

Inspiring leaders to  
improve children's lives



National College  
for School Leadership

---

Schools and academies

---

# Research Associate Full report

**Gillian Hodgson**  
**Vice Principal, West London Academy**

Resource

Creating a climate of intelligent  
accountability in all-through  
academies

Summer 2011

---

# Contents

Abstract .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Literature review .....	5
Methodology .....	6
Findings .....	7
Conclusion .....	18
References .....	19
Acknowledgements .....	20

## Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, the National College is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of the National College's policy.

---

# Abstract

This research sets out to examine and analyse, from a senior leadership perspective, the particular challenges, complexities and processes required to secure improvement in all-through academies within a climate of accountability. An initial analysis and consideration of the literature identifies three main questions central to the research.

- What are the strategies used to improve outcomes in all-through academies?
- What are the key inhibitors and accelerators to successful outcomes in an all-through academy?
- How have the three all-through academies studied begun to overcome the emerging complexities of internal and external accountabilities?

The key premise of this research is that strong self-evaluation strategies combined with external evaluation promote further improvements in performance. Accountability can often be seen as a dirty word, but it does not need to be a constraint on schools. Through a literature review and interviews with senior leaders at three all-through academies, a conceptual model (Figure 1 in the main text) was developed in one of the academies (the researcher's own school) and analysed in respect of each type of accountability against the specific complexities and challenges posed by the all-through nature of the academies studied. As similar cyclical processes were also described in the other all-through academies studied, this suggests the need for further research to explore the potential benefits of such a model for a wider range of all-through academies.

---

# Introduction

There is no need for accountability to be a constraint on schools since, if used intelligently, it can lead to the innovation necessary for greater school improvement. It is well documented that strong self-evaluation strategies combined with external evaluation promote further improvements in performance. For example, Fullan asserts that ‘the discipline of school improvement lies in developing strong internal processes for self monitoring and reflection’ (Fullan, 2009:27). Barber states that:

‘The development of a powerful accountability system has been hugely beneficial for teachers. It has clarified their mission for a start.’

Barber, 2004:5-6

going on to state that :

‘Because it causes the system to address its weaknesses, it creates continuous improvement which encourages the public to keep faith.’

ibid

Barber is concerned with external processes, whereas Fullan is considering the internal processes of accountability. Both, however, conclude that accountability improves outcomes. The purpose of this research study is to identify the strategies that all-through academies are employing to lead improvement in a climate of accountability.

At the time of writing, Key Stage (KS) 3 standardised attainment tests (SATs) as accountability measures had been removed. There is discontent in parts of the teaching profession about the use of KS2 SATs (Marley, 2009). Ofsted now places a greater emphasis on attainment in the overall judgement of a school (Stewart, 2009), and there has been an increased expectation of collaboration between schools in order to share expertise, good practice and ideas for innovation. This has meant that the conventional idea of accountability as measuring the performance of an organisation in comparison with others has been extended in a move towards system leadership (Hopkins, 2007), and the idea that schools should work together to improve the education system.

A literature search reveals very little work focusing on the particular complexities of all-through schools in the UK. Macaulay (2008) focused on the leadership of the original academies set up under the former Labour government. The present research study focuses on the leadership of all-through academies with particular reference to their views on the process of ensuring accountability. With an ever-increasing interest in the development of all-through schools, and a growth in and government support for the establishment of new academies, this research is timely in seeking to answer the following research questions.

- What are the strategies used to improve outcomes in all-through academies?
- What are the key inhibitors and accelerators to successful outcomes in an all-through academy?
- How have the three all-through academies studied begun to overcome the emerging complexities of internal and external accountabilities?

This research is of interest not only to single-institution, all-through schools, but also to any school seeking to work collaboratively. As collaboration and cross-phase partnership working are encouraged, federations and networks of schools will start to encounter similar complexities and challenges and may therefore benefit from the findings of this research study.

---

# Literature review

The term 'accountability' is often used to describe the process of proving 'that something has been done or achieved' (Hopkins, 2007:101). Hopkins contends however that this is not the entire picture and that accountability is also a process to improve quality or performance', (ibid). Such accountability processes may be both external and internal. External accountability is provided by an inspection system that creates a performative culture with:

'A technology for auditing the performance of educational institutions in a form which renders them transparent to the public gaze.'

Elliott, 2001:193

However, it is complemented by the internal accountability processes of schools as they seek to improve their own provision. ('Intelligent accountability', Secondary Heads Association (SHA), 2003).

The 'building of capacity and flexibility at the front line, backed by an intelligent accountability framework and by targeted intervention to deal with underperformance', (SHA), 2003:8, balances both internal school processes and external monitoring to secure efficient and effective schools.

At an internal level, schools are largely able to implement school improvement processes in ways appropriate to their specific contexts and circumstances, and academies have been granted even greater freedom to do so. This increased freedom at institutional level is however not at present fully backed by effective internal accountability structures to ensure its use is effective. It is necessary for schools to accept that 'the counterpart of greater freedom at institutional level is an increased need for accountability to show how such freedom has been used' (Earley & Weindling, 2004:78).

