

Leading to Success:

Judging success in primary schools in challenging contexts

“Schools in disadvantaged areas...face real and serious challenges. The link between social disadvantage and educational attainment is complex and longstanding. However, schools make a difference and can achieve relatively good results against the odds”

OFSTED, NCSL evidence base, www.ncsl.org.uk

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1. Executive Summary

This research project, undertaken on a 100 days secondment to the National College for School Leadership during 2001, attempted to find clues to answer two research questions:

What are the successful leadership strategies adopted by headteachers of primary schools in challenging contexts?

What success criteria might be used to judge these schools successful other than academic outcomes?

In attempting to answer these questions, the research also asked:

What are the characteristics of primary school in challenging contexts?

Visits were made to 14 primary schools in three different English LEAs – Brent, Leeds and Lincolnshire. Their LEAs recommended these schools as representative of very good practice. The headteachers were interviewed about issues concerned with their school's challenging context and their own leadership strategies. The response by each of the headteachers was extremely positive. They each had a story to tell, and they each wanted to tell it in detail.

The challenging context in which these schools operated were characterised by some combination of the following factors:

- Social deprivation and the related lack of educational opportunities for pupils outside of the school
- A high crime rate in the neighbourhood
- Very challenging behaviour of significant numbers of pupils
- Variations of parental expectation that impact on pupil performance
- Inconsistent attendance and punctuality
- High pupil mobility
- Diverse cultures represented in the pupil population
- Staff recruitment difficulties.

The impact upon the schools of these features, particularly in the area of academic outcomes, was obviously pivotal in the identification of the level of success of the school. It is clear nationally that there is a strong correlation between primary schools in a challenging context and those schools with lower than average academic achievement, as defined by the Key Stage 2 National Assessment Tests. One piece of evidence is an analysis of all of one LEA's primary school test results in the year 2000 matched to the same school's position in a table of rank order of schools by need (see appendix 2).

Observations in the schools and the interviews carried out with headteachers and with LEA representatives suggested that:

Schools are distinctive and one school's effectiveness cannot be simplistically compared with another's. A disservice is done to all schools, but particularly schools in challenging contexts, when communities are asked to judge their schools' effectiveness on academic outcomes alone. Schools must ensure that their successes are well advertised and understood. Policy makers need to be more honest about what test results mean and support school leadership in their demand for the recognition of other indicators that represent success for their school.

- Many schools working in challenging contexts are well run and achieve success in spite of a considerable intake of pupils from homes suffering from various kinds of social disadvantage. Understanding the factors operating in successful schools in challenging circumstances and transferring the lessons is more likely to encourage improvement than an approach that involves unfair comparison.
- There is a case to be made for using a set of public success indicators in addition to academic outcomes to define the effectiveness of a school. The indicators suggested here are: pupil progress, school ethos, pupil participation and community participation.
- The career backgrounds of headteachers working in primary schools in challenging contexts is generally no different to that of other headteachers. Headteachers in primary schools in challenging contexts are more likely to emphasise particular elements of their leadership such as community awareness, celebration of small steps of progress, passion, and a 'we can do' culture to help undermine the negative influences of these contexts.

2. Background

“Understanding the combination of factors operating on some schools would be more likely to encourage improvement than an approach that involves blame.” (Lodge C, 1998)

a. Introduction

This research project posed three questions:

- What are the characteristics of primary schools in challenging contexts?
- What are the successful strategies adopted by headteachers of primary schools in challenging contexts?
- What success criteria might be used to judge these schools successful other than academic outcomes?

The research is a small part of a substantial body of research which considers schools in challenging contexts; particularly pertinent in the current educational climate where schools are compared to each other in league tables of crude achievement. Schools' intake of pupils varies so enormously that many schools which have significant numbers of disadvantaged pupils struggle to convince that they can be effective. McConnell J, (1998) suggests:

“It is grossly unfair to compare a school in Beckenham with a school in Peckham. I have no problems with inspections or tests. But they are pertinent only to that year's intake in that particular school. Let's not kid ourselves they are more than that. To do so is to create further lies about education.”

This view does not match current education policy makers' thinking in England. Indeed, although the devolved governments of Wales and Northern Ireland have recently decided to stop publishing school results tables, this remains a cornerstone of English policy. In countering criticism of the misleading nature of these league tables, Mike Tomlinson, (2001), Chief Inspector of Schools in England, asserts:

“I think this attitude is wrong. I have confidence in parents' capacity to understand the limitations of what the data say about a school.”

A school that takes in many disadvantaged pupils, and in most cases primary schools have no option in this, has to manage a different set of learning strategies for those pupils to those schools with limited numbers or no disadvantaged pupils. From the leadership of the headteacher to the day to day classroom activities, the strategies have to successfully overcome many negative influences. As Mortimore P and Whitty G (1999) say:

“The relationship between individuals, institutions and society is complex and blaming schools for the problems of society is unfair and unproductive. Teachers who choose to work in these schools because they want to help the disadvantaged, need their commitment recognised and supported rather than being ‘blamed’, as has happened so shamefully in the recent past. But they will also need to work closely with other agencies if their work is to make a significant and sustained impact on relative levels of achievement among disadvantaged communities.”

b. What is a School in Challenging Contexts?

Over the last 30 or 40 years, a huge body of work has set out to debate the perceived inequalities in education, both in its provision and outcomes. Its relationship to the inequalities between communities is irrefutable. The usual measure used to distinguish school's disadvantage has remained the proportion of families entitled to free school meals benefit based on family income. Clearly a school whose intake includes a high proportion of pupils who have free school meals would consider they have more disadvantaged pupils than schools with low free school meals numbers.

A primary school represents and is typical of its community where its intake comes from the immediate neighbourhood. The community is thus a significant influence on the school. Disadvantaged communities can be characterised by a number of factors, including inner city deprivation, rural isolation, low income, unemployment, poor housing. Put together, these factors equal poverty.

Other factors though can make a school challenging, for instance, excessive parental demands for examination success, or teacher recruitment issues, but these do not necessarily indicate a disadvantaged school.

The overall effect of disadvantage on a school's profile can be immense, as described by Smith T and Noble M, (1995):

“... social disadvantage operates, not as a fixed handicap which inhibits progress, but rather as a series of events that may intervene to check or undermine progress throughout the child's education. These would include ill health, financial pressures on the family, family stress and breakdown. Such events are statistically more likely to happen to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where families may have fewer resources to cope. Additionally, the increased concentration of such families and children in particular areas puts increasing pressure on schools, and limits their capacity to offer an effective education for all their children.”

The primary school in a challenging context, therefore, for the purposes of this research, is characterised by these poverty factors, comprising significantly disadvantaged pupils who are, according to Natriello (1990):

“...those exposed to insufficient educational experiences in at least one of three domains – family, community, school. While the first awareness of the consequences of such experiences may surface in the schools where student performance is formally assessed, the source of the problem may rest with the school and/or with the family and the community in which the student is reared...”

c. The Impact of Disadvantage on the School

The premise on which this research is based is that it is more difficult for primary schools in challenging contexts to show success based on academic achievement than primary schools in less challenging contexts, but that these schools might be successful in other aspects.

Mortimore P and Whitty G, (1999) suggest:

“Probably the single most significant factor that currently distinguishes the most academically successful schools (even if not the most effective ones in value-added terms) is that only a small proportion of their students come from disadvantaged homes.”

MacBeath, J and Mortimore, P (2001) also argue:

“... the importance of the balance of intake has implications for policies on selection, schools with concentrations of disadvantaged pupils having a greater risk that all pupils’ performance will be depressed ...”

To make comparisons between all schools is invidious to those with many disadvantaged pupils. The likelihood is that the majority of schools in challenging contexts will forever be seen to be nearer the bottom end of these league tables of school achievement. Analysis of one LEA’s End of Key Stage 2 results for the year 2000 bears this out in quite stark terms. Having conducted a very detailed examination of its primary schools’ characteristics (see Appendix 1), this LEA was able to rank the schools in order of need. Interestingly, having completed this exercise, the results closely matched a rank of the schools by free school meals entitlement. As can be seen in the table below, the gap between the aggregated average SAT scores for English, mathematics and science of the lowest quartile of schools and the next quartile was significantly greater than that between all the other schools.

