

## **‘Closing the achievement gap’ in English cities and towns in the twenty-first century**

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### **Abstract**

A key focus in English work on ‘narrowing the gap’ in recent years has been persistent ‘social class’ differences in educational achievement. The policy response to these issues has frequently been targeted at schools (or groups of schools) in urban areas, given the generally higher levels of disadvantage in these locations. It is important to address the academic attainment gap in schools in that student performance during the compulsory phase of education has significant implications for access to higher education and the labour market. In this chapter we explore a number of these policies, the particular challenges about urban education they sought to address, and their successes and failures. There is a particular focus on the much-lauded ‘London Challenge’, held up as a flagship policy for driving improvements in urban areas. While there is some evidence of change as a result of this multi-faceted approach to education reform, it seems that at least some of the improvements being driven by other changes going on in London at the time, such as significant demographic shifts. We conclude that while there have been some notable policy successes, a stubborn achievement gap remains, particularly at the higher end of the attainment distribution and question the extent to which schools alone, rather than society more broadly, can be expected to close these gaps.

### **Introduction**

A key focus in English education policy in recent years has been on overcoming persistent ‘social class’ differences in educational achievement, even though the issue is often discussed in terms of ‘poverty’, ‘disadvantage’, ‘deprivation’ or ‘social exclusion’ and differences are usually identified using measures of socio-economic status (SES) or eligibility for free school meals (FSM) (Whitty, 2001). For many years in the last century there were major concerns about the underachievement of girls. That gender gap has been largely reversed, although not in the hard sciences or at the very highest levels in some other subjects (Ringrose, 2013). Minority ethnic achievement has also been a concern, although there are significant differences in the performance of different minority groups (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000).

The policy response to these issues has frequently been targeted at schools (or groups of schools) in urban areas, given the generally higher levels of disadvantage in these locations. Although it can be argued that all schools in England are urban in one sense or another (see Campbell & Whitty, 2007), urban education in the UK usually refers to specific spatial locations where a particular combination of economic, social, cultural and demographic conditions poses significant challenges for the education system. While these have traditionally been identified as the inner city areas of large conurbations, including London, there has recently been a growing emphasis on the rather different set of challenging conditions that has emerged in smaller isolated towns, especially those in coastal areas.

The urban focus of recent policies in England has sometimes been explicit (as in the case of area-based interventions) but more often implicit (as in the case of national strategies for school improvement). In this chapter we explore a number of such policies, the particular challenges in urban education they sought to address, and their successes and failures. Our emphasis here is on narrowing attainment gaps between socio-economic groups as identified through cognitive measures and the achievement of academic qualifications. This is not intended to suggest that the only purpose of schooling is to achieve such qualifications or that those who fail to do so are deficient, either absolutely or relatively, in other important respects. Indeed, during the period under consideration here there was, for example, considerable emphasis on the role of education in fostering 'well-being'.

One difficulty in establishing the impact of other aspects of education though is that data in these areas are limited and highly contentious. Furthermore, in the present political climate in

England, many of those advocating the importance of these wider aspects of education find themselves justifying them in terms of their impact on attainment (see, for example, Harrison *et al.*, 2015). Although this might seem to be ceding too much in the argument over the purposes of education, there is a great deal of evidence that life chances in English society are closely linked to school attainment in a myriad of ways and that personal fulfilment and social justice could both be enhanced by narrowing or closing longstanding academic achievement and participation gaps (Schuller et al., 2004). As Kerr & West (2010) put it, ‘despite the dangers of narrowing our view of what education is about’, a focus on attainment is justifiable because ‘attainment undeniably has important consequences for life chances’ (p.16).

One specific reason why it is important to address the academic attainment gap in schools is that student performance during the compulsory phase of education has significant implications for access to higher education and the labour market. There has been a considerable and, at least until recently, persistent gap in England in the rates of participation in higher education between different social groups and in their opportunities for access to employment in science and technology and the professions (Kelly & Cook, 2007). There has also been a strong tendency for students at the most competitive universities (usually concentrating on the self-selected Russell Group of research-intensive institutions) to be drawn from more affluent families (Boliver, 2011).

Although there may still be some financial and aspirational barriers to widening participation and ensuring fair access in higher education, it is clear that one of the major impediments to students proceeding to higher education is low prior attainment (Whitty et al., 2015). Recent research has

found that, while there is a considerable gap in higher education participation between those from different backgrounds, this gap is actually very small once prior attainment has been fully taken into account (Anders, 2012; Vignoles & Crawford, 2010). Prior attainment and choices made in terms of future study at ages 14 and 16 can then have huge consequences for future employment prospects. Low attainment and inappropriate subject choices can be particularly restrictive on opportunities for entry into the professions (Milburn, 2009) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) related employment (Coyne & Goodfellow, 2008).

The remainder of this chapter will concentrate on attempts to narrow the gap in the compulsory phase of schooling (ages 5-16), as well as identifying the sorts of interventions in those years that the evidence suggests might have some potential to break the enduring link between social background and educational achievement. It is important to note, however, that parallel policies have been pursued in relation to pre-school (NESS, 2010) and post-compulsory education (Harris, 2010).

### **New Labour's attempt to narrow the attainment gap in English schools, 1997-2010**

We begin by highlighting the socio-economic gradient in attainment throughout the English schooling system. Using data from attainment in 2005 (DfES, 2006), while there is always a gap between FSM and non-FSM eligible students in terms of relative performance, this does not grow inexorably through the different stages of schooling up to age 14. In each of these stages, the performance of children eligible for FSM is around 85-90% that of the rest of the cohort, but this widens somewhat at Key Stage 4 where FSM-eligible young people achieve roughly three quarters the average point score of the rest of the cohort (DfES, 2006).

Survey data analysed by Goodman et al. (2009) present a slightly different picture when using more detailed measures of SES, rather than simply FSM eligibility. These authors find a widening gap in attainment through children's educational careers up until Key Stage 3 (age 14), but that it narrows somewhat for Key Stage 4 results. The difference between these two analyses is accounted for by the fact that FSM eligibility splits the population into a deprived group and the rest, whereas this analysis generally compares a broader (compared to FSM) lower group with a smaller (compared to non-FSM) higher group. Nevertheless, taken together these studies do point to a widening of the socio-economic gap during English children's educational careers.