Accountability is not a new concept; total quality management (TQM) encompasses four equal symbiotic components to help improve the outcomes of an organisation: 'the status of customers, the emphasis on values and vision, the management of processes and the significance attached to the management of people' (Davies & West-Burnham, 1997:10). These components have been described as 'accountability relationships' by Earley and Weindling (2004:78), who highlight four different types within schools:

- accountability to pupils: moral accountability
- accountability to colleagues: professional accountability
- accountability to employers or political masters: contractual accountability
- accountability to the market (through availability of a choice of institutions): market accountability

With the current trend towards system leadership (Hopkins, 2007) this model could be extended to add:

- accountability to the education system as a whole: system accountability

These five facets of accountability can underpin an analysis of how all-through academies effect improvement within a climate of accountability, which is the purpose of this study.

---

# Methodology

The aim of this research is to analyse the views of senior leaders on how they effect change in a climate of accountability. Academies were selected for the study on the basis that they have students in all phases of education, and that they have experienced the complexities and challenges of effecting improvement in such a climate. Three academies were identified as fulfilling these criteria and agreed to take part. A total of eight senior leaders including all principals and heads of school were interviewed. All interviewees remain anonymous, but for the purposes of citation, the three schools are coded throughout this report as being 'red', 'indigo' or 'violet'.

A semi-structured interview style was adopted with open-ended questions and the flexibility to ask follow-up questions. In order that both theoretical and practical leadership aspects could be addressed, there was an attempt by the interviewer to assess the respondent's perceptions and feelings regarding the accountability process, as well as obtaining practical details about what was done and its impact.

This case study is necessarily a snapshot in time of one type of organisation. It is recognised that the main limitation of this approach was the small sample of all-through academies which met the criteria to be involved in the research. A follow-up study as other all-through academies come of age would help to validate the results of this study.

---

# Findings

## Processes for monitoring and evaluation

All the principals and senior leaders of the three all-through academies interviewed identified self-evaluation as being at the heart of processes for improvement, as summarised by one academy principal:

“We have an IMPACT strategy here which stands for Improvement through Monitoring Performance, Action, Challenge and Targeting. It is a holistic 360-[degree] cycle of monitoring performance then challenging and targeting the areas that need to be improved.”

Principal, violet school

A similar process was also recognised by other principals and senior leaders, described for example as:

“A chain of outcome analysis, self-evaluation [and] improvement planning.”

Principal, red school

In describing such processes, there was little in the language used to distinguish these responses as coming from leaders of all-through academies. This could suggest that the process of monitoring and evaluation in all-through academies is the same as that used for monitoring and evaluation in other types of school, and that the challenges are perhaps more to do with achieving consistency than specifically related to the all-through nature of the academy.

The process of gathering information to aid whole-academy improvement was consistently described by all the principals interviewed. It was simply recognised as being good practice in any school. One principal said it consisted of:

“Throughout the whole organisation, identifying what the issues are, but also... issues that we might not have known about [so] then we can use those for targeting as well.”

Principal, violet school

Monitoring and evaluation are thus not simply about confirming what is already known; rather they offer an objective understanding of what the real situation is. One principal remarked that perception and reality are not always the same thing and that this makes the monitoring performance part of the improvement process in all-through academies much more important. All of the principals and senior leaders interviewed expressed the importance of knowing the organisation fully and accurately.

If there is an emerging complexity or challenge particular to all-through academies in monitoring and evaluation, it is the size of the organisation, and the need to ensure that practice is consistent regardless of the phase of education, thus making the academy offer a true continuum of education. One principal acknowledged the importance of this:

“It was absolutely imperative that [the quality of learning] that was happening in one lesson was happening in another. It doesn't matter if that is with 5 year olds or 18 year olds.”

Principal, violet school

The key theme that is identified here is that monitoring and evaluation are essential for ensuring consistency across all phases of the organisation. If there are strengths of practice when staff work with 5 year olds there must also be the same consistent strength shown by staff working with 18 year olds. If that is not present then there are unacceptable variations in practice within the organisation which must be addressed.

---

The way in which this emerging complexity appears to be being met in all-through academies is to have a common language by which performance is monitored. One principal identified in depth the ways in which it was important to create this common language:

“There are common things all of the way through: we can have a whole staff meeting on assessment because we speak a common language of assessment.”

Principal, indigo school

A theme linked to this use of common language in overcoming the size and complexity of an all-through academy was to ensure staff accepted that they were not simply working in a primary or secondary school. In part this could emerge because primaries often joined the secondary school at a later stage or in some cases there is, or has been, a head of primary phase and a separate head of secondary phase. Two of the principals acknowledged that being an all-through institution required more complex integration:

“Until we stop hearing staff saying ‘I work at the primary’, we aren’t fully all-through.”

Principal, violet school

“Having a primary next to a secondary doesn’t make it an all-through.”

Principal, indigo school

There is evidence that some academies are beginning to overcome this complexity by devising structures that give staff whole-academy responsibilities. In two of the three academies in the study, vice principals have specific responsibility across the whole age range. Other academies have chosen not to address this complexity and simply operate as a primary and secondary school on the same site.