224 LEA primary schools : greatest need/year 2000 SAT results by groups

| Rank order by greatest need of schools | Average SAT score for groups of 14 schools | Average SAT score for groups of 28 schools | Average SAT score for groups of 56 schools |
|--|--|--|--|
| 1 – 14 | 199.4 | 200.9 | 198.9 |
| 15 – 28 | 202.4 | | |
| 29 – 42 | 184.0 | 196.7 | 238.4 |
| 43 – 56 | 209.4 | | |
| 57 – 70 | 237.1 | 236.6 | 247.0 |
| 71 – 84 | 236.2 | | |
| 85 – 98 | 226.3 | 240.1 | 261.7 |
| 99 – 112 | 253.9 | | |
| 113 – 126 | 244.1 | 245.5 | 261.7 |
| 127 – 140 | 246.7 | | |
| 141 – 154 | 250.8 | 248.5 | 261.7 |
| 155 – 168 | 246.2 | | |
| 169 – 182 | 256.4 | 258.2 | 261.7 |
| 183 – 196 | 260.1 | | |
| 197 – 210 | 270.7 | 265.1 | 261.7 |
| 211 – 224 | 259.4 | | |

The assumption made is that the schools demonstrating the greatest need are going to find it more difficult to secure a high number of pupils attaining Level 4 or above at the end of Key Stage 2 in English, mathematics and science. As MacBeath J and Mortimore P, (2001) point out:

“It is hardly surprising that those who have enjoyed better diet, housing and healthcare and whose families have been able to buy books and provide outings and holidays generally do better in competitive tests than those for whom family life has always been a struggle against poverty.”

These tables confirm this assumption by reference to far more detailed criteria than the basic free school meals eligibility reference commonly used. Narrowing the gap between the schools is no easy task either:

“While some schools can succeed against the odds, the possibility of them all doing so, year in and year out, still appears remote given that the long-term patterning of educational inequality has been strikingly consistent throughout the history of public education in most countries.” (Mortimore P and Whitty G, 2000)

Is it not therefore unseemly to castigate schools working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds for their so-called failure in matching national expectation for academic results? A House of Commons Education Committee (1995) seemed to recognise this:

“It is difficult to comprehend how a fair comparison could be made between schools in the form of a league table based on the progress of children in the school.”

Indeed, primary schools in challenging contexts often possess many good characteristics, as defined by OFSTED school inspection criteria, including good teaching, good leadership, a positive learning ethos and so on. Chazan M, (2000) is another who points out the problems:

“Many schools in social priority areas are well run and achieve success in spite of a considerable intake of pupils from homes suffering from various kinds of social disadvantage. However, it is not surprising if some schools, in which many of the pupils are adversely affected by grossly unsatisfactory home conditions, have a disproportionate number of disruptive pupils. Staff may face challenging behaviour on the part of individual pupils, or even whole classes, that have lost interest in scholastic tasks and are out of control.”

This challenging behaviour is but one indicator of the difficulties these schools have to cope with on a daily basis, but is a significant factor that cannot be ignored, again recognised by the House of Commons Education Committee (1995):

“Although the causes and cures (of crime) in deprived urban areas were beyond the remit of our enquiry, it is important to recognise that even quite low levels of vandalism and other crime add a further burden to teachers, notably primary headteachers. Crime is a drain on financial and staff resources which is not suffered to anything like the same degree by schools in less challenging environments as it is by schools in deprived urban areas.”

All schools can undoubtedly make a difference to their pupils' development. Schools that are well managed with good teaching and learning opportunities will make the biggest differences. The OFSTED school inspection system has highlighted specific schools that were failing to provide an adequate education for their pupils, through, for instance, poor teaching or poor management or poor use of resources. The majority of schools in recent years though have been found to be providing at least a satisfactory level of education, many much more than satisfactory with good teaching. The commitment needed to work at this level in a challenging school is exceptional. One researcher in Thrupp M, (1999) quotes a senior member of staff of a school in a challenging context, who visited a school with a totally different mix of pupils thus:

“You can't do everything, you can't ... Our management structures are probably not as good as they should be but that probably reflects the pressure we are all constantly under. You do not get time, the school does not allow you time, to sit back and reflect. I cannot believe the people I am meeting at a middle class college. I cannot believe the, not laid back, but just open, friendly, unflurried way the staff relate to each other. It is extraordinary. And that school is working quite efficiently. But people don't have that kind of gaunt, drawn, lunatic look about them that you constantly see around here.”

This may seem an exaggerated way to make the point but it tells the difference. For schools in challenging contexts, improvements are hard won and not easily maintained:

“In order to achieve improvements ... such schools have to exceed what would be termed 'normal' efforts. Members of staff have to be more committed and work harder than their peers elsewhere. What is more, they have to maintain the effort so as to sustain the improvement.” (Mortimore and Whitty G, 2000)

These special efforts needed in challenging primary schools are being recognised as more targeted resources are being given to them, as for instance, in the development of Education Action Zones. This is recognition of the differences inherent in these schools and the linkage between low educational performance and social and economic disadvantage. Successful and effective primary schools working in challenging contexts, such as those visited for this study, take account of this. They recognise the potential for change in their pupils and attempt to give them every opportunity to achieve this.

Inequality, within and between communities, cannot be simply eradicated by schools. This must surely be taken into account when measuring the success or failure of schools. Anyon J, (1995) makes the crucial point succinctly:

“The structural basis for failure in inner city schools – and the failure of educational reform there – is political, economic and cultural, and must be changed before meaningful school improvement projects can be successfully implemented. Thus, I think the only solution to educational resignation and failure in the inner city is the ultimate elimination of poverty and racial degradation.”

3. Challenging contexts

a. Data

In this section, I describe the data collected from the 14 primary schools visited, which indicate the challenging contexts of the schools. It will be seen that a number of characteristics of the schools are similar to most primary schools, but that there are significant differences. It is these factors that define the challenging contexts of the primary schools and impact upon their leadership strategies outlined in the subsequent two sections.

- Parental support for the schools is variable. A number of parents do work regularly in all the schools and support for school events, including parental consultations, is generally good. Parental expectations are also reported to be extremely variable. In some schools, for example, where there are significant numbers of refugee families, parents are mostly very concerned that their children receive a good education. In other schools, there are negative cultural influences at work, which prohibit any real recognition of achievement or success. One headteacher said ‘they want their child to do well but do not understand the broader educational implications to achieving this.’ The headteacher spend a lot of time explaining to parents about this.
- Nine of the 14 schools visited reported they are subject to a significant level of aggressiveness and violence within the school. There is a simmering, underlying potential for aggressiveness on the part of many pupils and parents. Verbal threats are not uncommon, though the incidents of physical violence are less. One headteacher reported she was used to being threatened. The headteachers spend a lot of their time covering strategies to monitor behaviour.
- The leadership in most of the 12 primary schools – two are infant schools – have to spend time ensuring parents understand the context of their school when explaining to them the reasons for lower SAT results within the school. Headteachers are convinced their parents do understand this issue but also feel that it is necessary to continue explaining. For instance, in one school, the number of refugees entering the school with limited English is clearly a factor on overall achievement levels. Eleven of the 14 schools have significant pupil mobility, as high as about 50 per cent in one of the schools, and often take in pupils during the year with lower achievement levels than their peers in the school. Again, this has a significant effect on overall school levels. In other schools, the 11+ examination takes precedence and SAT results are not seen to be important if the child has failed to achieve a grammar school place.
- In all of the schools, the headteacher had gone through the process of long explanations about the school context, to either OFSTED or their LEA. In bidding for extra resources, two headteachers say they have had to spend a great deal of time explaining the nature of the challenging context in which they worked. Another headteacher believes that the day-to-day rigour required to deliver the curriculum is not fully understood by the LEA.
- The governing bodies of all the schools are committed and involved in their schools. They give varying degrees of support and advice and all are proud of their school’s work. Many of the headteachers have had to work with their governing body to encourage a greater involvement in the day-to-day work of the school. In isolated incidents certain actions of the governing body are demonstrably not in support, or even sympathetic of, the headteacher’s attempt to engage in school development.
- All four schools from one LEA indicate that the incidence of crime in the school’s neighbourhood is a serious issue for them. Common among these are drug-related offences, racist attacks and gun shootings. The schools cannot predict what the young pupils coming into school each day have experienced or seen the previous evening. Many exhibit symptoms of tiredness with its attendant problem of lack of concentration. This also affects attendance and punctuality. One school reported that if there had been a shooting on the estate, the authorities sometimes do not allow anyone to leave until the matter has been cleared up, so children stay at home. For schools from another LEA, crime is an ongoing issue outside the schools but its effects do not impinge greatly inside the schools. Schools in the third LEA reported the level of community violence to be low.