During its thirteen years in office the New Labour government, first elected in 1997 under the leadership of Tony Blair, increasingly made it a key part of its educational policy to narrow the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds (Lupton & Obolenskaya, 2013). Given this goal it is perhaps surprising that data on the trends for this gap are somewhat patchy. While there are figures on the gap at particular points in time, they often use different measures of attainment and/or different comparator groups, making the assessment of trends quite difficult. It is also the case that, in the initial period of New Labour government, apart from the Excellence in Cities (EICs) and Education Action Zones (EAZs) programmes, the major emphasis was on driving up standards overall.

EiCs and EAZs were both area-based, but ultimately short-lived, programmes, specifically targeting the issues of disadvantage in urban contexts. EAZs were established in 1998, following a competitive bidding process by partnerships of schools, local authorities, business and community groups. EAZs received £750,000 on top of £250,000, which had to be sourced from

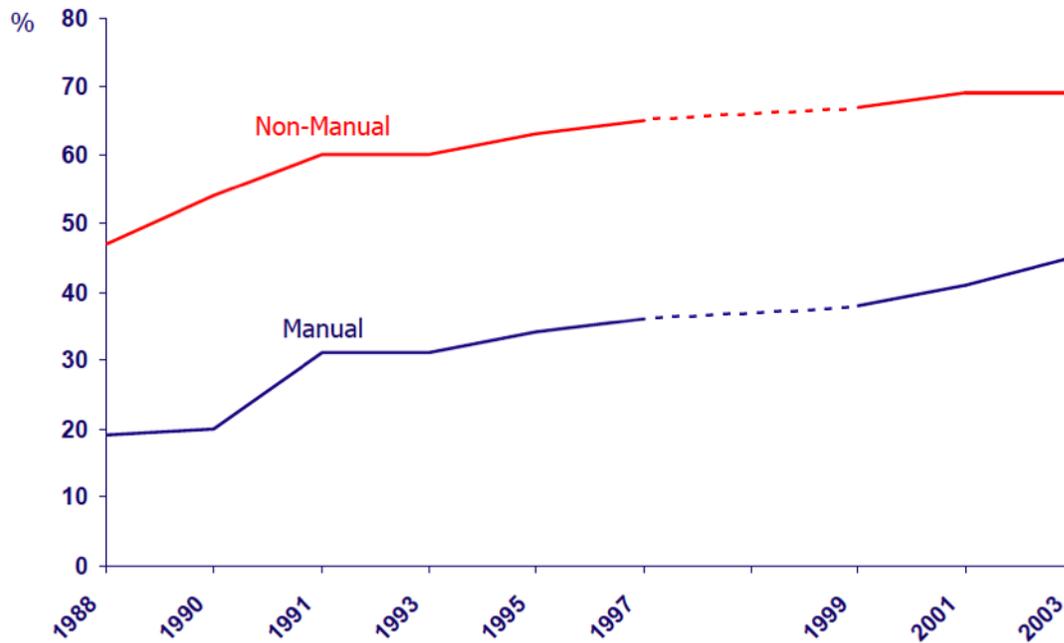
private sponsorship in order to be eligible, with which to establish an “Action Forum”. This acted as a kind of super-governing-body with limited powers over member schools and responsible for drawing up an action plan to be approved by the Secretary of State for Education to raise educational standards in the zone. After disappointing results, funding for new EAZs was dropped after three years with all EAZs coming to a stop at the end of their five year contracts (Brain & Reid, 2003; Power et al., 2004).

EiCs were also an area-based intervention, (initially) focused on local authority areas but, unlike EAZs, they were designated rather than competitive. Starting in September 1999, funding was provided in order to provide some additional programmes (such as Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units), as well as facilitate partnership working and sharing of best practice (through Specialist and Beacon schools) between schools in these shared contexts. An evaluation found a positive, but very modest, impact on attainment at age 14 in both English and mathematics, but rather more marked improvements in attendance (Machin et al., 2004, 2007).

It was the failure of this type of policy to have a significant impact on social differences in attainment that led to specific policies after 2001 to address the attainment gap, with a major thrust in this direction after 2005 (Lupton & Obolenskaya, 2013). Although there were increases in average levels of attainment in the first period of New Labour government, some have argued that even these increases were at least partly achieved through grade inflation (Tymms, 2004).

Figure 1 shows trends in the attainment gap up until 2003 and suggests a slight narrowing of the gap between students from non-manual and manual families.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Cohort Achieving 5+ A\*-C GCSEs by Parents' Social Class: 1988-2003 (%)**



Note: Discontinuity exists between 1997 - 1999 because of a change in the classification of social class from SEG to NSSEC. Manual and non-manual categories have been constructed by grouping more detailed breakdown of social class groups. The 'other' group has been excluded from the analysis.