The ways in which performance is monitored across the whole organisation was seen as vital in creating the all-through feeling of the organisation. The sheer size of the organisation was seen as an emerging complexity with a requirement for robust and clear systems, structures and communication routes. For example, the principal of violet school described how the academy had tackled communication difficulties by using a staff intranet, which was used to ensure everyone knew what was happening.

The academies that operate whole-academy cycles of monitoring and evaluation across all phases, ensuring that everybody is involved in performance measurement, see it as essential in successfully ensuring the continuum of education. Communication of performance monitoring findings then becomes of paramount importance as all staff need to know the findings of performance monitoring so that they can progress to the higher stages of academy improvement strategies which include action, challenge and targeting.

Equally, ensuring everybody knows everything they need to know within complex organisations is critical to their becoming truly integrated as all-through organisations. Staff training as a cross-phase integrated structure was seen as one way in which the whole organisation can come together and is also one of the ways in which the language, ethos and goals of the organisation can be shared. Staff at all academies commented on these training opportunities.

“... whole-academy training so we can use the best practice from all of the phases.”

Principal, violet school

“If it is particularly effective practice that is working well we do our best to ensure that it is advertised [and] that the colleagues who are producing get the opportunity to explain to other colleagues what they are doing.”

Principal, indigo school

Whole-staff training, circulating effective practice and having staff groups working on improvement priorities may not at first seem an emerging complexity for all-through organisations. However, interviews reveal the importance of ensuring that staff from all phases work together and learn together. What is distinctive is not that all-through academies necessarily approach accountability differently than other organisations do, but rather that they must embrace their all-throughness directly at all times so that being all-through is seen as an intrinsic part of the organisation.

---

## Processes for planning improvements and taking action

Principals recognised that measuring performance in itself is not sufficient to effect change; there must be a will to act upon the information. It is important that the criteria against which the performance will be measured are clearly identified, along with the person responsible and the actions that will be taken. Staff from all organisations identified the process of taking action, for example:

“Firstly identify who is responsible for what, then making clear how that will be measured and when... how that person will give an account so the criteria against which an account will be given and then how that individual or team will be judged and then the possible consequences and opportunities for celebration.”

Vice principal, indigo school

The research identified two main areas for improvement planning and acting upon the information from self-evaluation in respect of accountability. The first is through challenging staff and looks at what is done when particularly effective practice is seen, or when ineffective practice is found. The second is about targeting within the organisation, ie targeting students, parents or staff in order to ensure improvement. Each of these will now be considered in turn.

An overwhelming theme to help academy improvement has been to celebrate the achievements of staff who are particularly effective. Part of that celebration is sharing good practice through whole-staff training or partnering with other staff. Arranging partnerships with members of staff who can support and help others to improve was mentioned by staff interviewed. An emerging complexity of doing this was identified by one principal who said:

“We had a newly qualified teacher who achieved an [Ofsted grade of] outstanding [for a lesson]. It is a humbling experience for those staff who have been teaching for 20 years and for those not getting it right.”

Principal, violet school

How staff react to these ‘humbling experiences’ was, however, less clear.

Another theme where there was agreement between principals and senior leaders in all the organisations was that there needs to be acceptance of the need for rapid formal intervention when practice is ineffective or where there is an issue of capability. Clear systems of four-week intervention before a decision on formal capability was reached were present in all organisations. One senior leader commented that:

“If things aren’t going well it is not a matter of hiding, it is looking at how can that be improved.”

Vice principal, indigo school

Honesty and integrity, backed up with clear communication, support and deadlines, were seen as being critical in the intervention process of effecting change through accountability, for it was felt that if people try to hide the real situation then actions taken would not be beneficial to the organisation. It requires people to trust the organisation to deal with the situation. As one principal stated:

“We alert people to what we feel are the shortcomings, put in place a support package, give the deadlines and then move in to take them to account.”

Principal, indigo school

---

Concomitantly, there is a need to celebrate good practice across the academy. The celebratory aspect of using particularly effective staff to model best practice was a major theme in all the academies. An emerging benefit of all-through academies is that they have a wider range of best practice to draw upon. Staff from two of the organisations talked about sharing good practice in regard to the all-through academy:

“We have been able to roll [the system] out quite quickly by getting the people who are truly outstanding to present to the whole staff and model it.”

Principal, violet school

Understanding phase differences in applying particularly effective practice to each phase is key to being able to take advantage of this benefit. One of the emerging challenges of securing improvement in an all-through academy is potentially also one of the greatest benefits. In organisations that operate as a single institution, senior leaders hold responsibilities across the whole age range. The principal of violet school stated that holding a responsibility across the whole age range was vital to developing effective all-through practice.

The challenge that is emerging is one of ensuring that staff quickly become skilled in the phases of education that they have previously been unfamiliar with so that they can contribute to the improvement of all phases of the education offered. The limitation of this is the time it takes to train senior staff who have developed within a compartmentalised system to understand the phases they have not been trained in but are now responsible for leading. Another principal acknowledged the importance of all-through responsibility along with the challenge of developing skills, citing:

“The time it takes for the senior staff to become familiar with the other educational phase... getting used to the learning needs at different phases... has been quite a challenge.”