- One way to combat the negative issues surrounding these schools is for them to be actively involved in community ventures. In most of the schools, heads spend time and effort raising the school's profile. Special weekend groups for different cultural backgrounds are held in one school. Being part of the neighbourhood watch is another strategy used by another school. All of the schools report they are involved in raising the school's profile in the community with the local church, police, charities and so on. Breakfast clubs and after school clubs are very common.
- Eleven of the schools report difficulties within the last two years in recruiting good teachers. They have mostly had periods recently when they have had to resort to temporary measures, for instance the headteacher or deputy headteacher in two of the schools taking a class for a term. In one case a head reported that the only two applicants for two vacancies were both high quality and wanted to join the school. The isolated position of a number of the schools presented a problem for recruitment, not least because there were no universities or training colleges nearby as a source of newly qualified teachers. Or, as one head put it 'no exciting town or city nearby to persuade good young teachers to live here.' Other schools reported problems because of the perceived nature of the school and the fact that it was known that working at the school would be a challenge. 'Experienced teachers do not appear to want to work at our school' explained one headteacher following a poor response to recent advertisements.
- The pupils in 11 of the schools present very challenging behaviours for their teachers. They are not good at dealing with any inconsistencies, such as having a supply teacher. A significant amount of school leadership time is devoted to this issue, whether it is the day-to-day management of unpredictable and aggressive behaviours, or the implementation and review of policies and procedures to effectively cope with this. Heads reported that it was very energy sapping for all staff not knowing from which direction the next major problem will come. These are not low level or inconsequential interruptions that happen in most schools but serious threats to the safety of others. 'Pupils come into school emotionally charged and wind each other up. It is a way of life for them. We all spend a lot of time calming them down' reports one headteacher.
- Attendance and punctuality are an ongoing serious problem in five of the schools and a periodic issue for six schools. Illnesses arise due to poor living conditions and/or a poor diet. The way schooling is perceived by some cultures, for instance Asian or Romany, with long overseas holidays not uncommon for some children, is inconvenient to the schools. Serious incidents on the neighbouring estate overnight can delay school attendance. All the schools have introduced various incentives to improve attendance and punctuality, but this remains an issue for a significant number of their pupils, and so affects their performance levels.
- Many issues about the schools' buildings present a great challenge. Heads reported a long list of premises problems: a very small playground for a school with over 600 pupils, cramped conditions for a school with 78 pupils, a very small dining hall, no school field, flat roofs, out of date boilers, rotting windows, and one school that has had a nomadic existence in numerous buildings before they will finally settle into a brand new building next year, hopefully!

It is recognised that there are both similarities and differences between the characteristics of the 14 primary schools in challenging contexts and other primary schools. However, the differences are significant and can be summarised as:

- Social deprivation and the related lack of educational opportunities for pupils outside of the school
- A high crime rate in the neighbourhood
- Very challenging behaviour of significant numbers of pupils
- Variations of parental expectation that impact on pupil performance
- Inconsistent attendance and punctuality
- High pupil mobility
- Diverse cultures represented in the pupil population
- Staff recruitment difficulties

b. Case Study

“... in these schools, however, disadvantage is multiple, widespread and, in some cases, worsening. They are hard places to teach in.” (OFSTED, 2000)

To illustrate the nature of some primary schools' challenging contexts I present below a picture of one of the schools visited as part of this project.

This school is a large primary school, covering the 3 – 11 age range. It is the only primary school in a seaside town. The pupil roll is approximately 440 and there are 16 teachers in post with seven support staff. The numbers of pupils with special educational needs, currently 45 per cent of the pupil roll, is rising each year. There is a significant mobility factor with up to 25 per cent of pupils each year arriving or leaving the school. OFSTED reported in 2000 that 109 pupils were entitled to free school meals which placed the school in the above average band. The numbers of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds is very small and all pupils speak English as a first language. Achievement levels are below national averages when compared to all schools.

The headteacher reports a small number of parents work voluntarily in the school and that many are 'scared silly of coming in because of their own bad experiences at school.' The headteacher who has been at the school for eight years, groups the parental body into three distinct groups. He says a small group have high expectations for the academic success of their children, and these are generally those with managerial responsibilities or who have lived elsewhere; a second very large group of parents care very much for their children and do everything they can to support them. However their priorities do not always match those of the school. A third small group is antagonistic to authority and not sympathetic to the school at all.

In recent years there have been a small number of serious incidents concerning aggressive and threatening behaviour from parents towards the headteacher and other staff. In one incident a drunken parent physically assaulted a member of staff. Six parents have had to be banned from the school premises. OFSTED (2000) reported that the behaviour of a minority of pupils is a serious concern to the school. The headteacher reports three groups of pupils who are a constant problem to staff and other pupils. These are those who have experienced violence at home, pupils who enter the school during the year and take a lot of time being integrated into the school systems and a number of the older Key Stage 2 boys. The headteacher says that staff can never relax with their classes and are continually monitoring the effects of the school behaviour policy.

The school has recently experienced serious difficulties recruiting new staff. In 1997 the headteacher reported 136 applications for one teaching post. In 1999 she received 36 applications for a vacancy. In 2001 only one application was received for two teaching posts.

The headteacher suggests the main issues relating to the challenging context of the school are the mobility of the pupils, poor levels of attainment on entry and some parental apathy based on different life priorities.

4. The Leaders

a. Data

This section is concerned with the headteacher's personal contexts for their work and the values they espouse.

- Most of the 14 headteachers interviewed have been in the teaching profession for a considerable time, the majority over 30 years (average 28 years). The average time in their present post is 6.5 years. Seven of the 14 are in their first headteacher position, six have had one previous headship, the other two previous headships. Five of the headteachers have so far completed the LPSH training. None have completed the NPQH training.
- All said that the most enjoyable aspects of their headteacher role concerned the children at their schools; they enjoyed seeing them make progress, being happy and laughing, responding positively to the school. The emphasis of comment was on promoting the quality of life of the children. Similar comments were made about aspects of their staff's development, particularly younger colleagues.
- The most difficult and/or least enjoyable aspects of the headteacher role was said to be the incessant demands on their time from all quarters, particularly from outside school. Also the frustrations of having to deal with a lack of outside support for particular children, including lack of support from some parents; the challenging behaviour of some children; child protection issues; paperwork and juggling the budget. In the small schools, the headteachers were concerned that they might not be effective as both class teachers and headteacher.
- Although the headteachers expressed their own values differently there was much in common. The common elements had to do with the rights of their pupils to have the same opportunities to learn as pupils from other schools – deserving the best package as they only have one opportunity – and the importance of children being valued and feeling proud when progress is made.
- Heads were asked what they saw as their own leadership style. Their perceptions of their own leadership styles and strategies encompass aspects such as: democratic, empathic, participative, celebratory, enthusiastic, positive, considerate, determined, motivator.

It was clear in talking to these heads that they thought that the children should come first in everything. All the headteachers are driven to provide the best possible learning environment and take enormous pride in the progress that each child makes – this despite what they perceive to be indifference and scant acceptance by others of their day-to-day work. It was clear that they would all fight tenaciously for what they wanted for their school. But these headteachers do not see themselves as special people. Indeed, as can be seen from the information above, their personal context is no different to headteachers in most primary schools.

b. Case Study

“It is a significant failure if children are not valued by society. So my work is driven by a reaffirmation of faith in the fundamentals of human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person.” (Case study headteacher)

This headteacher leads an average size primary school in an area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage, and high unemployment. The number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. The school is also characterised by a large turnover of pupils each year, a very high proportion of pupils having English as an additional language and significant numbers with behavioural difficulties.