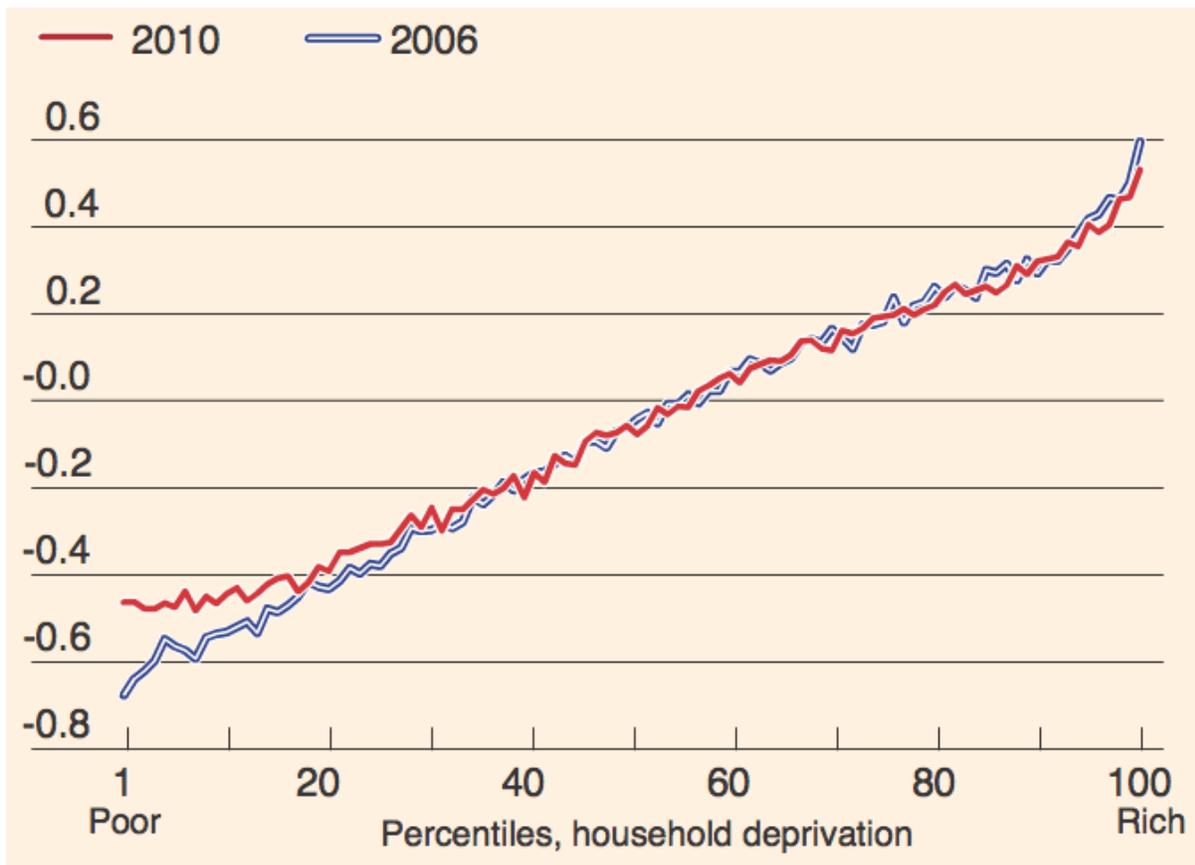
Source: DfES (2006) analysis of Youth Cohort Study cohorts 4-12, sweep 1.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2006) provides data on changes in the attainment gap from 2002 and 2005. These figures show a reduction in the attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM and those not in terms of those obtaining no GCSEs (or equivalents) and the proportion obtaining 5 or more A\*-C GCSEs (or equivalents). These figures show a stronger trend towards narrowing when IDACI (an area-based indicator of deprivation) is used instead of FSM eligibility. This is because this measure compares the most deprived with the least deprived, rather than the most deprived with the rest, and there seems to be evidence of generalised catching up between the bottom three deprivation quartiles and the top. In the FSM

measures this catching up by pupils in the middle reduced the relative gains of the bottom compared to the top.

Cook (2011) too presents evidence of a further reduction in the attainment gap between 2006 and 2010. He uses performance relative to the mean in sciences, modern languages, maths, English, history and geography, generally regarded as the core subjects. In this case the size of the reduction looks to be relatively modest and concentrated among those in the bottom fifth of households ranked by deprivation.

**Figure 2: The relationship between household deprivation and relative performance in GCSE point score in core subjects**



Notes: Vertical axis shows standard deviation from mean GCSE point score performance in the core subjects of sciences, modern languages, maths, English, history and geography. Percentiles of household deprivation derived using Index Deprivation Affective Children and Infants (IDACI).

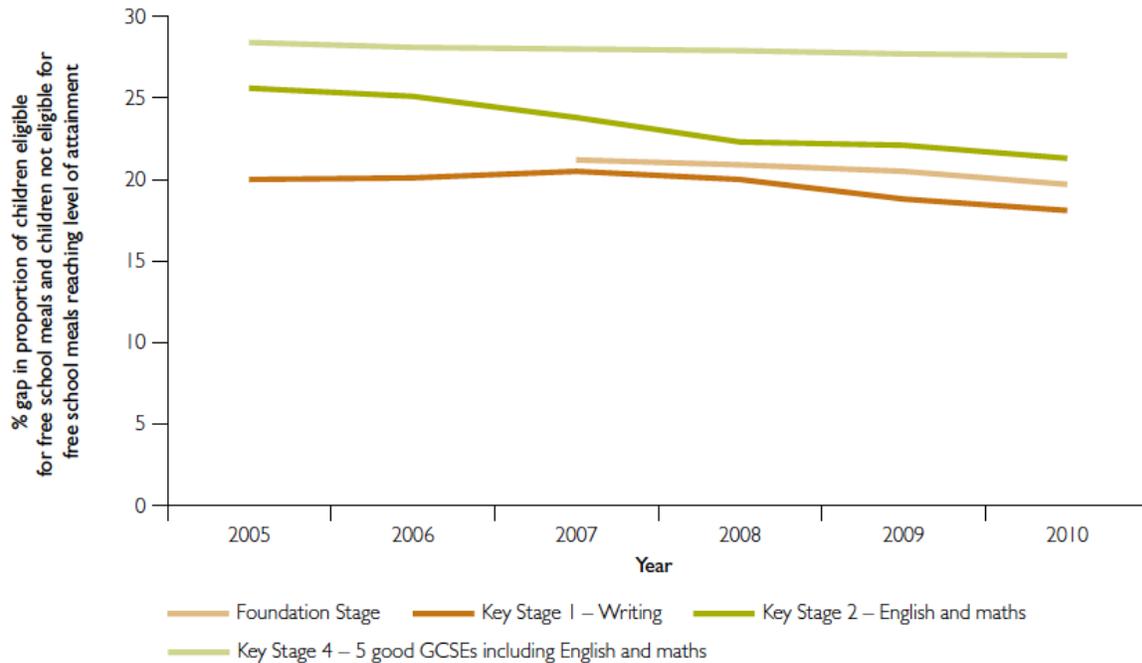
Source: Cook (2011) analysis of National Pupil Database.

The analysis shows a steady weakening of the overall correlation between the two factors in the years between 2006 and 2010. Interestingly, this is the case particularly for KS4 attainment overall, where performance on some vocational courses is included. It could be argued that this lends some support to the charge that part of the decline in the socio-economic attainment gap is due to lower-performing students being diverted to alternative courses (de Waal, 2008).

However, as the core measure still shows a decline not all of the reduction in the gap can be dismissed as illusory, even if one accepts the argument that the alternative courses are somehow less rigorous or marketable.

Although by most measures there was thus a small reduction in the attainment gap under the New Labour government of 1997-2010, it must be regarded as a disappointing achievement when compared with the aspirations of successive Prime Ministers and Secretaries of State for Education. Not surprisingly, the Coalition government that took over in 2010 tended to dismiss even the limited narrowing of the gap that was achieved under New Labour, regarding it as a poor return on the significant amount of public resources invested. This picture is summarised and restated in the Coalition government's Social Mobility Strategy (HM Government, 2010b), and presented graphically in Figure 3 with a politically loaded heading.

