist skills to match students' individual learning circumstances. They reported that assessment regimes provide up-to-date, deep knowledge of students which in turn underpins the school's capacity for swift and finely tuned interventions. Teachers reported having developed a curriculum that is well-planned and well-matched to student age and stage of development and that offers significant enrichment opportunities within and beyond the school day.

Leaders reported that systems have been developed that enable rapid response to changing familial circumstances in order to maintain stability for students, including enabling parents to support children's learning. This was reiterated by teachers. Therefore a significant factor to enable the most vulnerable students to succeed, seems to be the way in which schools can, as far as possible, insulate the worst effects of family stress to ensure that any negative impact on children's learning, progress and emotional security can be minimised.

KD2: The school works to a set of non-negotiable benchmarks within a well-honed culture of high expectations about the performance of all groups (that includes behaviour and attitudes) and applies equally to children and adults.

We found non-negotiable expectations about the performance of all groups of learners and adults in these schools, with no compromise as exemplified by very high expectations set and maintained for the disadvantaged group, including both academic performance and personal attributes. Significant emphasis is placed on developing strong student learning behaviours and resilience, and there is substantial investment by leaders and teachers in achieving high attendance including successful work with hard-to-reach families. In all schools the physical environment provides an outstanding resource to support student learning and progress (for example in terms of classroom structures, displays, library provision, provision for encouraging play).

Teachers reported having high expectations of student capabilities for all groups of learners and of setting all students challenging and specific targets. They reported curriculum mapping regularly and in detail to ensure the age and stage of development of specific groups and individuals are met. Teacher place particular emphasis on developing student's key learning skills, including resilience, so students sustain a commitment to their work. Interviews with teachers suggested children demonstrate genuine enjoyment of learning and show a willingness for sustained engagement in lesson activities, and there are established expectations about attendance and punctuality that are regularly reinforced and that successfully target the hardest-to-reach families. While teachers were sympathetic and highly supportive of the most vulnerable families, children's attendance and welfare was the overriding factor in a school's decision making.

KD3: Engrained in the work of schools is intelligent analysis and accountability protocols to ensure: Regular review of educational and pastoral provision quality, including monitoring so changes are made when better ways of meeting need are identified (undertaken termly, monthly or weekly as required); Therefore data and observational evidence drive swift but carefully focused interventions for students at risk of falling behind or experiencing difficulties; There is smart use of performance and pastoral information at whole school, group and individual student level.

We found that these schools had a clear and coherent understanding of student achievement and social/emotional needs. Changes in provision for students at risk of falling behind are swiftly made. These schools work from an evidence-based set of solutions (ie a library of strategies from research). Accountability is based upon clear lines-of-sight from teacher/staff classroom performance to student learning and progress,

and their ability to track performance accurately over time is exemplary. In addition, there is expertise to undertake routine comparison against the performance of similar schools and national trends.

Teachers reported that staff track student academic performance regularly, and leaders supported the accuracy of staff tracking. Teachers also respond rapidly when students are at risk of falling behind. They are encouraged to make effective use of their existing specialisms and to acquire new ones, to target interventions and deliver specific curriculum elements. They reported flexibility of timetabling to respond to emerging needs of students, and that they made use of multi-faceted tracking covering all aspects of student development, often linked to familial stress or breakdown (eg. CPoMs, an online tool to record student issues daily, including emotional, environmental, etc), to quickly identify and respond to emerging student problems. Teachers use regular team meetings to examine student progress and outcomes and to agree the next stage of provision.

KD4: Schools have an embedded differentiated professional improvement culture that invests substantial resource in staff development at all levels, including research.

In these schools we found that staff receive regular, relevant and high quality professional training. Development of expertise at all staffing levels is encouraged by leaders and includes an expectation that staff will demonstrate leadership in their area of expertise. These schools show a commitment to active in-school research, and staff knowledge of effective practice is developed through relevant training (informed by national and international research programs).

School leaders suggested teachers have an excellent pedagogical knowledge with a high degree of specialism that reflects the range of specific student needs, which was reiterated by teachers when interviewed. They also reported careful deployment of adult expertise resulting from a deep understanding of students' needs. Teachers have a strong commitment to review their practice regularly, often resulting from school-led research programs and knowledge gained from wider research.

KD5: Each school has an established culture of shared staff accountability for student achievement.

We found that there is an un-compromising recognition that all staff must play a full part in raising achievement in the schools interviewed. The workforce takes responsibility and every opportunity for developing their own capacity to make a full contribution to student learning and progress. There is also an established performance management culture which directly informs staff development programs.