The headteacher has 30 years teaching experience and wonders where to start when listing the most enjoyable aspects of her role. Her first thoughts are about the children, ‘Seeing them grow and develop and be happy. Seeing them want to learn and being part of the change in them’ are among her responses. Then there is the consideration of her staff and herself ‘... seeing and helping the staff develop their expertise and growing and learning myself.’

The awkward bits, the difficult issues, are also clearly expressed:

“The demands of being constantly available to everyone. Not always having a moment to draw breath and respond in an appropriate manner. It is very frustrating trying to support families who have a great need for social and other support. When this is not provided by others it’s down to the headteacher and the school.

This head clearly expressed her views about successful leadership in terms of commitment and passion, high expectations and enthusiasm.

5. The Leadership Strategies

a. Data

This third section details the specific strategies the 14 headteachers adopt to generate success in their schools. It also lists strategies that the LEA representatives perceive to be typical of effective primary headteachers of schools in challenging contexts.

- All 14 heads say that they work collaboratively with their staff, and set high standards and expectations. They are constructively critical where necessary, relying on good systems of monitoring and evaluation involving staff with responsibilities. A lot of emphasis is placed on the development of staff to ensure all are appropriately skilled to fulfil the high expectations.

- As a result of past OFSTED failures, three of the schools' decision-making processes are still driven by OFSTED requirements. Even here though, the schools' priorities are determined by the schools' recognition of their precise needs, priorities decided through detailed discussions with all staff.
- One particular issue, said by more than half of the headteachers to take precedence over all others in the schools is pupil behaviour. This is clearly the issue that takes up most time, even when the headteacher has instigated rigorous and successful strategies for dealing with indiscipline. Heads say that it saps energy levels of all staff and is an area that no one can relax about. Positive comments in the OFSTED reports of these schools, such as, '... behaviour management policies are applied consistently across the school...' or '...pupils are well behaved, form very good relationships, and have positive attitudes to school...' or '...behaviour is very good and pupils enjoy learning ...' or '...most pupils listen closely, work hard...' cannot hide the underlying potential of many pupils in these schools to seriously disrupt their or others' learning.
- Another common theme addressed by the headteachers was the culture of the school. A range of evidence suggests that by recognising the diverse needs of their pupils and the community the school serves, all the headteachers have directed much thought and action towards the creation of a unified environment of learning for all. They demand that their pupils make progress and instil a belief of self worth in everybody.
- The central curriculum priority for all the headteachers was literacy and numeracy. They also emphasised the absolute need to ensure the whole curriculum has breadth and balance, wanting to give many of their pupils opportunities to achieve excellence in areas such as dance, drama, music, cooking, and so on.
- The core stated objective for all schools is that their pupils make progress in their learning. The headteachers interviewed have put in place very detailed, regular monitoring systems to track each pupil as they work towards their individual targets of achievement. They are passionate about these systems as evidence of pupil progress. Here the headteachers can point to many successful outcomes in their school. OFSTED has been very positive about this aspect of the schools. '...more accurate assessment of pupils' progress and attainment has enabled challenging tasks and targets to be set and met...' or '...this rigorous system of assessment enables the teachers to set achievable but challenging targets for each pupil...' or '...a scrupulous analysis of assessment and test information allows realistic learning targets to be set for each pupil, positively affecting standards...' are some of their related judgements. One strength of these systems is the substantive link with other school procedures, for instance, accountability, performance management, and teacher development. This issue of pupil progress should always be a marker for a school's success. The question is how to define this progress equitably for all schools. One LEA has committed itself to providing its schools with detailed data showing what pupils achieving similar levels at Key Stage 1 achieve at the end of Key Stage 2. Pupils who leave or join the school in this period are discounted from the calculations to attempt to give an accurate figure for the value the school has added to its pupils, irrespective of their starting levels. This omission therefore, puts schools on a similar footing by disregarding pupil mobility, one substantial issue affecting 'challenging schools'.
- All the headteachers are involved, to different degrees, with school self-evaluation strategies. Some have attended OFSTED training. All have introduced self-evaluation procedures into their schools with the support of their staff and governing body.

- The headteachers see themselves as being available to others. Indeed this is perceived to be a very important part of their job. Being with the staff and pupils helps, as one headteacher remarked, 'to make our school a more cohesive unit'.
- Success for these headteachers revolves around the pupils. Challenging and engaging the pupils in their learning was considered the paramount success.

LEA representatives suggest a number of strategies that are an integral part of successful headteacher work in challenging contexts.

Brent LEA representative:

“The majority of the most effective headteachers are those who lead a category 3 or 4 school, those schools in greatest need. The essence of the excellence of these headteachers is they have to fight against the odds and it is not good enough to be satisfactory.”

Included in their strategies will be:

- Emphasising outcomes and the creation of a culture of learning within a 'we can do this' philosophy
- Expertise in the management of staff, including team building, counselling, empowering
- Community involvement and a realistic acknowledgement of the needs of the community
- A non-dependence leadership that does not require anyone from the LEA or elsewhere to inform them about priorities as they are skilled at school self-evaluation.

Education Leeds representative:

“Many of the headteachers of the schools in the quartile of schools with greatest need are extremely effective, with individual characteristics that make them suitable for the particular school they lead. They stand out because they are independent characters.”

Strategies used include:

- Maintaining high expectations of attitudes, behaviour and attainment in the creation of a 'can do' culture
- The insistence on good management systems
- Understanding and caring about the communities they serve
- Generating infectious enthusiasm for all aspects of their work and transmitting this enthusiasm throughout the school.

Lincolnshire LEA representative:

“In the disadvantaged schools, it is not enough for headteachers to be doing reasonably well as it is so much more difficult to succeed.”

The headteachers of these schools are mostly involved in developing strategies that will:

- Demonstrate their own curricular awareness and high standards of teaching to others in the school, as most teach in our small schools for part of each week
- Promote an understanding of their communities
- Illustrate their adeptness at dealing with governing bodies, many of whom only become active when things may be going wrong
- Cultivate positive professional relationships and a genuine care for, and understanding of, their pupils.

b. Connections to the Hay McBer Model of Effective School Leadership

i. Personal Values and Passionate Conviction

The headteachers interviewed all possessed remarkably strong self-belief in their own values that dominated their working practices. Recognising the sometimes huge dearth of knowledge and experience that so many of their pupils come to school with these headteachers explicitly drove their schools forward to provide as much as possible for their pupils. They all were passionate about any kind of progress individuals made.

“Attaining Level 4 is not the ultimate for my 11-year-old pupils. Making as much progress as humanly possible is the overriding criterion for success.”

ii. Creating the Vision

These headteachers have put in place strategies to ensure every pupil experiences the best teaching possible. Staff development has good teaching at its core. Pupils were given challenging targets and these were regularly monitored. The drive for improvement was strong.

“We are constantly evolving and modifying our systems. We want the work rate of children to improve to raise standards further.”

iii. Planning for Delivery; Monitoring, Evaluating and Improving Performance

The leadership these headteachers give to their schools is clearly characterised by high levels of commitment, enthusiasm and the ability to generate similar qualities in their staff. They have an exceptionally good understanding of their community and its needs, and use this knowledge to influence others in their work of supporting the pupils.

“I must always have a positive impact on staff and pupils.”

iv. Building Commitment and Support

The majority of the 14 headteachers have managed to get their governing bodies to work in cohort with them to achieve the best. They are accountable to the governing bodies and are trusted by them to deliver.

“The governing body check on policies as part of the school’s self-evaluation.”

v. Gathering Information and Gaining Understanding

In schools such as these, where there are such diverse cultural and social influences, the school leadership expends much energy on developing cohesiveness and trust and self worth. This is something that can only come from 'the top' to be really effective and have a positive influence.

"I recognised the needs of the children were not being met in respect of their low esteem following the school's OFSTED failure."

c. Connections to the OFSTED 'Improving City Schools' Key Features of Leadership and Management

i. A Determination to Concentrate on Changes Most Likely to Lead to Improvement

The issues that have been tackled by the headteachers more vigorously than others are clearly those that have effected a change for the better in the school. These have included changes to the culture of the school, and the way it is run, standards of teaching, pupil discipline, and strategies giving the pupils self belief and self worth.