**Figure 3: “Gaps in educational performance have narrowed only very slightly despite significant investment”**



Source: HM Government (2010b, p.20) drawing on data from various official sources.

### **What may have contributed to the narrowing of the gap?**

There were considerable numbers of educational initiatives during the period of New Labour government, reflecting a variety of different understandings about how best to close the gap. They ranged from area-based interventions like Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities (both of which were described above) and the London Challenge, through national-level changes such as the creation of a network of specialist schools, the foundation of academy schools outside the local authority system, and the National Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy. It also included remodelling the school workforce including the use of more teaching assistants, improving school leadership training, enhancing teacher quality, and the ‘personalisation’ of education through individually targeted interventions such as Reading Recovery. In addition,

there was Every Child Matters, a multi-agency policy that addressed a wider ‘children’s agenda’. We discuss the success of these policies in the remainder of this section.

The vast numbers of education policies introduced by New Labour led to charges of ‘initiative-itis’, while the tendency to alter them even before they had been properly evaluated has meant that it is virtually impossible to determine across the system as whole which policies were effective in narrowing the gap. This despite the fact that the government espoused an ‘evidence-based’ approach to policy and often employed the rhetoric of ‘what works’ (see Ofsted 2010b; Whitty, 2012).

For some policies, such as Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities and the employment of teaching assistants, the evidence is equivocal or suggests only a very modest positive impact - or even a negative one (Power et al., 2004; Machin et al., 2004, 2007; Blatchford et al., 2012). We therefore focus in the rest of this chapter on the analysis of some of the policies for which there does seem to be some credible evidence that they did have a positive impact on narrowing the attainment gap.

### *The National Strategies*

The National Strategies for Literacy (from September 1998) and Numeracy (from September 1999) were a key early policy enacted by Labour in an attempt to raise baseline achievement and thereby, it was anticipated, help to reduce the gap. . An evaluation of a major plank of the National Strategy for Literacy, namely the ‘Literacy Hour’, was conducted by Machin and McNally at the London School of Economics. This identified a significant impact of the Literacy Hour in its

piloted form as part of the earlier National Literacy Programme (NLP). It found that ‘reading and English Key Stage 2 levels rose by more in NLP schools between 1996 and 1998’ than in the comparator schools which had not yet introduced the policy (Machin & McNally, 2004, p. 27).

A more critical view has been taken by a series of reports by Tymms and colleagues (Tymms, 2004; Tymms et al., 2005; Tymms & Merrell, 2007). These question the extent to which standards have truly increased by using secondary data on pupil performance that are argued to be more comparable over time. While it does seem likely that some of the increase in apparent performance has been due to grade inflation it should not detract from quasi-experimental evidence, such as that used by Machin and McNally, since there is no particular reason to think inflation would affect the pilot schools more than comparator schools.

However, the results found by Machin and McNally relate to very early impacts of the intervention. It seems plausible that part of these effects are simply due to the increased focus generated by the introduction of these strategies. Indeed the evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies commissioned by the DfES suggests ‘... the initial gains in the 1999 national tests were likely due largely to higher motivation on the part of teachers and others at the local level’ (Earl et al., 2001, p.5). This would also explain the tailing off in improvements observed in general performance over the period.

More generally Earl et al. (2001) were positive about the impact the Strategies were having in terms of implementation, suggesting they brought about large shifts in priorities within almost all schools in the country. They describe the Strategies as ‘successful’ at more than one point in

their report. However, in a critique similar to that later developed by Tymms, Goldstein (2002) suggests the report relied too much on test performance at KS2 to justify extrapolating from successful implementation to success in raising standards.

Machin and McNally (2004) also noted particularly strong effects at lower levels of attainment (but still positive effects for those already achieving above the target level), and an increased impact for boys (who were otherwise lagging) compared to girls. The results on differential impacts at varying levels of ability fit well with the suggestion by Jerrim (2012) of a reduction in the attainment gap at the bottom of the ability distribution and suggests that the Strategies may have been more effective in this respect than their critics claim.

Evaluation of the National Strategies is a difficult task for several reasons. Elements such as the Literacy and Numeracy strategies were rolled out rapidly and comprehensively, quickly becoming a pervasive part of the education system. The Strategies also had many elements reaching across EYFS, primary, secondary, behaviour and attendance, and school improvement programmes. Many evaluations only point to overall improvements in attainment over the period (DfE, 2011), implicitly treating almost all New Labour education policies as part of the National Strategies. They also tend to provide only descriptive evidence, and we have no indication of what would have happened in the presence of different or unchanged policies. Indeed the national schools inspectorate (known as Ofsted) has pointed to the failure to evaluate which elements of the National Strategies were successful as a serious shortcoming, partly stemming from the sheer number of initiatives introduced in a relatively short period of time. Its report does however praise the impact the National Strategies have had on increased debate around

pedagogy, suggesting almost all schools feel they have led to an improvement in teaching and learning and the use of assessment (Ofsted, 2010b, p. 5).

Specific evaluation of the Narrowing the Gaps element of the National Strategies was carried out by York Consulting (Starks, 2011). This focussed on support and resources for both children eligible for FSM and Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) children. It describes finding evidence of increased use of the practices their literature review suggests are effective in improving pupil attendance, motivation, confidence and attainment. These included capacity building by local authorities to support schools in achieving goals, improved engagement with parents and intelligent tracking of pupil attainment. For the reasons referred to above, there is little specific quantitative evidence of how this feeds through into outcomes beyond the national trends in attainment gaps identified earlier. The limited case study evidence on the reduction of gaps is not particularly encouraging, with only three out of the eight case study schools reducing the attainment gap. However, it is not clear how representative these case studies were and the conclusion appears to relate to a rather limited time frame, although it is not entirely clear exactly what this is. The report suggests that the Strategies were anyway not fully implemented by the end of the period and it argues that with continued support we may see further positive results.

Ultimately, the National Strategies seem to have had a limited impact on the attainment gap, while their overall impact plateaued in later years. By then, and well before it lost the 2010 election, the New Labour government had decided that such large-scale national initiatives were no longer appropriate. Its Children's Plan envisaged much greater local and professional

autonomy in driving improvement in the future (DCSF, 2007). This was consistent with a wider trend towards handing more responsibility to schools and federations of schools, including autonomous academies and chains of such academies (Curtis 2009).