Leaders and teachers reported that performance management processes are integral to achieving school targets and priorities in all school phases. Teachers suggested that all adult contributions to lesson planning, delivery and assessment are valued with tightly targeted deployment and a shared responsibility for tracking student progress, both academic and personal. Designated staff lead on specific aspects of the curriculum, including teaching assistants and ancillary staff where appropriate. Teachers valued additional collaboration from parent support workers who provide some specialist support for the most vulnerable families.

KD6: Leaders adhere to the principle of 'licensed autonomy' (for teachers and leaders at all levels) that recognises staff capability and encourages innovation.

We found that staff who demonstrate highly effective skills and knowledge are offered licensed autonomy for innovation and experimentation by leaders, and these schools are genuine learning communities, seeking to improve provision. Importantly, teachers and adults have the autonomy to shape their teaching to the needs of the children according to individual and cohort requirements.

Leaders reported an effective performance management approach aligned to well-developed professional development which resulted in high quality teaching and learning. This was reiterated by teachers who also reported that staff are encouraged to be innovative and to con-

stantly search for new ways to meet the needs of students, and that a flexible curriculum delivery approach constantly maps provision against cohort, group and individual needs. Teachers also reported that regular staff dialogue leads to a collective reshaping, developing and reviewing of the curriculum to ensure it is consistently fit for purpose, and that robust systems are in place for the development and support of less experienced and/or weaker members of staff.

KD7: There is substantial, but intelligent investment in securing student academic progress, their personal development and mental health. Significant resource is targeted in providing familial support with targeted engagement for the most vulnerable families.

All schools interviewed put great emphasis on building successful relationships with parents often involving other agencies. Therefore high priority is placed on supporting the building of home/school confidence and parental skills to engage in the child's learning (both academic and behavioural). Work with families and external agencies is designed to maintain stability around each child by minimizing negative influences on their learning and progress. Experienced staff are used to engage directly with the most vulnerable families focusing primarily on student attendance and educational engagement. These schools have effective local intelligence networks so they can be alerted to changing familial circumstances enabling a pro-active approach including bespoke rapid deployment and specialist support to tackle emerging difficulties.

Leaders reported having a definitive strategy to engage with families sometimes involving a dedicated team who are the front line in supporting the most vulnerable.

Teachers stated their commitment to parental engagement and suggested it was crucial to supporting student learning and progress. They reported that specialist staff are deployed to work with the most vulnerable families and that delivery of parent learning programs are in place to ensure that enrichment activities involve vulnerable parents as well as students. Teachers routinely organise informal events to remove barriers and to encourage parents into school to share in the education of their children. Some of these meetings take place off-site including in local coffee shops where parents feel more comfortable.

5. Discussion

In line with the goals set by the United Nations, the Capabilities Approach, a framework developed by Amartya Sen, views human development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy, expressed as their capabilities in doing so (Sen, 1999). Poverty is identified as deprivation of capability, where being educated is described as a basic capability, *i.e.* part of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being (Sen, 1992). Within this framework, education is foundational to other capabilities as it promotes a concrete set of basic learning outcomes, such as the abilities to read and write (Unterhalter, 2002). Poor attainment poses a threat to children's participation in economic and social life as adults. The seven key drivers and their operationalization in schools in this study, suggest an equitable model of education is present in these schools, which contributes to student educational success and onward capability development, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

In answer to the first research question, the study found that comparative key drivers were present in the schools interviewed, across the five district areas. These key drivers (KD1-7) underpin high quality provision for all young people, including the most disadvantaged cohorts. The interviews found a positive pattern present in the participating schools in terms of seven key drivers (KD1-7) and their operationalisation summarised as follows: (1) equity driven model of school provision; (2) non-negotiable expectations about performance of all learners and adults; (3) intelligent analysis and accountability to drive provision; (4) professional improvement culture that invests in staff development; (5) culture of shared accountability for student achievement; (6) licensed autonomy that celebrates staff expertise and encourages innovation; and (7) high investment in familial support and engagement.

In respect of the Capabilities Approach and using Broderick's framework (What, Why, Who, How) (2018) for answering questions about equity in capability development in education:

- What - Equity (KD1), was foundational to the formulation of policy and strategy within these schools and set the direction embraced by teachers. KD1 (Equity) indicates that these schools had a clear view of 'what' they meant by equity. Equity in education for these schools entailed that every student in their care was able to develop their capabilities to thrive in life, and consequently staff had high expectations for the success of every child in their care.
- Why - Both leaders and teachers were clear about 'why' it was imperative to ensure that such students received the targeted support required to enable the development of their capabilities in school (eg. to feel included, to feel well, to be able to write, to read and communicate effectively, etc).
- Who - Leaders and teachers in these schools knew 'who' required particular support in their setting, to ensure equity within their school. They identified socio-economically disadvantaged students as a specific cohort to be supported. Leaders and teachers demonstrated unrelenting commitment to equity for this group of students such that the national gap between achievement of disadvantaged students and other peers was not perpetuated in their school.
- How - These schools used agreed regular monitoring of student academic progress, attendance, and environmental contexts (eg. CPoMs, an online tool to record student issues daily, including emotional, environmental, family stresses etc.) and triangulated this data in an intelligent way resulting in rapid targeted intervention for students who required it. Leaders and teachers in these schools understood 'how' equity in education for disadvantaged students could be achieved, cooperatively sustaining a culture of high expectations for these students, and implementing processes and allocating resources focused to support this group of children, in line with key drivers 2-7. Student provision was constantly reviewed to gain maximum effect from available resources, and staff were encouraged to experiment and innovate, as they sought new ways to meet student needs. Schools changed tack when actions were not effective and resources were directly targeted to meet student need for disadvantaged cohorts.

It was noted that individual drivers were not in themselves delivering high outcomes; it was the skills set used by senior leaders in coordinating these different elements cooperatively with staff who operationalised them, to suit the school context, that made them collectively so powerful (Grieveson et al., 2017). These school leaders had a deep understanding of causation in their school's performance and were able to use this knowledge to blend strategy across all the key drivers, thereby making effective decisions at all levels. Importantly the cooperative nature of the process which involved all staff, including the collective moral purpose across the team was integral to its success.

In answer to the second research question, the study found that the seven key drivers identified, align with national evidence about the structures and practices which support high quality provision for all young people within schools, including for disadvantaged students (Macleod et al., 2015). For example, the key drivers require within them a level of leadership capacity and commitment to make them operational in the context of rapid curriculum and accountability change. In line with reports about evidence-informed teaching, the schools included in the study align policy changes with the best research evidence available, and support evidence informed teaching as the school finds mechanisms to embed research evidence into the professional discourse and practice of teaching (Coldwell et al., 2017). National findings also highlight the importance of 'setting a culture of high expectations for all pupils, understanding how schools can make a difference, selecting a range of evidence-based strategies tailored to meet the needs of individual schools and pupils, and implementing them well' (Macleod et al.,

2015, p13.). These elements are integral to the seven key drivers found in this study and their operationalisation by schools.

It is accepted that changing the culture within and across schools in specific geographic areas would take trusted voices to be heard and successful schools to work with others within the area. The seven key drivers could provide the basis from which tools and a structure of support could be developed to effect improvement across the five district areas from which the findings are drawn based on local 'trusted voices'. Creating large-scale improvement in schools including of instruction requires collective moral purpose and a shared theory of action (Gifford, 2010), as it is difficult to change student instruction when implementing school improvement reforms without systematic subscription to the proposed reform (Ravitz, 2010). Factors such as improvement culture and improvement processes can influence reform outcomes positively (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005). Assuring credibility when implementing change entails both involvement from the leadership and buy-in from teaching professionals within the school, accessing appropriate exemplars of success and sharing pedagogies and training where necessary (Muijs & Harris, 2006). This includes hearing authentic voices of what is important from other leaders and teaching professionals and bringing people together to share ideas and experiences (Magolda & Ebben, 2007). With this in mind, Ravitz (2010) argues in favour of 'a systematic model that provides guidance and ensures adequate focus on and capacity for instructional reform' (p309) including a 'top-level vision for instructional changes' (p310). The seven key drivers found in this study, and the cooperative nature of their operationalisation enables the improvement within a school setting. As this powerful model including the 7 key drivers is found in a number of schools within the five district areas, the model lends itself to being shared across the region with the capacity to be a catalyst for leader and teacher buy-in required to enable high outcomes for disadvantaged students moving forward.

The national evidence suggests that a number of measures are required for closing gaps between disadvantaged cohorts and their peers, tailored to each school's circumstances as there is no 'one size fits all' solution. Macleod et al. (2015) thus recommends that schools which have made the greatest progress in improving the attainment of disadvantaged students are well placed to spread good practice working with neighbouring schools (Macleod et al., 2015). The primary schools in the Northeast region who participated in this study are particularly successful in terms of student achievement, including supporting disadvantaged cohorts to function well, when compared to other regions in England (Andrews et al., 2017). However, although performance of disadvantaged students is higher in the Northeast compared to other parts of England, 33% of disadvantaged students fail to meet the age related required education standard at 11 years (Clifton et al., 2016). As this study highlights, notwithstanding the variability in student outcomes between schools, there are a number of schools with successful methods to ensure high achievement for disadvantaged children. We suggest that the seven key drivers identified within this study brings these exemplars to the fore in a coherent way, capable of providing the basis for improvement within and across local areas.