"We have to first provide a safe and secure environment for all the pupils. We are raising their self-esteem and confidence. Then we will raise their achievement levels."

ii. High Visibility and Accessibility of the Senior Team

Having created cohesive and collaborative structures, the leadership make time to be a visible part of the school, to the staff, pupils and parents. A lot of energy is spent on knowing where the pupils are and what is going on in the classrooms.

"As the school has grown threefold in size, I have worked hard on making it a cohesive unit."

iii. Simple and Pertinent Management Systems

The collaborative systems created empower staff to make decisions and to be an integral part of the school development planning process. All the headteachers stressed the importance of the different roles members of staff undertook, with clearly understood lines of responsibility and accountability to senior staff groups.

"All staff are involved in decision making at different stages, depending upon their responsibilities – including the office staff, dinner ladies and parents."

iv. Good Use of Data on Pupil Participation and Performance

Use of data is clearly a strong element of the leadership seen in these schools. Headteachers offered passionate justifications for their systems. The data provides the headteacher with a rich source of evidence on pupil progress and the rate of academic success of their schools.

"I have set up a pupil tracking system, including regular teacher assessments and target setting that is reassessed every term. This defines our pupils' progress."

v. Skills in Harnessing and Managing Resources from a Range of Sources

These headteachers do not wait to be advised about their entitlements. They will go out and fight for everything they can acquire, even to the point, for one headteacher, of using professional fundraisers. They seem to harness others' energies, skills and knowledge to ensure the maximum use is made of every available resource.

“I recognised the deeply ingrained emotional needs of many of our pupils and so we have set up our own counselling service to cater for all the pupils – and they use it well.”

vi. The Ability to Establish Effective Partnerships with External Agencies

These schools have diverse cultures and social groups under one roof. The headteachers worked to reconcile these different groups by enlisting interested and committed people from both within and outside the school. The headteachers of these schools have managed to build collaboration with other organisations and individuals, for instance, a local FE college, the police neighbourhood watch scheme, and pensioners' groups.

“I have instigated an Islamic school on Saturdays and am currently bidding to put in place a Somali school on Sundays.”

The data above suggests the 14 headteachers operate in line with 'official images' of excellence, although only a few of them have completed the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) course which considers these models of good leadership. Evidence from the schools' OFSTED inspections clearly supports the notion that these headteachers lead and manage their schools well. Three different examples of this are:

- The headteacher and senior staff provide clear direction and sensitive support for the work of the school
- The headteacher's good leadership identifies a clear direction for the school
- The school has pulled together very well to manage pupils' behaviour and learning problems

But, overall school achievement in these schools is not at or above the national averages. Why is this not so?

The challenging context of the schools described here, prohibits overall achievement reaching certain levels. It does not, however, constrain each pupil in these schools making often startling progress in their learning. That is the crucial measure of success for the headteachers interviewed and an underlying, continuous and successful strategy used. There is much celebration in these schools for those pupils, for instance, who attain a Level 3 at the end of Key Stage 2 because the schools recognise the efforts that have gone into progressing to that point.

There is also a very humane culture in the schools visited which recognises individual pupils' barriers to learning and speaks to the pupils – and the staff – of what can be achieved, not just in academic terms but in social and emotional terms.

“There must be greater recognition and support of our work and less of the culture of blame.”

6. Success Indicators

a. Data

The primary schools in challenging contexts described in this study are seen to have good and effective leadership but are not necessarily successful in terms of their end of Key Stage 2 SAT results. Eleven of the 14 schools visited – two of the others were infant schools and one was an exceptionally small school – achieved an average, aggregated score of 203 for English, mathematics and science compared with a national average score of 231 in summer 2000. This is a score out of a possible 300. The three LEAs where the schools are situated averaged 233, 234 and 232 for all their schools. On this basis, most of the 11 schools are scoring significantly lower than the majority of their own LEA schools and schools nationally. On this league table basis, therefore, these schools are not successful.

Yet I have reported so much that is successful about all the 14 schools visited. Defining success is clearly not a simple matter and cannot be simply judged by making crude comparisons between schools in very different situations and contexts. As Michael Barber (1996) points out:

“No single number, whether a raw one or a value added one, can effectively summarise something as complicated as the academic performance of a school...we need to move towards the notion of three or four indicators which, taken together, summarise the performance of the school.”

Children are not predictable in any of their behaviours, including the rate of their learning. For some, things that are learnt one day are often forgotten the next; some will learn significantly more in one subject than another; some may do better with a particular teacher than another, and so on. The effect of all the variables that impact on any particular child, including the school, the home and the community will determine the depth of the learning and rate of retention. The current extent of pupil testing and achievement measurements is providing just one sort of data about our schools and what our pupils are learning. But there must be space for all the work teachers do for their pupils to be properly recognised and celebrated.

How do the 14 successful and effective headteacher of the schools visited define success for their schools?

“Children learning; children and staff being happy; children knowing they have choices and knowing someone is there for them if needed.” (Chalkhill)

“Seeing our children being challenged, engaged and relaxed as they build up their skills and knowledge.” (Carlton Vale)

“Having a positive image in the community with people saying our school is effective in a mixture of learning and other issues.” (Cottingley)

“Success is a happy school for everyone involved; particularly with pupils doing their best and wanting to come to school in the morning.” (Shakespeare)

“Success is about team work and having a common vision; it’s about being able to laugh and be open with each other, to tolerate each other and be open to constructive criticism.” (South Witham)

“To make a positive difference in the lives of the children, in their behaviour and their attitudes.” (Mablethorpe)

These markers of success are crucial to primary schools in challenging contexts. They authenticate the work of the effective and successful school leaders and everyone else in the schools when academic achievement levels fall consistently below national averages as a result of the schools' context. Importantly, these success markers are not used as an excuse for lower achievement levels, more as realistic indicators of what the schools actually do for their pupils:

“Successful schools are successful for people in a range of different ways. They can be measured by the quality of experience they offer to young people, their ability to support and challenge and bring out the best in them.” (MacBeath J, 1999)

If external league table measures do not do justice to the schools' work, schools must do it for themselves. Effective school self-evaluation can produce data that will both encourage the improvement of teaching and learning in the school and be a focus for indicators of success. School self-evaluation strategies, covering the monitoring of all appropriate and relevant school practices and conducted in an open manner, can help to trace the success of all pupils – and lead to greater satisfaction for their teachers:

“All the strategies are shared amongst the staff. They have their own videos of their teaching.” (Park Lane)

“We base this on asking ourselves what else can we do to raise standards?” (Middleton)

“Form S3 has become part of the culture of the school.” (Lutton)

“We see this as an important part of school improvement.” (Skegness)

OFSTED recognises the worth of regular self-evaluation in schools and reports that it is becoming more rigorous, although still variable in quality (OFSTED, 2001). When adopted as a rigorous inquiry into all aspects of the school

“... self-evaluation can reach the epicentre of school life and what matters to pupils, teachers and parents.” (MacBeath J and Mortimore P 2001)

As school leaders become more adept at the skills of self-evaluation, using the expertise and knowledge of all the school's community – teachers, pupils, parents, governors – so the results of this strategy can feed into the factors determining school success. Validity for this can be gained by external monitoring, for instance, LEA advisers, plus comparisons with the school's inspection report.

As reported above, the headteachers of the 14 primary schools in challenging contexts describe the use of a variety of markers to gauge their success. These markers relate to the three domains referred to at the beginning of this report – family, community and school – which determine a pupil's advantage or disadvantage in their schooling.

The following description of the most practicable of these indicators, exclusive of final achievement levels, will help other schools in similar challenging contexts corroborate their own successful strategies. The six questions raised at the end of each indicator description, which emerged from the discussions with the 14 headteachers, can be used to facilitate school self-evaluation.

i. INDICATOR 1

Pupil Progress

The first measure of success to be highlighted is that of the progress the pupils make during their time at the school. Objective, national measures, which determine each pupil's level of achievement at a particular point in time, are well established. LEAs have put in place their own measures to determine the progress of pupils between the key stages in their schools. Many schools have now developed, or are developing, their own internal systems to monitor individual pupil progress:

"I am very passionate about our pupil tracking system as it also links into so much of the school's systems, for instance, monitoring, accountability, performance management, teacher development." (Chalkhill)

"We are constantly evolving and modifying our systems to cater for all the challenges." (Middleton).