### *Academies*

Originally called ‘city academies’, academies were based on an expectation that giving greater autonomy to schools with dynamic leadership teams and private sponsorship would improve their performance. Some of these academies were new schools in disadvantaged areas, while others were existing schools deemed to be failing under local authority supervision. Almost all of those founded by New Labour were in disadvantaged, urban contexts.

An official evaluation conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the DfES (PWC, 2008) notes an increased level of performance in these schools relative to the national average. However, this methodology has been criticised (Machin & Vernoit, 2011) on two main counts. Firstly, new academies during the period of evaluation had a significantly more disadvantaged intake relative to the national average. Secondly, changes in the socio-economic status of the intake frequently accompanied the opening of an academy, and these have the potential to further undermine the validity of the comparison.

An evaluation by the National Audit Office (NAO) used a more select group of comparator schools, based on their intake and performance relative to the academies prior to conversion. This found increases in performance, but the analysis suggests this was largely driven by the ‘substantial improvements by the less disadvantaged pupils’ (NAO, 2007, p. 27). While

improvements are of course to be welcomed, this does not seem particularly promising for reducing attainment gaps between students from higher socio-economic backgrounds unless there are substantial peer effects. On the other hand, as Maden (2002) once put it, successful schools tend to have ‘a “critical mass” of more engaged, broadly “pro-school” children to start with’ (p. 336), so a longer term perspective may be helpful here.

In their own study, Machin & Vernoit (2011) went further to try and overcome the potential for selection bias in the choice of comparator schools. They used maintained schools that went on to become academies after their data collection period. Their analysis yielded preliminary results suggesting that in the academies an extra three percentage points of pupils achieved top grades (5 A\*-C) at GCSE (or equivalents). However, they only identified this effect in academies that had been open for more than two years at the time of their evaluation. Interestingly, their results suggested that despite the same increase in the socio-economic status of the school’s intake noted above (and the consequent reduction for neighbouring schools) there were also increases in performance in those neighbouring schools, perhaps due to increased competition. This finding runs counter to the claims made by most critics of academies, who regard their success as coming at the expense of other local schools.

Further work by Machin and colleagues delved into the ways in which academies achieved improvements in their own outcomes. Their findings are not encouraging for proponents of the policy as a way of closing gaps in performance: they suggest that in general those academies that converted between 2002 and 2007 improved their results by ‘further raising the attainments of students in the top half of the ability distribution, and in particular pupils in the top 20% tail’ and

not by improving the results of those in the bottom tail. In addition, they found no evidence of improvements among the academies converting in 2008 and 2009 (Machin & Silva, 2013).

Perhaps this suggests that conversion to academies is only a useful policy in certain circumstances. Unfortunately, the incoming Coalition government cancelled an evaluation of academies commissioned by the previous government, which might have shed further light on these issues.

Although some of the academies founded under New Labour proved successful in improving the attainment of disadvantaged students, not all academies have performed so well in this and indeed other respects. As Curtis et al. (2008) argued, ‘Academies are in danger of being regarded by politicians as a panacea for a broad range of education problems’. They pointed out that, given the variable performance of academies to date, ‘conversion to an Academy may not always be the best route to improvement’ and that care needed to be taken ‘to ensure they are the “best fit” solution to the problem at hand’ (p. 10). A recent House of Commons Select Committee report raised doubts about the evidence for academisation driving improvement, although it was more positive about the impact of the early New Labour academies than those created under the subsequent Coalition government (House of Commons, 2015).

### *Extended Schools*

Extended schools and full service extended schools (similar to full service schools or ‘wrap-around schooling’ in the USA) were introduced to provide an extended day and/or additional social services on school sites. These were seen as particularly important in areas of multiple deprivation where families needed to access a wide range of support services. The evaluation of

New Labour's pilot programme of full service extended schools found that the number of students reaching the national benchmark at age 16 (five good GCSEs) in such schools rose faster than the national average and that it brought particularly positive outcomes for poorer families by providing stability and improving their children's engagement in learning. Encouragingly in terms of the concerns of this paper, the final report indicated that the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, based on FSM eligibility, had narrowed in these schools (Cummings et al., 2007, p.126). However, as this was less of a flagship policy, there is limited evidence about it compared to that available on the National Strategies or the academies programme.

### *Reading Recovery*

Support for Reading Recovery was an example of a policy targeted directly at individuals rather than schools or areas and was part of a broader personalisation agenda that developed in the later years of the New Labour administration. Reading Recovery originated in New Zealand but was introduced in England by the Institute of Education and given some government funding and it eventually became a key component of the national Every Child a Reader programme. It provides one on one support to children falling behind in their reading in the first few years of school. While there are often more such children in urban schools, it also supported individuals in more advantaged contexts. A Reading Recovery evaluation (NatCen, 2011) saw statistically significant improvements in reading ability and reading related attitudes and behaviours for children receiving help from the programme. It is worth noting, however, that this is a purely descriptive analysis; no comparator group can be identified since it is only in schools where Reading Recovery is being implemented that eligible pupils are identified. As such, we cannot

say what progress these children would have made in the absence of Reading Recovery. It could be the case that some would have caught up by themselves or through pre-existing support mechanism, or alternatively that they would have fallen further behind. The same evaluation also used a quasi-experimental method to estimate a wider impact of Every Child a Reader. This found an encouraging impact on school level reading and writing attainment of between two and six percentage points in the later years of the intervention.

### *Teach First*

There has been an increasing recognition that ‘that getting the right people to become teachers is critical to high performance’ (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 16). Teach First, like Teach for America, was an initiative to recruit highly qualified graduates into teaching in particularly disadvantaged schools. It began work in London in 2002 and, until relatively recently, all Teach First recruits spent their two years on the programme in school in disadvantaged, urban contexts. An evaluation by Muijs et al. (2010) provides indicative results that schools with Teach First teachers achieve higher attainment for their students than comparable schools (as matched by type of school, gender intake, performance levels, student intake characteristics, location and school size). As with any quasi-experimental method we cannot be sure the results are causal, since the matching will not be able to ensure the schools are truly comparable; indeed, since schools choose if they wish to partner with Teach First there seems considerable scope for those with more proactive leadership or more capacity to benefit from Teach First teachers to be driving these results. The evaluation attempts to assess this possibility by also comparing Ofsted evaluations of Teach First and comparator schools, finding little significant difference. It also finds some evidence of a mild, but significant, correlation between the number of Teach First

teachers in a school and its student outcomes, a pattern we would expect where such teachers are making a real difference to the pupils' attainment. While this does not give us specific evidence on closing the attainment gap, since all Teach First schools have disadvantaged intakes, it seems plausible that this initiative can help to reduce between school attainment gaps.

