Student performance by social class and gender. Making research findings on students’ resilience and self regulation work for teachers in secondary schools

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Abstract

Background

This paper builds on previous research which found that the achievement of pupils from a White British background has started to fall behind that of some ethnic groups within the whole school population and that this has been more in evidence among White British pupils from deprived backgrounds and among pupils of both genders, although even more so for boys (Hayes, Shaw and Osborne - 2007¹). This research was based on a comprehensive analysis of performance at all Key Stages carried out within one Local Authority over three years. It also builds on a qualitative research project into the factors that proved to be important for some students from a deprived White British background who managed to achieve GCSE success, apparently against the odds (Hayes et al - 2009²).

Research questions

This research project addresses the following questions:

- Does RAISEonline serve a useful purpose as a research tool?
- What factors helped students to achieve success at GCSE above what they were predicted to achieve, given their background and prior attainment?
- How can these findings be successfully disseminated to schools?

Research methods

This main methodological approach to this part of the research was to carry out in-depth interviews with individual GCSE students, using a semi-structured questionnaire. The sample of students was selected from the pupil level data in the interactive performance analysis tool RAISEonline, on the basis that they were White British pupils from deprived backgrounds who had performed better than their GCSE estimates. The objective was to find out what factors had helped these students to perform better than they had been expected to and to find effective ways of disseminating these findings to schools.


² Hayes, S. G. Shaw, H. McGrath, G. & Bonel, F. (2009) Using RAISEonline as a research tool to analyse the link between attainment, social class and ethnicity. Information, Research and Statistics Team, Greenwich Children’s Service.
Analytical framework

The framework for analysis was structured around the use of RAISEonline\(^3\) to identify the sample of pupils for the qualitative aspect of the research and then to carry out the semi-structured interview with those students.

The interviews were carried out by four officers of the local authority’s Children’s Service and were tape recorded to facilitate the transcription of the responses. Through a systematic analysis of the interviews, it was possible to identify which strategies and approaches the students had used to enable them to achieve success at GCSE. This analytical approach enabled the researchers to construct a list of key factors that were deemed to be instrumental in pupils from a deprived White British background achieving GCSE success.

Research findings and contribution to knowledge

The qualitative research suggests that there are several strategies that the students have successfully employed to improve their outcomes. These included: a level of personal ambition for one’s academic success and the ability to recognise the importance of one’s friendship groups and, if necessary, to change them. The ability to employ self-regulation strategies in relation to their own learning and to develop personal resilience were both considered to be important. Family support was important, both personal and academic, and particularly personal support where levels of parental education and aspiration were low. In-school support was cited, both personal from individual teachers and structural, in terms of study support, revision classes and other interventions. The ability to see the bigger picture was something several students also reported and this included the quality of careers advice, the importance of the world of work and finding one’s place in the world.

In the local authority context it is important that these findings on the students’ strategies and the factors they have employed to support their own success are disseminated to schools, as part of the local contribution to knowledge. There are some important lessons to be learned and the findings can help schools to consider what strategies would redress some of the external factors that might have impeded pupils from a deprived White British background from making good progress.

The dissemination is taking place through tailored training sessions for middle leaders in secondary schools, particularly those teachers with a responsibility for assessment, student welfare and teaching and learning at Key Stage 4. The training exercises were developed based on the research findings and have been delivered by local authority staff with a responsibility for school improvement and research. The training

\(^3\) RAISEonline is an interactive performance analysis tool designed jointly by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, as was, now DfE) and Ofsted. It enables schools to analyse performance data in greater depth as part of the self-evaluation process, providing a common set of analyses for schools, Local Authorities, inspectors and School Improvement Partners, and to provide better support for teaching and learning. It uses techniques such as contextual value added (CVA) analysis, which adjusts performance to take account of an individual’s prior attainment, their contextual profile, including gender, ethnicity and special needs status and the contextual profile of their school.
will be evaluated and the subsequent work that teachers agree to undertake in school will also be monitored and evaluated, as will the impact on any groups of pupils that the teachers decide to track through to their GCSE examinations in 2010 and beyond.

The research findings can help local authorities in their development of school improvement strategies to meet the needs of groups of pupils at risk of underperformance, while making best use of RAISEonline as a tool to support research. The findings can be shared with other local authorities, who are encountering similar issues.

Key words

Deprived White British pupils, working class, social class, performance, achievement, RAISEonline, teachers, Local Authority, resilience

Introduction

Greenwich Children’s Service is in the London borough of Greenwich and the department was created in April 2006, following the merger of the Education and Children’s Social Services Departments. This paper builds on previous research in Greenwich by Hayes et al, which analysed the performance of White British working class boys and found that:

“…in the context of Greenwich local authority, the performance of White British working class boys is low and that it is a cause for concern. On average, this group starts behind other pupils at the start of primary schooling and by the end of compulsory age schooling are even more likely to be further behind.”