"Targets are set and monitored every half term with parents involved and informed, particularly of the next step." (Mount St. Mary's)

"We use lots of in-house assessments as indicators of individual pupil progress and improving whole school performance which may not show up in national tests." (Skegness)

"Every third staff meeting is a monitoring meeting on pupil progress." (South Witham)

These examples demonstrate that effective school leaders accept their school's responsibility for ensuring that the pupils make strong progress and that they have high expectations of the progress their pupils can make. Schools do make a difference. Recent research confirms that the greatest influence on pupil progress is school rather than other factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or gender, whereas there are greater links between low income and pupil outcomes (MacBeath J and Mortimore P, 2001). Good monitoring systems, when used constructively with teachers' planning, will ensure good pupil progress and prove the extent of the school's influence on each pupil, the value that the school adds.

For example, in one school visited the end of Key Stage 2 SAT results were significantly below national and LEA averages with only a small number of schools, out of over 250 schools in the school's LEA, showing a lower aggregate score. However, the Key Stage 1 progress to Key Stage 2 data for this school demonstrated their pupils were making average progress when compared with pupils of similar ability in the LEA.

School Self-evaluation Questions

- Does our school have rigorous procedures to measure pupil progress, ideally concerned with age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic (FSM) and mobility factors?
- Do teachers use analyses of pupil performance in their planning?
- Do we celebrate successful steps by individual pupils?
- Is target setting used effectively in the classroom?
- Do we monitor our teaching methods to ensure best practice for all?
- Are all our school resources used to benefit the progress of pupils in their learning?

ii. INDICATOR 2

The School Ethos

Measures of success that are difficult to judge objectively include the whole area of pupil care, pupil behaviour, attitudes to learning, and so on. But it is right that these issues help to define whether a school is successful or not. Often these factors are a precursor to any kind of academic success. The headteachers interviewed concentrated a significant amount of their time and energy in establishing and maintaining the right social context in their schools in order that learning can take place and pupils subsequently make progress.

The *Oxford Dictionary* (1996) defines ethos as the characteristic spirit or attitudes of a community, people or system. OFSTED include the following features in order to judge a school's ethos: general staff commitment to the achievement of high standards, pupil and parent satisfaction, and good working relationships across the school.

Much is made in OFSTED school inspection reports of the school ethos. For instance, the following extracts relate to some of the schools visited:

“The school's good ethos and attention to individual needs enhance pupils' personal development.” (Carlton Vale, 2000)

“The very positive ethos, consistently promoted by all staff ensures pupils gain a good understanding of right and wrong.” (Salisbury, 2000)

“Very good ethos. The school offers a consistently encouraging approach in which pupils can make progress.” (Middleton, 1999)

“The school provides a caring ethos that benefits all pupils, particularly those with special educational needs, and pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are good.” (Cottingley, 2000)

“Much has been achieved in creating a positive and supportive ethos, based on mutual respect and care.” (Skegness, 1997)

“A good ethos. It is committed to helping pupils achieve as high a standard as possible and to developing positive attitudes and good relationships.” (Cowbit, 1999)

If the comments above are reflective of the schools' 'characteristic spirit' can these schools be deemed to be less than successful? The word 'positive' crops up three times in these six extracts and this certainly is indicative of the commitment of the schools' leadership on which I have reported. Most primary schools over the years have developed their own unique brand of characteristic spirit, cemented in the pupils' early years when their parents are so much involved.

Primary schools cannot survive without the spirit of community. Whether as an adult or a child it is rare to be in isolation. Everyone has to learn the rules of community life, to get on with each other. This aspect is pursued vigorously by the headteachers in their schools especially as they have to deal with significant poor behaviour issues:

“In a school like this no-one can relax about pupil behaviour, particularly with the older boys and all the newcomers during the year.” (Mablethorpe)

“The attitude and arrogance of some pupils is very sad.” (Sutterton)

“The key thing has been the behaviour and discipline, that took us four years.”
(Middleton)

“I have attempted to change the culture of the school. It used to be run by bullies. I want it to be a positive place.” (Chalkhill)

A primary school in a challenging context must develop a good ethos as a priority. Once it has achieved this, that is one of its first major successes and must be publicly recognised as such. Without the positive ethos there is no community spirit and there will be no effective teaching or learning.

School Self-evaluation Questions

- Is our school safe and happy for everyone?
- Do we have a positive ethos that encompasses high expectations?
- Do staff and pupils work well together at our school?
- How do we know if parents are satisfied with our school procedures?
- Do we apply policies consistently throughout the school to ensure pupils learn the difference between right and wrong?
- How do we integrate new pupils into the school systems?

iii. INDICATOR 3

Pupil Participation

The greater the level of pupil participation in the daily life of school the greater the pupil's opportunities to make progress. Aspects of pupil participation are an integral part of OFSTED's inspection framework and include features such as attendance, attitudes, behaviour, homework, and involvement in extra curricular activities. Although these may not be an absolute determinant for improving pupil achievement, the extent to which these features are positive is a measure of a successful school.

In the challenging schools context, pupil participation can be a formidable hurdle. For instance, regular attendance and punctuality are serious issues to be addressed, in many instances, as a result of factors beyond the schools' control:

“Parents say, ‘What is there to get up for?’” (Chalkhill)

“Pupils disappear suddenly due to fear of deportation.” (Park Lane)

“Those who do not attend regularly are because of parentally condoned truancy, for instance, we had a party last night.” (Shakespeare)

“The main problem is the time to have off to see the dentist or speech therapist or hospital. All these are in Boston or a long way away so the child always has a full day off.” (Sutterton)

“Some families just disappear but we have to keep them on roll for four weeks.”
(Mablethorpe)

“Our Romany children, who have their own rules and culture, negatively skew our attendance figures.” (Cowbit)

All the schools though, have policies and systems in place to encourage good attendance and punctuality, systems that often take up a large amount of administrative time and financial resource for the school.

It is very easy to accumulate data on school attendance rates that discriminates against challenging schools, which have to incorporate external factors into their attendance policies. It is the effectiveness of these policies to both coerce and encourage their pupils' participation in school that is one measure of the success of the school.

Both the amount of time spent on homework and the rate of completion of homework is an indicator of the pupils' willingness to participate in school conventions. Whilst all the headteachers interviewed have spent considerable time in putting together and publicising their homework policies, in many cases involving parents in the policy construction, support remains variable.

“A lot find this very hard.” (Chalkhill)

“The majority of parents support and think it is good but lack the ability to give proper support.” (Cottingley)

“The implications of the home school contracts are worthless in this area.”
(Shakespeare)

“Perhaps 40 per cent of parents either can't or won't support their child's homework, even though they all agree it is very valuable.” (Mount St Marys)

“The parents of the younger children are far more responsive.” (Lutton)

All the schools in the study give explicit support and encouragement to all their pupils to actively participate in homework, encouraging it to be seen as a natural extension of the pupils' learning in school. The variable support given to homework by pupils and their parents in these challenging schools is a measure of the extremes in expectations their families have of the school. At one end of the spectrum:

“All hell can be let loose if a child is kept behind for two minutes to discuss homework.”
(Middleton)

“Our school is fighting against a culture that, for many, says you do not need qualifications to get a job, you do not actually need a lot of money, parents do not want their children to go onto higher education because they will not come back home.” (Lutton)

And at the other:

“Some very high expectations, particularly amongst the refugees.” (Salisbury)

“A small group of parents have very high expectations and these tend to be those who have experienced life elsewhere.” (Mablethorpe)

All the schools have extremes of views within the parent body that directly affect the pupils' participation. The headteachers accept this and work very hard to be positive:

“It takes a lot of work from the school leadership and all staff to break this cycle, as those who are not supportive take up a disproportionate amount of my time.”
(Shakespeare)

Positive action in encouraging pupil participation in all its aspects must be a determinant of success for the school.

School Self-evaluation Questions

- Do we have effective policies for encouraging good attendance and punctuality that utilise the knowledge and skills of all appropriate external agencies?
- What are the incentives for all our pupils to learn?
- Are homework strategies appropriate and informative to all?
- Is our behaviour policy used fairly and consistently by all?
- How many of our pupils are encouraged to participate in extra curricular activities/out of school learning classes?
- Are pupils throughout the school encouraged to take responsibility?

iv. INDICATOR 4

Community Participation

Involving the community in the core purpose of schools, pupil learning, is not an easy task.