### *London Challenge*

The transformation of schooling in London under New Labour is worthy of particular attention. Wyness (2011) notes that, while the demographic character of London would lead one to expect that educational outcomes in London would be inferior to those in the rest of the country, London students actually perform better than those from the rest of the country at most ages and levels of attainment. Performing similarly well to the rest of the country at KS1, London students 'pull away from their non-London counterparts at Key Stage 2, with the gap remaining constant, or increasing at Key Stage 4' (Wyness, 2011, p. 47). In this section we explore why this is the case, considering the role of both direct policy interventions and other influences.

One of the possible explanations Wyness offers for this is the London Challenge, a policy introduced in 2003 at a time when there was something of a 'moral panic' about the performance of London's schools. Its overall brief was ambitious and extensive (DfES, 2005). While it included some market-based elements, others seemed to respond to the potentially negative effects of such policies. It was consistent with the New Labour emphasis on standards, and recognised the importance of concerted collective efforts to raise achievement among those schools and children that had been languishing under existing policies. The first Commissioner

for London Schools, Tim Brighouse, describes London as trying to be the first place to show that schools could contribute to ‘cracking the cycle of disadvantage’ (Brighouse, 2007, p. 79).

London Challenge was initially a five year partnership between central government, schools and boroughs to raise standards in London’s secondary school system. Provision included transforming some failing schools into academies, pan-London resources and programmes available to all schools, individualized support for the most disadvantaged students and intensive work with five of the 33 London boroughs and more particularly with ‘Keys to Success’ schools within them. These schools were those in London facing the biggest challenges and in greatest need of additional support. Each school received bespoke solutions through diagnostic work and on-going support (Brighouse, 2007). Provision was extended in 2006 to include work with primary schools and in relation to students’ progression to further and higher education. Additional continuing professional development for teachers was provided through the Chartered London Teacher scheme and for head teachers through the London Leadership Strategy.

The Conservative Secretary of State for Education from 2010-2014, Michael Gove, claimed that the three most important elements were sponsored academies, the use of outstanding schools to mentor others and a focus on improving the quality of teaching – especially through Teach First, the English equivalent of Teach for America (Gove, 2012). While this emphasis is perhaps not surprising given the centrality of these particular policies to his own party’s preferred reforms, which are discussed at the end of this paper, there is certainly some support for the claim that each of these particular policies had a positive impact on schools in their own right (Machin & Vernoit, 2011; Earley & Weindling, 2006; Muijs et al., 2010). However, we are not aware of

any research that shows that they were necessarily the most important elements in the success of the London Challenge or in narrowing the attainment gap in London. In reality, New Labour's London Challenge programme whose success Gove was praising was a multi-faceted and system-wide policy, and it included some elements that seem to be out of step with the present government's approach. It involved a range of interventions at the level of 'the London teacher, the London leader, the London school and the London student' (Brighouse, 2007, p. 80ff).

This means that unfortunately, as with national policies, it is actually quite difficult to identify which, if any, of the particular parts of the intervention did make a difference. Nevertheless, many commentators have suggested that the overall approach of London Challenge does seem to have had an impact. They point to national performance data that show that between 2003-2006, the national rate of improvement in the number of students achieving 5 or more GCSE passes with grades A\*-C at age 16 was 6.7%, whereas in London it was 8.4% and in the 'Keys to Success' schools in London it was 12.9% (DfES, 2007a).

Towards the end of its existence, the London Challenge was extended to other English cities as the City Challenge (DfES, 2007b). Hutchings et al. (2012) suggest that these programmes had impacts on reducing the number of underperforming schools and increasing the performance of those eligible for FSM faster than the national average. However, only in London (and in Greater Manchester in the primary phase) was there a closing of the attainment gap over the period 2008-2011.

Even in London, it was initially suggested that the improvement in the overall performance of London schools noted above derived largely from an increase in attainment among the more advantaged students in the schools that were receiving the most intensive interventions.

However, subsequently it was found that not only were the 'Keys to Success' schools improving at a faster rate than the norm, the attainment gap for disadvantaged children in London was itself narrowing faster than elsewhere and narrowing fastest in these particular schools. Using FSM entitlement as a proxy for economic disadvantage, data provided to us by the DfES showed that attainment at age 16 for this group of pupils within 'Keys to Success' schools rose by a larger amount than for the non-FSM pupils (13.1 points compared to 12.3 points for the latter between 2003 and 2006). Michael Gove too drew attention to this particular success for poorer children in London when he noted that while in England more generally '35 per cent of children on free school meals achieve five good GCSEs with English and Maths ... in inner-London 52 per cent meet [this benchmark]' (Gove, 2012). He also noted that this is not far off the national average for pupils regardless of their background.

A report by Ofsted on the impact of London Challenge described continuing positive impacts beyond the initial period. It noted that the primary schools that joined the London Challenge 'are improving faster than those in the rest of England', partly attributing this to schools continuing to participate in development programmes for teachers after the support given as part of London Challenge had ended (Ofsted, 2010a). The report was positive about the possibilities for maintaining the gains from London Challenge due to changes it has engendered in practices (such as increased use of performance data to track progress) and ethos (such as motivating staff to share good practice with other schools). It could be that such collaboration may have

countered the more negative effects of school choice mechanisms, so it will be important to monitor what happens in London now that the initiative as a whole has finally come to an end but market-oriented policies remain in place. On this issue, Hutchings et al. (2012) found some encouraging evidence that schools that were part of the initial London Challenge scheme, but no longer funded as Keys to Success schools after 2008, continued to improve at a faster rate than the national average despite the extra support ending.