Principal, indigo school

It is an emerging complexity that staff take time to become familiar with phases of education new to them. As staff seek and gain promotion outside the all-through sector, it then takes a further period of time for the next generation of staff to become familiar with the all-through nature of the organisation.

Within an all-through school, the process of target-setting with students at an early age and monitoring students regularly throughout their education to ensure that they meet their long-term potential are seen as essential for improving learning outcomes. That long-term potential, it was agreed, is presently only just being tapped into.

One of the emerging challenges for all-through academies in securing further improvements in outcomes was to ensure students became more independent in their learning. Academies operating as a single, multi-phase organisation identified that the independence of learners in the primary phase was far in excess of that seen in the secondary phase:

“The way I see learning take place in the nursery and I see it taught out by [the time] they get to Year 11... independent learning in the nursery is probably the best in the school.”

Vice principal, indigo school

The challenge of helping students to become more independent in their learning by curriculum reform was one which needed to be met. The freeing up of the curriculum to allow all-through academies to use a truly all-through curriculum such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme was seen as a way of realising the potential of students within all-through schools. The compartmentalised English national curriculum was criticised by the principals of two all-through academies:

“We would probably introduce the primary years and middle years [IB] to get away from the compartmentalised English national curriculum.”

Principal, violet school

“We use the international primary curriculum.”

Principal, indigo school

---

Principals look forward to the greater opportunities for all-through academies to implement a seamless curriculum appropriate to their needs.

## Achieving consistency

The size of all-through organisations was seen as a complexity, although not as an excuse. One principal acknowledged the surprise that people visiting the academy show when they realise the scale of the organisation. Implementing initiatives in a large organisation is complex in itself and holding people to account for those initiatives is also a very complex process due to the numbers of staff involved. Part of that challenge, identified by staff at more than one academy, is achieving consistency:

“This is a big organisation, [so] implementing a whole-academy strategy here is a major thing.”

Principal, violet school

The greatest challenge for all the all-through academies was felt to be achieving consistency throughout the organisation through whole-school processes and communication and discussion structures. Whether this was made more complicated than in conventional schools because of the all-through nature of the academies was difficult to assess. However, inconsistency between phases was admitted both in terms of student independence of learning and in the quality of practice in all phases. This latter was seen as an overarching challenge for the all-through academies as identified by two academy leaders:

“We need very good practice in every phase; how do we dovetail that to make the continuum of education... outstanding in every subject in every phase of the academy?”

Principal, violet school

“Each phase needs to deliver quality and each phase needs to be given the time to learn from others and not to underestimate the support that one phase can give another.”

Vice principal, indigo school

The all-through academies taking part in the research all had very different operational and strategic leadership structures. The challenge of creating an all-through ethos and as a result consistency across the academy was seen to be resolved by creating processes across the whole academy and ensuring everybody knows the results of those processes:

“The parallelness of the processes... we standardised our paperwork... it is not the paperwork that is important but the process of discussions.”

Principal, red school

“Everyone knows what is happening, everything is on our portal so that everyone can see the results of everything.”

Principal, violet school

There was a clear recognition of the deleterious effect that underperformance in one part of the organisation could have on the whole; one principal very carefully acknowledged this:

“If you think of the wholeness of the academy, if one part isn't secure then it depresses the whole academy.”

Principal, red school

This demonstrates that in all-through academies that are structured in different ways, the overarching challenge is to create best practice in all phases so that no phase undermines the achievements of the whole organisation. It is dealing with the transparency of inconsistencies between phases in all-through academies that presents a large challenge for academy improvement but also leads to the greatest

---

possibility of effective outcomes. One respondent stated:

“An all-through school has no excuses... the synergy in an all-through school has possibilities that we don't even recognise yet and I wouldn't put a ceiling on yet.”

Vice principal, indigo school

This degree of hope is echoed by another respondent:

“Overcoming the culture shock children experience on transition to a new school is one of the greatest removals of barriers to progress so we are one great continuum of learning.”

Principal, violet school

All-through academies educate children from the beginning of their education right through to the end of compulsory schooling. This means that difficulties of transition and the culture shock of arriving at a new school is removed for children who remain at the academy. However, not all students join the academy at the beginning and stay until the end. One respondent stated:

“There is a limit to the development of things that we can do as an all-age school because we have a two-form of entry primary and a six-form entry secondary, [so] we feel we need a critical mass moving through.”

Principal, indigo school

This brings with it a further challenge created by being an all-through academy. In those academies studied and indeed in most all-through academies, there is a much larger intake in the secondary phase than in the primary. Dealing with the transition of students entering an all-through academy which has students who are already familiar with the organisation is a great challenge. Achieving consistency within a short space of time is crucial to that challenge and crucial to improving progress within all-through academies.

Consistency of staff in relation to accountability in all of the all-through academies was seen as a constant challenge, although whether this is specific to all-through academies or to all schools is debatable. Respondents from all the academies studied were clear about the need for more consistency and observed that achieving it was not an easy task:

“We haven't so much got consistency of accountability, what we have is a consistent expectation that staff are accountable.”