“Many urban schools find it difficult to tap the initial hopes and expectations which parents have for their children’s education and to engage parents as educators, or even as partners in the process, beyond the nursery and reception class.” (National Commission on Education, 1996)

This statement is supported by the majority of the headteachers interviewed who claim:

“Parents think it is school’s job to educate – they can be amazed when their child performs well and are not always sure how this can be.” (Mount St Marys)

“Many parents lack an understanding of the value of education to their children and they have low expectations.” (Sutterton)

“Most parents see the school as totally responsible for their child’s education.”
(Skegness)

The community outside of the home and school does obviously influence pupils who are part of neighbourhood groups, clubs, gangs, and so on. Within the school must be recognition of this fact, and the development of a community partnership that Stoll (1996), maintains:

“Means recognising all the influences and attempting to bring some coherence to the multiple messages pupils receive.”

All of the 14 headteachers assert their school plays a role in the community and that their school takes an active part in leading aspects of this partnership:

“I believe the school should be used by the community.” (Park Lane)

“We see ourselves as the centre of the community but not the most important.”
(Cottingley)

“We are part of the community and do a lot together.” (Lutton)

“Wherever community involvement is seen to be supportive of the children this will take precedence.” (Cowbit)

This community participation by these primary schools in challenging contexts is seen as a crucial element in improving the life chances of their pupils. Significant time is given over to its development:

“I have had numerous parental meetings about expectations and they now say they are more aware of standards.” (South Witham)

The justification given by the schools for giving specific time to community participation includes:

- Helping to build low esteem in the community in general
- Binding cultures together
- Reducing the impact of low economic status
- Encouraging respect for the school.

The level of support given by the school to the community, and by the community to the school should both provide indicators of the success or otherwise of the school’s work.

School Self-evaluation Questions

- How well do we know our community?
- How well do we cater for the social and cultural needs of our pupils?
- Do we encourage all our parents to play an important part in their child’s learning?
- Do we keep our parents well informed about their child’s progress and other aspects of school life?
- Do we take every opportunity to be involved with the community outside our school?
- Does the community see itself as part of a cohesive and collaborative unit of professionals, pupils and parents?

7. Conclusions

a. Challenging Contexts

Every primary school has unique characteristics and most have little or no control over their external context. The particular features that characterise primary schools in challenging contexts include social deprivation, high crime rates, challenging behaviour of pupils, low community and parental expectations of pupil achievement, pupils' inconsistent attendance and punctuality, the extent of pupil mobility, the existence of diverse cultures and often problems with staff recruitment. Every school has to adapt their teaching and learning strategies according to the extent of the demands of their pupil intake. The more challenging the context, the greater the adaptation required. The intake will influence final achievement outcomes and

“... the considerable majority of schools achieve precisely the sort of results one would predict from knowledge of their intakes. A few may do substantially better while a similarly small number may do substantially worse.” (Gray J, 1996)

The school, however, will influence the individual progress its pupils make.

b. Personal Leadership Contexts

The career background of headteachers working in primary schools in challenging contexts is generally no different to that of other headteachers. Headteachers in primary schools in challenging contexts are more likely to emphasise particular characteristics, such as, community awareness, celebration of small steps of progress, passion, 'we can do' culture emphasis, to help undermine the negative influences of these contexts.

c. Leadership Strategies

Leadership strategies in every school should encourage the best progress of which each pupil is capable. Leadership in primary schools in challenging contexts has to be more rigorous in first tackling the specific needs of their pupils in order to create a climate for learning where pupils can make progress. Issues such as pupil behaviour, raising self-esteem, creating a unified school culture, dealing with a volatile community are constant concerns.

d. Success Indicators

The success indicators suggested in this report will help to define the effectiveness of a school. The successful school is one that ensures its pupils make good progress in an appropriate learning environment. By a regular and critical evaluation of its role, schools can use the indicators in the manner described in this report – pupil progress, school ethos, pupil participation and community participation – to confirm their success in challenging their pupils to do better.

e. Implications

The implication for all primary schools, and policy makers, is to recognise the basic differences between schools. Schools are distinctive and one school's effectiveness cannot be simplistically matched with another's. Parents need to be assured that the school they send their child to will do everything possible to encourage good progress in their child's learning. They need to be satisfied that their child will be safe and happy and will be actively encouraged to participate in his or her learning and in all aspects of the school. They will also need assurance that the school is committed to continually reviewing its practices to ensure that it is an effective school for all its pupils and reflects the needs of the community it serves.

The significance of this for those headteachers of primary schools in challenging contexts is to ensure that specific strategies are in place to ensure the school's success. These strategies will include:

- Working to create a positive school ethos
- Monitoring pupil progress and celebrating successes
- Creating realistic targets for pupils and staff
- Monitoring teaching and learning
- Involving the community
- Creating a cohesive and collaborative unit of learning professionals
- Conducting regular self-evaluation of school policies that will analyse and identify those critical issues for change to bring about school improvement

Leading a primary school in a challenging context requires an enormous energy and commitment. Time is always at a premium to achieve all the essential tasks in the allotted time-scale. Although each school is unique, headteachers can learn so much from each other, from the school down the road, for instance, whose intake will be similar. The headteachers visited for this research welcomed the opportunity to have a frank and non-judgemental discussion about their school and their own work. Many felt that although the impetus for the meeting was this project, by talking through their strategies, they were able to perceive some issues in a different light. It was seen as very much a two way process.

A disservice is done to all schools, but particularly schools in challenging contexts, when communities are asked to judge their schools' effectiveness on outcomes alone. Schools must ensure that their successes are well advertised and understood. Policy makers need to be more honest about what the results of national tests mean for each school and support school leadership in their demand for the recognition of other indicators that represent success for their school.

8. Methodology

a. Sample

This project focuses on primary schools in challenging contexts. Three areas of the country were chosen to represent different types of challenging contexts – Brent, as a compact but diversely populated London authority, Leeds as a northern England authority with a significant proportion of inner city schools and Lincolnshire, being very large geographically and with many rurally isolated primary schools.

The first contact made, initially by telephone, was with senior representatives of the three local education authorities. Discussions were arranged in their offices to determine their response to a number of issues. The issues discussed with the LEA representatives were mainly to do with their perception of successful headteacher strategies in schools in challenging contexts in their authority. They were also asked to suggest a list of schools I could visit. These schools were linked by a number of factors.

- LEA and OFSTED judgements on the leadership of the schools were extremely positive.
- End of Key Stage 2 national test results, for the year 2000, were generally much lower than the LEA average.
- The context of the schools' catchments was deemed by the LEA, and subsequently confirmed by the OFSTED inspection report information, to be of a challenging nature.

Telephone contact was initially made with the 14 headteachers, some of whom had been previously contacted by their LEA, to explain the nature of my research and confirm they would be happy to see me. All headteachers contacted were very positive in their response. Subsequently, letters were sent to them confirming the time of my visit.

b. Materials

In determining the most effective method of collecting information to answer my research questions, a number of elements had to be considered. These included time constraints – 100 days from beginning to end of the project – what kind of data could be best analysed to provide an 'easy read' for my target audience of busy school leaders and how to collect the most applicable information possible from my sample. The main instrument I decided to use was a set group of questions written in the form of a questionnaire. This was to be discussed with each headteacher to attempt to build a consistent picture from the interview sample. I also followed a number of key principles, outlined by MacBeath J, (1994). These included:

- People need to know why the survey is being conducted
- Participants need to know what is going to be done with the information
- Honest and useful statements of opinion depend on the assurance of confidentiality.

When the visit confirmation letter was sent to the 14 headteachers a short questionnaire was also enclosed (see Appendix 3). This questionnaire was collected during my visit. Its purpose was to provide basic information about the school and the headteacher, which could act as a start to our discussion. It would also serve the purpose of encouraging the headteacher to reflect before my visit on some of the issues to be discussed in depth.