6. Conclusion

This paper reported findings in respect of the key ingredients present across a region in a number of schools to support the attainment of disadvantaged students and ensure their capability development. These ingredients are articulated as seven key drivers, which are operationalised within a culture of social interdependence including a cooperative commitment from schools, to overcome stubborn barriers to success present in any young person in their care. We suggest that this inclusive equitable education model found in the participant schools in this study, could provide an important basis from which a structured regional ap-

proach using local trusted voices could bring about improvement to ensure high achievement for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Interview question proforma

School:	
Researcher:	Date of visit:
Headteacher: LA/Academy chain/MAT/Diocese:	URN:
	Age range:

A& B - Leadership questions:

A - One-to-one interview with the Headteacher

B - Small group interview with Teacher Leader

1. How does the Headteacher and Teacher Leaders describe the school's **approach/vision** for the achievement of all pupils and particularly FSM? (FSM – Free School Meal eligibility is used here as the indicator for socio-economic disadvantage)
2. What are the **key decisions** that have been taken to ensure FSM pupils achieve highly?
3. How does the leadership/governance **monitor/track the performance of FSM** pupils and what happens when pupils in this group are at risk of falling behind?
4. What does the leadership do to ensure that pupils from the **most vulnerable** and hard to reach families achieve highly?
5. Are there any **unique contextual factors** that the leadership has to deal with for FSM pupils? How are these managed? Which factors ensure these are successful?
6. Does the school provide **anything additional to support FSM achievement**? (activities that could be considered 'extras' – after school clubs; instrumental lessons etc. that involve additional expenditure)
7. Is there any evidence that could be used as a short **case study**, about very successful practice, that would be helpful to other schools?
8. What is being done to ensure that **teachers have the skills and knowledge** to ensure FSM pupils achieve highly?
9. What is being done to ensure that **teaching assistants have the skills and knowledge** to ensure FSM pupils achieve highly?
10. What **other resource** does the school use to support FSM pupils to attain highly?
11. Does the school work in **partnership with other agencies** to support particular FSM pupils? How effective is this partnership in securing high achievement?
12. How does the school actively **involve parents of FSM pupils** and on what issues? Can the school point to examples of verifiable impact on outcomes from this work?
13. What does the school do to tackle **FSM Absence/Persistent Absence**?
14. Can the school point to any **trend of improvement** in absence rates from the work they do?
15. Can the school point to **any striking examples of how they have tackled pupil absence/persistent absences** with hard to reach families? What has been the key to success with these families?
16. Similar questions about **exclusions** – dependent upon whether there are any.

C. Questions for Teacher interviews

Teacher interviews with a small group of teachers from Early Years, Year 2 and Year 6.

1. From their perspective, what are senior and middle leaders doing to ensure there is **high quality provision** for the FSM cohort?
2. How do they as teachers ensure that the provision made for FSM pupils successfully delivers high achievement? Can they point to **key activities/actions/decisions** that are proving to be highly effective and from which others could learn?
3. What support do senior and middle leaders provide for **teachers** to equip them with the **skills and knowledge** needed to ensure FSM pupils achieve highly?
4. **Use of assessment/ tracking progress:** Gain an overview of how the school's systems for collecting, collating and using performance information and particularly as it pertains to the FSM cohort. How do teachers consider that it supports them in delivering high achievement for the FSM group?

5. Does the school use specific intervention programs to ensure disadvantaged pupils achieve their potential? If yes:

- Which intervention programs do you use? (eg. Read,Write,Inc. etc)
- How are the programs used?
- What is the intended length of the programs?
- Who is the intended lead for each program (eg. Teacher, TA, other)?
- Which is the target year group for each program?
- Which is the target cohort for each program?

6. If no specific intervention program is used in school what do you do instead?

- Is there any whole staff training on a specific program (eg Talk for Writing) which is then used as a personalised/group teaching approach where needed?
- Are any teachers/TAs trained in a specific program (eg. Numbers Count) which they then disseminate within school for general use?
- If you use a highly personalised approach, what methods/programs do you use? (eg. Teaching Assistants in some schools are deployed weekly using a bidding system based on teacher knowledge of children and what targets they fail to meet. Here teachers and TAs may be trained together to use a variety of methods and we would like to hear about these.)

7. Is there any intervention program you wish to develop in your school in the future?

Question for Leaders and Teachers:

- **Is there a case study from this school that could be showcased to help other schools to improve their work with FSM pupils?**

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