Principal, red school

“There is a wide variation in lots of things.”

Vice principal, indigo school

One principal offered the reason for patchiness in accountability practice as occurring when the member of staff or even the line manager is reluctant to engage fully with its demands. This is a common issue for creating a culture of consistent accountability:

“One or two [members of staff] are reluctant because it shows them up, if they are not prepared to mark every week and have their work scrutinised, it is because they don't want to do it.”

Principal, violet school

Effective line management and clear structures of accountability were identified as being necessary to embed a culture of accountability. This was clearly identified by one member of staff who stated:

“Staff structures clearly show who is responsible to whom... to clearly have indicated on a structure who is accountable to who and for what... I think has helped us.”

Vice principal, indigo school

---

Relationships were seen as key to the success of line management and accountability. There are parts of the accountability process that people find uncomfortable but it comes down to relationships and the ability to engage in difficult conversations. This theme was seen as critical and identified by many members of staff interviewed in terms such as:

*“The structure of relationships is the key - a piece of paper might indicate where those relationships should be but the quality of the relationships is key.”*

Vice principal, indigo school

Accountability, as one respondent put it, ‘is a dirty word’ (principal, indigo school), but done well in a spirit of professionalism and with good relationships is seen as key to whether people enjoy the challenge of raising their game.

An emerging complexity of all-through schools is the different way in which staff from different phases respond to criticism. Secondary teachers were more able to distinguish between the professional and the personal than primary teachers who often took negative feedback much more personally. Narrowing this gap was seen as important in all-through academies:

*“Secondary teachers, by and large, are able to accept those judgements, even when disappointing, in a way which showed a more professional understanding whereas some of the primary teachers take it more personally.”*

Principal, indigo school

What became clear within all the organisations was that self-evaluation processes and taking action to address inconsistencies are non-negotiable issues and that staff reluctant to embrace them would need to move on. One principal stated:

*“Everyone has to buy into it - you can’t have one person responsible for [intelligent accountability] otherwise everyone is not accountable.”*

Principal, violet school

Whilst this does not appear to be related specifically to the all-through nature of the academy, there could be an emerging complexity that if staff from different phases react differently to the impact of the accountability process and hence buy into it to different degrees, this will weaken the consistency of its application.

## Summary of findings

This section summarises the findings of the interviews with senior leaders against the initial two research questions:

- What are the strategies used to improve outcomes in all-through academies?
- What are the key inhibitors and accelerators to successful outcomes in an all-through academy?

This research study found that the following strategies were felt to be effective in improving outcomes and accelerating progress against potentially inhibiting constraints such as the cross-phase nature, compartmentalised staff experience, size and complexity of the all-through academy:

- self-evaluation at the heart of processes for improvement
- monitoring performance to ensure consistency across all phases
- commonality of language by which performance is monitored
- structures giving staff whole-academy, cross-phase responsibilities
- effective and empathetic communication of performance monitoring findings

- staff training as a cross-phase integrated structure
- sharing good practice and securing improvement through partnering between members of staff
- rapid formal intervention when practice is deemed ineffective
- celebrating good practice across phases and across the academy
- understanding phase differences in staff experience and student learning
- target-setting with students and regular monitoring of progress
- curriculum reform as a vehicle to enhance independent learning
- achieving consistency through whole-school processes and communication and discussion structures
- effective line management and relationships with clear structures of accountability

## Discussion

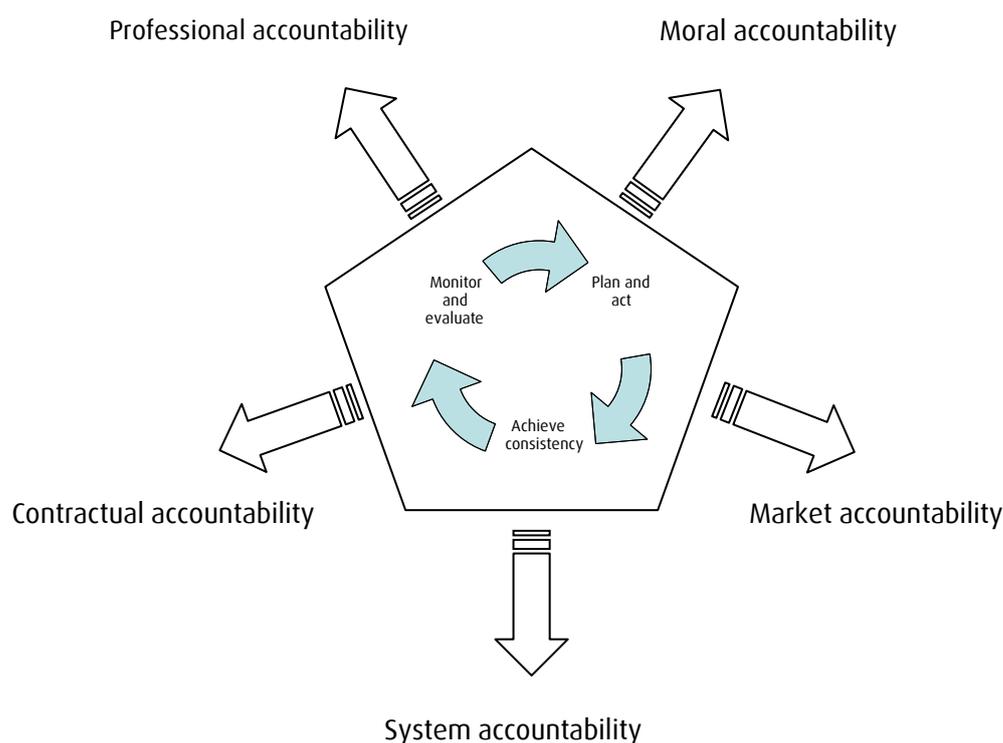
The following discussion now addresses the third research question:

- How have the three all-through academies studied begun to overcome the emerging complexities of internal and external accountabilities?

## A conceptual model of accountability

From the initial review of literature, five different types of accountability which play their part in schools and therefore also in all-through academies were identified. Through comparison of the literature review and interviews with senior leaders at all-through academies, a conceptual model of accountability (Figure 1) was developed within one academy (the researcher's own school). The core cycle of the processes of monitoring, evaluation, planning and action can be described using this conceptual model to provide a mechanism to analyse practice against five identified accountability pressures. As similar cyclical processes were also described in the other all-through academies studied, this would suggest the need for further research to explore the potential benefits of such a model for a wider range of all-through academies.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model of accountability**



---

The central cyclical core of the model acts as an engine both to secure school improvement and satisfy the accountability relationships and pressures. All-through academies have a number of emerging complexities within each part of the cycle, most of them centred on the achievement of consistency across the academy. Achieving a high degree of consistency in an all-through academy is arguably more difficult than in a traditional secondary or primary school due to the more transparent nature of any differences between phases.

The core cycle encompasses the self-evaluation and improvement strategies in action within the organisation. The arrows show the reporting and accountability pressures that are placed upon the organisation. This model can now be used to consider the complexities and challenges of being specifically an all-through academy against the five facets of accountability identified as being required to secure improvement through a climate of intelligent accountability.

## Moral accountability

Narrowing the 'persistent and unacceptable gaps in average attainment between different groups of pupils' (Gilbert, 2006:7) is essential in order to effect improvement in all-through academies.

The senior leaders of academies interviewed for this research all talked about achieving a consistency of quality in each phase, in a continuum of education for the students. The moral accountability to the students is to ensure that the education provided for them is consistently of the highest possible quality: 'if schools are about anything then they have to be fundamentally and obsessively concerned with providing children with the very best educational possibilities' (West-Burnham, 1997:7). This is supported by academy principals:

*"There is a very basic benchmark, an emotional benchmark for all of them, which is would you be happy with your child in their class for a year with them as their maths teacher... if the answer is 'no' then if it is not good enough for your child then it can't be good enough for other people's children."*

Principal, indigo school

In order to achieve these 'very best educational possibilities' for all children, it is essential to monitor the performance of all staff and to act where improvement is required. Accountability to students can best be served through the core improvement cycle of ensuring monitoring and evaluating, planning and acting, and achieving consistency.

Principals interviewed accepted the six key drivers: assessment for learning, self-directed learning, powerful learning and teaching, new technologies, curriculum, school and system organisation identified by Hopkins (2007:57) as necessary components of a strategy for personalising learning. They saw the challenge as being to focus staff on the need for personalised learning and their accountability for individual student progress. A cycle of monitoring, evaluation, planning and action to create consistency is not designed to stifle teacher creativity but to ensure that each student gets what he or she individually needs from each lesson.

The core cycle can act as a servant to moral accountability, in working to ensure that consistency within the organisation provides the best learning and development opportunities for each child regardless of phase, subject or class. It was felt by the principals interviewed that an intelligent system for moral accountability will not stifle creativity in the search for consistency but rather free up staff to do what is necessary to meet the learning outcomes of students as an essential part of the application of any school improvement strategy.

## Professional accountability

The process of using a core school improvement cycle specifically in relation to professional accountability was described clearly by principals in all of the organisations studied, albeit in varying terms. All the respondents from the all-through academies identified how they managed human resources (HR) to achieve the academies' strategic goals of improving outcomes for students. This was seen in particular when respondents talked about the processes for dealing with ineffective practice.

---

The core cycle can support HR management in terms of providing a framework to ensure that there is professional accountability within the organisation in not only the management of people but also the development of people (Hall, 1997; Earley & Bubb, 2005; Hopkins, 2007). There is a responsibility on schools as employers to invest in their staff to ensure that they can deliver the highest quality service possible. Within the academies studied in the research, the support package offered to staff is an intrinsic part of the elements of planning, action and achieving consistency.

Done well, performance management can help each employee to understand how his or her role can impact upon the school's effectiveness. The evaluation of that effectiveness links to staff development and can create a form of organisational trust, seen as essential to creating a climate in which accountability is accepted. It is the buy-in that is essential to the success of professional accountability.