I devised a detailed questionnaire to use with each headteacher. The structure was conceived from Natriello's (1990) categories ie of disadvantaged pupils affected by a combination of family, community and their school. Questions were devised to gain information about these three domains from the 14 schools. The personal leadership context questions were subdivided into questions concerning the headteachers' background and the leadership strategies used in their schools.

c. Procedures

Interviews with the 14 headteachers were all prefaced by a short description of my own position, as the headteacher of an inner city primary school in a challenging context, and the justification for my current research work with the NCSL. This introduction was designed to put interviewer/interviewee on the right footing for an open discussion based around the main questionnaire. Although not every discussion followed the same course, I was always able to backtrack to ensure all questions had been addressed. Following each visit, I sent a letter of appreciation to the headteacher, each of whom had given over a substantial portion of their working day to talk with me.

The collation of questionnaire responses was a crucial and time-consuming exercise after the visits. I developed a structured format to ensure I was able to accurately cross-reference all the responses (see Appendix 3) and begin the process of analysis. I also ensured a detailed and appropriate literature review was ongoing so I could triangulate the data analysis with other sources.

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| | |
|-----------------|--|
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Appendix 1

What is a school in challenging contexts?

In determining allocation of EIC funding to primary schools across the LEA, the process one LEA (Leeds) used was to look for a method that would extend the commonly used free school meals indicator, thus ensuring all schools were seen to be equally advantaged in the allocation. This funding was to go to primary schools with the greatest need for pupil care and pupil progress, and could thus be also defined as challenging schools.

Indicators used included the following:

- Number of pupils achieving below Level 4 in English at KS2
- Number of pupils achieving below Level 4 in Maths at KS2
- Number of pupils achieving below Level 2b in Reading at KS1
- Number of pupils achieving below Level 2b in Number at KS1
- Total pupil mobility
- Number of sessions lost to all absences
- Number on roll
- Number of pupils at Level 3 or above on SEN matrix
- Ethnicity: number of pupils from disadvantaged ethnic groups, esp. African Caribbean/Pakistani Groups
- Number of pupils with English as an additional language
- Number of pupils looked after by the local authority
- Number of pupils entitled to free school meals
- Number of sessions lost to unauthorised absence
- Number of referrals to Primary School Support Service
- Number of referrals to Primary Pupil Referral Service
- Number of pupils at Level 3 or above on SEN matrix – F band (emotional and behaviour needs)

Appendix 2

224 LEA primary schools: greatest need/year 2000 SAT results **

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 200 | 43 | 269 | 85 | 207 | 127 | 210 | 169 | 218 | 211 | 279 |
| 2 | 213 | 44 | 254 | 86 | 242 | 128 | 267 | 170 | 272 | 212 | 291 |
| 3 | 212 | 45 | 164 | 87 | 223 | 129 | 234 | 171 | 278 | 213 | 247 |
| 4 | 163 | 46 | 187 | 88 | 218 | 130 | 250 | 172 | 250 | 214 | 223 |
| 5 | 175 | 47 | 192 | 89 | 224 | 131 | 238 | 173 | 265 | 215 | 245 |
| 6 | 213 | 48 | 245 | 90 | 254 | 132 | 300 | 174 | 255 | 216 | 256 |
| 7 | 156 | 49 | 222 | 91 | 256 | 133 | 288 | 175 | 253 | 217 | 246 |
| 8 | 235 | 50 | 173 | 92 | 210 | 134 | 230 | 176 | 285 | 218 | 282 |
| 9 | 217 | 51 | 132 | 93 | 234 | 135 | 240 | 177 | 261 | 219 | 223 |
| 10 | 223 | 52 | 196 | 94 | 262 | 136 | 243 | 178 | 273 | 220 | 241 |
| 11 | 181 | 53 | 233 | 95 | 200 | 137 | 279 | 179 | 291 | 221 | 276 |
| 12 | 198 | 54 | 189 | 96 | 263 | 138 | 205 | 180 | 275 | 222 | 279 |
| 13 | 204 | 55 | 244 | 97 | 202 | 139 | 265 | 181 | 248 | 223 | 251 |
| 14 | 202 | 56 | 231 | 98 | 173 | 140 | 204 | 182 | 265 | 224 | 292 |
| 15 | 164 | 57 | 233 | 99 | 235 | 141 | 284 | 183 | 259 | | |
| 16 | 236 | 58 | 271 | 100 | 254 | 142 | 220 | 184 | 297 | | |
| 17 | 205 | 59 | 203 | 101 | 252 | 143 | 180 | 185 | 255 | | |
| 18 | 263 | 60 | 234 | 102 | 247 | 144 | 197 | 186 | 281 | | |
| 19 | 218 | 61 | 227 | 103 | 246 | 145 | 233 | 187 | 292 | | |
| 20 | 259 | 62 | 208 | 104 | 265 | 146 | 300 | 188 | 261 | | |
| 21 | 205 | 63 | 247 | 105 | 251 | 147 | 224 | 189 | 294 | | |
| 22 | 191 | 64 | 231 | 106 | 246 | 148 | 259 | 190 | 207 | | |
| 23 | 207 | 65 | 242 | 107 | 288 | 149 | 253 | 191 | 186 | | |
| 24 | 140 | 66 | 228 | 108 | 258 | 150 | 286 | 192 | 287 | | |
| 25 | 214 | 67 | 236 | 109 | 271 | 151 | 262 | 193 | 288 | | |
| 26 | 134 | 68 | 241 | 110 | 271 | 152 | 270 | 194 | 263 | | |
| 27 | 179 | 69 | 242 | 111 | 251 | 153 | 273 | 195 | 241 | | |
| 28 | 216 | 70 | 276 | 112 | 219 | 154 | 270 | 196 | 231 | | |
| 29 | 217 | 71 | 208 | 113 | 187 | 155 | 240 | 197 | 290 | | |
| 30 | 169 | 72 | 262 | 114 | 222 | 156 | 231 | 198 | 250 | | |
| 31 | 216 | 73 | 217 | 115 | 280 | 157 | 253 | 199 | 262 | | |
| 32 | 189 | 74 | 184 | 116 | 248 | 158 | 217 | 200 | 270 | | |
| 33 | 188 | 75 | 233 | 117 | 208 | 159 | 207 | 201 | 300 | | |
| 34 | 244 | 76 | 234 | 118 | 257 | 160 | 266 | 202 | 275 | | |
| 35 | 165 | 77 | 279 | 119 | 253 | 161 | 268 | 203 | 266 | | |
| 36 | 211 | 78 | 176 | 120 | 275 | 162 | 251 | 204 | 228 | | |
| 37 | 237 | 78 | 273 | 121 | 234 | 163 | 288 | 205 | 264 | | |
| 38 | 173 | 80 | 261 | 122 | 218 | 164 | 297 | 206 | 250 | | |
| 39 | 222 | 81 | 244 | 123 | 217 | 165 | 273 | 207 | 274 | | |
| 40 | 88 | 82 | 262 | 124 | 281 | 166 | 126 | 208 | 297 | | |
| 41 | 132 | 83 | 262 | 125 | 269 | 167 | 270 | 209 | 273 | | |
| 42 | 125 | 84 | 212 | 126 | 269 | 168 | 266 | 210 | 291 | | |

** *Greatest need rank order: as measured by Eic Primary Plan key indicators (school 1 = greatest need, school 224 = least need)*

Year 2000 SAT results: aggregated % En, Ma, Sc at Level 4+

Appendix 3

Confidential primary school pre-visit questionnaire – summer 2001

- Headteacher's name.....
- School.....
- LEA.....

| ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL | YOUR RESPONSE |
|--|---------------|
| What is the age range of your pupils? | |
| What is the current total pupil numbers? | |
| How many registered SEN pupils? | |
| How many teachers – f/t and p/t? | |
| How many good teachers – better than satisfactory? (OFSTED or own criteria) | |
| How many classroom support staff ? | |
| Do you set pupils by ability for some subjects? | |
| If you set, for which subjects? | |
| Do teachers monitor each other's teaching or planning or assessments? | |
| What percentage of the 2001–2002 school budget is to be spent on all staffing? | |
| Please list the main challenges that constrain individual pupil progress at your school. | |
| About yourself | |
| How long have you been headteacher at this school? | |
| How many other full-time headteacher posts have you had? | |

| | |
|---|--|
| How many years have you been in the teaching profession? | |
| Have you attended the DfEE NPQH programme? | |
| Have you attended the DfEE LPSH programme? | |
| In a few words, how would you describe your leadership style? | |