However, it is possible that there were also other factors at work in London that contributed to progress in London under New Labour (Wyness, 2011; Allen, 2012). Indeed, various reports in 2014 on the improvement in the educational performance of London, and the role of the London Challenge in that improvement, came to significantly different conclusions. These varied from lauding the London Challenge (Baars et al., 2014), explaining the success by earlier educational interventions (Greaves et al., 2014) and attributing it to the changing ethnic mix of the capital, noting that between 2004 and 2013, the share of London's population that is White British fell by 10%, while higher performing groups such as Mixed, Other White, and Black African became a larger share of London's population (Burgess, 2014, Figure 6). The controversy continues to this day (McAleavy & Elwick, 2015; Blanden et al., 2015), but this issue requires resolution before we can assume that policies associated with the London Challenge are replicable (even with contextual adjustments) in other parts of the country, as has been suggested by Ofsted (2013) and Centre Forum (Claeys et al., 2015).

After all, it can plausibly be argued (rather as Diane Ravitch (2010) argues in the case of New York school district 2) that even the limited progress made under New Labour, particularly in

London, was more to do with their tenure of office coinciding with a period of sustained economic boom and demographic changes than with any of these education policies - so that perhaps the economy is the driver and Bernstein (1970) was right that education cannot compensate for society. If this is the case it will be much more of a challenge to bring about similar improvements in the post-industrial cities of the North of England or the run-down coastal towns that have recently become the focus of education policy.

### **Policies under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, 2010-2015**

The Coalition government that was elected to replace New Labour in May 2010 made an ambitious commitment to ‘closing’ the achievement gap as part of a wider commitment to increasing social mobility, which it claimed had stalled under New Labour (HM Government, 2010a). The general thrust of its policies was to continue and accelerate the emphasis on seeking improvement through school autonomy, competition and choice that was pioneered by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government but continued by New Labour under Tony Blair (Whitty 1989; 2008).

While the academies policy of the Blair government discussed above sought to use academy status mainly to prioritise the replacement or improvement of failing schools in disadvantaged areas, the Conservative-led Coalition potentially extended this status to virtually all schools. Schools highly rated by Ofsted, a disproportionate number of which are in more affluent areas, can now be granted academy status automatically if they so desire. Meanwhile, parents, teachers and others have been encouraged to open publicly funded ‘free schools’, which like academies are outside local authority jurisdiction. It remains an open question whether such policies help to

‘close’ the gap or, as some critics have suggested, effectively ‘open’ it up again, and attempts to assess the evidence have so far come to no firm conclusions about the impact of these policies (House of Commons, 2015; McNally, 2015). Around sixty per cent of English secondary schools and nearly ten per cent of primary schools now have academy or free school status and increasingly many of them are being linked in academy ‘chains’, whose performance, like that of stand-alone academies, is variable particularly in respect of closing the gap (Hutchings et al., 2014).

Recognising that there is a complex relationship between attainment, autonomy, collaboration and accountability, the House of Commons Education Committee has argued that ‘current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change’ and ‘agree[d] with Ofsted that it is too early to draw conclusions on the quality of education provided by free schools or their broader system impact’ (House of Commons, 2015). Nevertheless, a study by the think tank, Policy Exchange, has since argued that, contrary to some of the criticisms levelled at free schools, their presence has improved, rather than diminished, the results of poorly performing neighbouring schools (Porter & Simons, 2015). However, the methodology of the report has come in for criticism given its lack of statistical significance testing and potential issues of improvements being driven by regression towards the mean (Green, 2015). Nevertheless, it is certainly a finding that would merit more rigorous investigation.

As mentioned earlier, a major thrust of policy under the Coalition government was to identify and address achievement gaps outside the large conurbations. Some of these underperforming areas have been in apparently affluent counties such as Surrey in the south of England but media

attention has often become focused on small northern cities, small towns in the east of England and coastal towns around the country (Ofsted, 2013). It has certainly been important to highlight previously neglected underperformance in such areas and remind ourselves that the achievement gap is (and has always been in practice) much more than a ‘urban’ problem in the conventional sense. Not only are there more disadvantaged children outside ‘failing’ schools in the big cities but they are often ‘unseen’ for a variety of reasons that require careful study. However, the Coalitions’s main policy solutions were largely familiar, namely academisation and a series of local and regional challenges (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2013; Claeys et al., 2014). It will be important that any future such initiatives are aligned to particular local demographics and economic conditions rather than mimicking the apparent success of London Challenge (and to a lesser extent the other City Challenges) of the New Labour era, and give due consideration to the sorts of issues raised in the discussion of London Challenge earlier in this chapter.

There is also considerable controversy about whether the Coalition government’s curriculum policies will eventually help to close the attainment gap. There was for example a commendable emphasis on early literacy but an undue commitment to ‘synthetic phonics’ as the only way to teach reading, despite evidence that, while it can indeed be an effective strategy with disadvantaged children, it is not a panacea and that a more mixed approach is desirable (Wyse & Parker, 2012).

Another policy introduced by Michael Gove, when Secretary of State for Education in the Coalition Government, was the ‘English Baccalaureate’, an award to students but also effectively a new performance measure for secondary schools based on the percentage of students achieving high grades in specified subjects, i.e. English, mathematics, two sciences, history or geography

and a foreign language. This seems, initially at least, to have affected socially disadvantaged students adversely as they are more likely to have been exposed to alternative curricula than more advantaged students on a university entrance track (DfE, 2014).

A linked policy was to reduce the number of ‘equivalent’ qualifications that are permitted to be used in school performance tables as alternatives to the GCSE qualifications at age 16. This is having an impact on the number of vocational qualifications taught in schools and has placed a further emphasis on a return to conventional academic qualifications. Ironically, in view of the Coalition government’s enthusiastic embrace of the academies programme, some of the New Labour academies that moved sharply up the performance tables in recent years did so partly by introducing these alternative qualifications (de Waal, 2009).

The Coalition government’s response to concerns about its traditionalist curriculum policy was that social justice requires equal access to high status knowledge and that there is little point in students succeeding on courses that are deemed to have little value by universities, employers and the wider society. However, while there may well be a good argument for ensuring that all students should have the opportunity to gain access to ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2010), if indeed that is what the traditional curriculum provides, governments will need to give more attention than hitherto to reforming the pedagogy through which school subjects are taught (Whitty, 2010). Exley et al. (2011) have argued that some current approaches involve a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and we need to remember that very few disadvantaged children and families benefited from the forms of schooling that predominated in those days.