Any strong school improvement cycle should have a never-ending cycle of improvement at its heart. How this is embedded in the culture of an organisation is considered by principals to be more important than the strategy itself. If the cycle is embedded in a data-driven manner that demands instant results, this will adversely affect the culture of the organisation and ensure that what should be a 'demanding culture of trusted relationships that press for success' becomes an 'add-on data-driven team that demands instant results' (Hargreaves, 2007:183). The findings from this research indicate that effective line management and clear structures of accountability were identified as being responsible for helping to embed a culture of accountability.

Relationships were seen as key to the success of line management and accountability. There are parts of accountability that people find uncomfortable but it comes down to relationships and the ability to engage in difficult conversations. This demonstrates the requirement for the cycle of monitoring and evaluation, planning and action to ensure consistency to be used intelligently and empathically, with due regard for people at the same time as demanding improved standards.

## Contractual accountability

Educational establishments are contracted to provide a service to their stakeholders:

*'Schools are accountable to their stakeholders; they need to be in a position to provide convincing evidence of their success and a clear plan of action to demonstrate how improvements will be made.'*

Ofsted, 2006:4

The process of gathering this evidence is self-evaluation and the process of delivering improvement based on it is improvement planning. The findings of this research demonstrate that monitoring performance is not simply about confirming what is already known, but is an objective means of fully and accurately understanding what the real situation is in order to gather evidence to inform and address the contractual accountability to stakeholders.

## Market accountability

The initial review of literature identified that marketing in education is:

*'The means by which the school actively communicates and promotes its purpose, values and products to the pupils, parents, staff and wider community.'*

Davies & Ellison, 1997:3

In the all-through academies in this research, the development of an all-through ethos and culture was central to ensuring that the academy felt like one organisation. In all cases it was highlighted that what makes the academy all-through is the people, the culture and ethos.

Marketing this culture and ethos is essential not only outside the organisation but also within it to ensure that the staff do see themselves as a part of the whole culture and ethos. There is an inherent danger in marketing externally if staff 'find out that the rhetoric does not match the reality' (Davies & Davies,

---

2003:124). It was also identified in the research that dealing with the transparency of inconsistencies between phases in all-through academies presents these institutions with a significant challenge. There was clear recognition that if one part of the organisation was not performing this could depress the whole organisation.

The particular challenge for all-through academies is that the market does not universally view the all-through academy as a 3-19 continuum; for some it is seen simply as a secondary school. Analysing the impact of this upon the ethos of the school and ensuring that the school fulfils its potential within a complex market of parental choice is an emerging challenge for all-through academies. Essentially each all-through academy 'will have to see themselves as part of their communities... in meeting the needs and requirements specified by that community' (West-Burnham, 1997:8) . For some in the community that will be as an education provider from age 3 up to 16, while for others it will be only part of the education journey.

## System accountability

All-through academies in England are drawing their staff from a pool that is trained in an education system compartmentalised by age. Understanding the differences between applying particularly effective practice in a different phase is key to being able to take advantage of the all-through status and also key to ensuring that all-through schools offer an education at least equivalent to that in the best single-phase establishment. The challenge that emerged in the findings was to ensure staff quickly become skilled in the phases of education that they have previously been unfamiliar with so that they can contribute to the improvement of all phases of the education offered.

The role of the core cycle and its continuous cycle of monitoring and action becomes vital in system accountability. A system of clear identification of best practice coupled with the sharing of this practice across phases helps the all-through academies to absorb their staff into the cross-phase nature of education.

This sharing of effective practice across the phases is in effect a continuous training programme for staff within the all-through sector which addresses a fundamental gap in the present training provision of the system. Bringing together different approaches is seen by the organisations studied as contributing 'more than the sum of the parts' (principal, violet school) as the best practice from each phase is developed. A strong academy improvement cycle which is rich in action can be used to drive this process.

---

# Conclusion

In order to effect improvement and ensure consistency in all-through academies there needs to be an all-encompassing self-evaluation and improvement planning tool that influences the ethos and culture of the organisation. The model outlined in this research, whilst only developed on the basis of a very small sample, can encompass many of the requirements of such a planning tool for a wider range of all-through academies, although further research would be necessary to establish this.

The model provides a useful tool to analyse practice against the five identified drivers of accountability. When considering moral and professional accountability there was little evidence suggesting any complexity specific to an all-through academy that could not be said to apply to any school. The language used was simply that common to many facets of the education system. The opportunities for all-through academies to choose a seamless curriculum is a specific emerging complexity which is compounded by the contractual accountability of national education policies.

In terms of market accountability, a further challenge is that there is a much larger intake in the secondary phase than in the primary of many all-through academies. The result is that the market in general does not view the all-through academy as being all-through, and for some it is simply a secondary school. Meeting the needs of a community where some see the academy as an education provider from ages 3-19 and others as a much shorter part of the education journey is therefore a particular challenge.

The complexities and challenges of all-through academies are particularly noticeable when considering system accountability. The complexity arises from the time that staff take to become familiar with the phases of education that they were not trained in. Being accountable to the system means that staff must however be able to contribute to the wider development of the education system as a whole. This could be achieved by seeking promotion either within or outside the all-through sector, or through networking with other institutions. This complexity means that until there is a significant all-through sector, all-through academies can play their part in improving the wider system by ensuring staff are able to contribute to it by the provision of appropriate training and development.