Some of the neo-conservative policies advocated by the Conservatives were moderated by the social justice agenda of the Liberal Democrat party whose votes gave the Coalition its majority in parliament. Among policies that were strongly influenced by Liberal Democrat thinking was a commitment to address the attainment gap through a ‘pupil premium’ paid on top of the normal grant for every school age student in receipt of free school meals in state schools. This was consistent with the earlier trend of linking resources to individuals in need regardless of the neighbourhood in which they were receiving their schooling. Unfortunately, welcome as this payment was, the level of it was significantly below that envisaged by the Liberal Democrats prior to the election and it replaced some other targeted benefits that were paid under New Labour. Most seriously, the fact that it was introduced at a time of major expenditure cuts in other areas meant that some schools barely noticed its impact. Nevertheless, it was subsequently significantly increased and extended and, although the money is not ring-fenced or mandated for particular purposes, monitoring of its use by Ofsted may be helping to ensure that it is actually used to benefit the education of the disadvantaged. Early surveys were not particularly encouraging in this respect, and suggested that too little of the money allocated through the pupil premium for disadvantaged children was being spent on activities that are known to boost attainment (Sutton Trust, 2012; Ofsted, 2012). However, more recent surveys have been somewhat more positive about its role in narrowing the gap (Ofsted, 2014a).

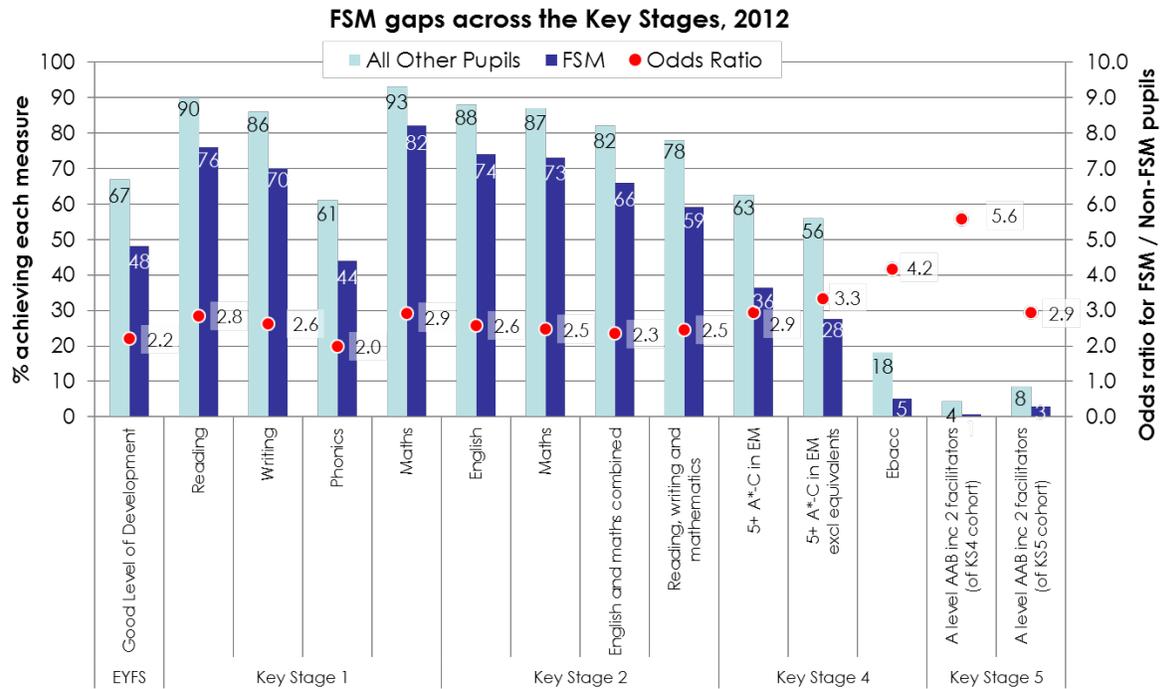
An initiative that may have helped in this respect was the creation by the Coalition Government of an Education Endowment Foundation, a grant-making charity dedicated to raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in English primary and secondary schools by finding out ‘what works’ in challenging educational disadvantage. One of the ways in which it does this is by providing independent and accessible information through a Learning and Teaching Toolkit

(EEF 2012), which provides guidance to schools on how best to use the pupil premium to improve attainment by summarising relevant educational research from the United Kingdom and elsewhere. It identified effective feedback, meta-cognition and peer tutoring as three strategies that have been shown to have high or very high impact at low cost, on the basis of strong evidence. In the case of peer tutoring it suggested that children from disadvantaged backgrounds derived particularly large benefits from this strategy. It also identified the high impact of early years interventions, but noted the high costs involved.

But all this may be of marginal significance. There are already signs that the slight narrowing of the attainment gap identified earlier under New Labour has stalled or even been reversed, at least at secondary school level (DfE, 2014; Ofsted, 2014b). While this may reflect the wider effects of economic austerity as much as specific education policies brought in by the Coalition Government (Clifton & Cook 2012), the downgrading of vocational and alternative courses in accountability measures does seem to have had a significant impact (Adams, 2015).

A further issue is that the gap on what are being termed as ‘elite measures’ (i.e. those recording the highest levels of attainment) has remained stubbornly wide, as illustrated in Fig. 4 below.

**Figure 4: FSM gaps for ‘elite measures’ across the key stages, 2012**



Source: DfE personal communication, 2013

This shows that, even where the attainment gap in schools has narrowed overall, it is largest for the elite measures, Levels 5 & 6 at KS2, 5A\*-C at KS4 and AAB at A-level (even after drop-out). Given the crucial importance of these and other elite measures for social sorting, via entry to the upper reaches of higher education and the professions, the challenge remains considerable. This will hardly be surprising to those familiar with theories of social and cultural reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

If further progress is to be made, what is needed, at the very least, is an acceptance of the conclusion of Kerr & West (2010) that ‘efforts to improve schools must be accompanied by efforts to support disadvantaged families’ (p.41). This was also the thrust of reports by Labour MPs, Field (2010) and Allen (2011). Furthermore, as argued under a previous government, ‘society needs to be clearer about what schools can and cannot be expected to do’ (Mortimore & Whitty, 1997, p.12). This does not mean that schools cannot make a difference, or that they do not have a particularly important role in helping to narrow the attainment gap and thereby enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged children. It does mean that they cannot do it alone. The analysis of the impact of English education policy since 1997 offered here also provides support for the warning made by Ravitch (2010) in relation to parallel policies in the USA ‘that, in education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets’ (p.3). Unfortunately, there is little evidence that English politicians of any political persuasion have yet learnt those lessons.

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