In terms of processes to achieve each of the identified accountabilities within educational organisations, the central cyclical core of the model can act as an engine to address moral, professional, contractual, market and system accountability, working to ensure that consistency and improvement within the organisation provide the best learning and development opportunities for each child and member of staff so that employers, the community and the whole education system can be served by the best possible educational establishments. The intelligent system for these accountabilities ensures that the accountability constraints are unlocked and creativity is not stifled in the search for consistency.

---

# References

- Barber, M, 2004, [The virtue of accountability: system redesign, inspection and incentives in the era of informed professionalism](#), Inaugural Edwin J Delattre lecture, Boston University, 4 Nov
- Davies, B & Davies, B, 2003, [Marketing schools: an analysis for educational leaders](#). In Davies, B & West-Burnham, J. *Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management*, Harlow, Pearson
- Davies, B & Ellison, L, 1997, [Strategic Marketing for Schools](#), London, Financial Times & Pitman
- Davies, B & West-Burnham, J, 1997, [Reengineering and Total Quality in Schools: how to reform and restructure your school to meet the challenge of the future](#), London, Pitman
- Earley, P & Bubb, S, 2005, [Leading and Managing Continuing Professional Development: Developing People, Developing Schools](#), London, Sage
- Earley, P & Weindling, D, 2004, [Understanding School Leadership](#), London, Sage
- Elliott, J, 2001, [Characteristics of performative cultures: their central paradoxes and limitations as resources for educational reform](#). In Gleeson, D & Husbands, C. *The Performing School: managing, teaching and learning in a performance culture*, London, RoutledgeFalmer
- Fullan, M, 2009, [The Challenge of Change: start school improvement now](#), Thousand Oaks, CA, Corwin Press
- Gilbert, C, 2006, [2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group](#), Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills
- Hall, V, 1997, [Managing staff](#), In Fidler, B, Russell, S & Simkins T (eds), *Choices for self-managing schools*, 140-61, London, Paul Chapman
- Halverson, R, 2007, [How leaders use artefacts to structure professional community in schools](#). In Stoll, L & Louis, K S. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*, Maidenhead, Open University Press
- Hargreaves, A, 2007, [Sustainable professional learning communities](#). In Stoll, L & Louis, K, S. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*, Maidenhead, Open University Press
- Hodgson, G K, 2010, [Securing improvement through intelligent accountability: views of senior leaders in all-through academies](#). Unpublished MBA dissertation, London, Institute of Education
- Hopkins, D, 2007, [Every school a great school: realising the potential of system leadership](#), Maidenhead, Open University Press
- Macaulay, H, 2008, [Under the microscope: Leading in a climate of close public scrutiny](#), Nottingham, National College for School Leadership
- Marley, D, 2009, [Key stage 2: 10,000 call for axing of KS2 SATS](#), Times Educational Supplement, 18 Sep
- Ofsted, 2006, [Improving performance through school self-evaluation and improvement planning](#), London, Ofsted
- SHA, 2003, [Towards intelligent accountability for schools: a policy statement on school accountability, policy paper 5](#), Leicester, Secondary Heads Association
- Stewart, W, 2009, [New Ofsted regime makes top grades near impossible if raw exam data is poor](#), Times Educational Supplement, 26 Jun
- Verma, G K & Mallick, K, 1999, [Researching Education: perspectives and techniques](#), London, Falmer
- West-Burnham, J, 1997, [Managing quality in schools: effective strategies for quality-based school improvement](#), Harlow, Pearson Education Limited

---

# Acknowledgements

## Particular thanks are due to:

Dr Hilary Macaulay for her inspirational leadership and supportive challenge.

The Trustees of West London Academy for allowing me the opportunity to undertake this research.

All the people interviewed for their generosity of time, hospitality and welcome.

Professor Peter Earley and Dr Tracey Allen at the Institute of Education, London for their guidance and supervision of this work as part of an MBA in educational leadership.

Dr Alan Flintham and Dr Amy Collins of the National College for School Leadership for their support and editorial help.

Download the summary report by visiting: [www.nationalcollege.org.uk/researchassociates](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/researchassociates)

The website also provides further information about the programme including:

- current projects
- other full research and summary reports

The National College is uniquely dedicated to developing and supporting aspiring and serving leaders in schools, academies and early years settings.

The College gives its members the professional development and recognition they need to build their careers and support those they work with. Members are part of a community of thousands of other leaders - exchanging ideas, sharing good practice and working together to make a bigger difference for children and young people.

©2011 National College for School Leadership – all rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior permission from the National College. To reuse this material, please contact the Marketing and Communications team at the National College or email [publications@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:publications@nationalcollege.org.uk).

Triumph Road,  
Nottingham NG8 1DH  
T 0845 609 0009  
F 0115 872 2001  
E [enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk)  
[www.nationalcollege.org.uk](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk)

#### We care about the environment

We are always looking for ways to minimise our environmental impact. We only print where necessary, which is why you will find most of our materials online. When we do print we use environmentally friendly paper.