Greenwich is a culturally diverse borough and the profile of its pupil population in maintained schools is around 50% white and 50% from minority ethnic backgrounds. An emerging pattern in recent years, 2004 to 2009, has been that pupils from many of the ethnic groups are starting to outperform their white peers, in terms of performance in the national curriculum tests from Key Stage 1 to 4 and that social class is re-emerging as an explanatory factor in this trend. Although there are performance gaps by social class among pupils from all of the main ethnic groups in Greenwich schools, the biggest gap is in the White British group. However, debate on the impact of social class on educational performance has been limited in the last two decades as Gazeley L. & Dunne M. said in 2005:

“Despite the prominent inclusion agenda in education, social class remains largely invisible as a determinant of educational achievement.”

This has also been acknowledged in a Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (now Department for Education – DfE) research paper which suggests that within dialogues about diversity; white ethnicity and social class is often rendered invisible. It is as if discussion about social class and the link between class and education has been suppressed for most of the last two decades. However, there has been a recent emergence of work exploring this area and there is an agreement within the research literature that social class is often related to educational achievement and, in turn,
social mobility and opportunities for employment. Some of these aspects are considered in the following review of the literature.

Review of the literature

Although it has been suggested that social class is often rendered invisible in many educational dialogues, a statement from the DfE in 2006 clearly acknowledges that there is a long-standing association between social class and educational achievement:

“There is a strong, direct and long-standing association between social class and successful achievement in education. DfES figures for many years (1997–2003) show that pupils from advantaged backgrounds (management, professional) were more than three times as likely to obtain 5+ GCSE A* – C grades than their peers at the other end of the social spectrum (unskilled manual). Indeed, although children from both social groups have improved, in percentage terms, in obtaining 5+ GCSE A* – C grades, the gap between them is getting larger every year.”

This statement from the DfES could hardly be any clearer about the association between social class and educational achievement, but there are still gaps in the research evidence, particularly when the analysis by social class is broken down by gender and ethnic group. Plummer in 2000 stated that: “the intersection of white working class and gender is gravely under-researched, and raises many unanswered questions.” However, more recent work by Cassen and Kingdon, for the Joseph Rowntree Trust in 2007, has begun to address this gap and they found that:

“White British students on average – boys and girls – are more likely than other ethnic groups to persist in low achievement [although] boys outnumber girls as low achievers by three to two. Nearly half of all low achievers are White British males.”

Earlier research by Reay and Ball in 1997 picked up on the ambivalence among the working class when considering their reluctance to invest in education:

“Working class decision-making in education is infused by ambivalence, fear and a reluctance to invest too much in an area where failure is still a common working class experience.”

Cassen picked up on the notion that for disadvantaged children the issues of low performance were likely to be in evidence before they enter primary school and that there was a need to address the problems associated with this before they became entrenched. Cassen’s recent work has brought the link between deprivation and low performance at school back up the agenda. The work of Strand also replicates some of the Greenwich findings of Hayes et al and of Cassen. In Strand’s work on: ‘Race, sex, class and educational attainment at age 16: The case of white working class pupils’ he found that:

“White British working class pupils (both boys and girls) [and Black Caribbean boys] were the lowest performing groups at age 16. While pupils from most minority ethnic groups made good progress during secondary school, White
British working class pupils showed a marked decline in attainment in the last two years of secondary school."

The qualitative research in Greenwich suggests that there are several strategies that the students have successfully employed to improve their outcomes, among which were personal resilience and self regulation of one’s own studying and learning. Research by Cassen et al provides a definition of resilience which provides a description of how it has been used in this work:

“Resilience is defined here … as positive adaption in the face of adversity. It is a process that explains the way in which some individuals achieve good outcomes despite the fact that they are at high risk for poor outcomes.”

A study by Nota et al in Italy found that students who can self-regulate cognitive, motivational and behavioural aspects of their academic functioning are more effective as learners. They studied relations between the self-regulation strategies used by a group of Italian students during the final years of high school and their subsequent academic achievement and resilience in pursuing higher education. They found that the cognitive self-regulation strategy of organizing and transforming proved to be a significant predictor of the students’ course grades in Italian, mathematics, and technical subjects in high school and in their subsequent average course grades and examinations passed at university.

**Methodology**

This research has explored ways of using a robust analysis tool, RAISEonline, to identify young people who have managed to succeed in secondary school against the odds and to investigate what it was that enabled them to succeed. This was done through a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with a small sample of the 2008 Greenwich GCSE cohort. The final strand of the research has been to disseminate the findings to schools through training sessions to support their development of school improvement strategies to meet the needs of groups of pupils at risk of underperformance, particularly those students who may be at a disadvantage, having come from a low income household. [See also work by Siraj-Blatchford based on data collected in individual case studies that aimed to investigate children and their families who succeeded against the usual ‘odds’ of disadvantage. Although this work focused on younger aged children, it identified the importance of the quality of the learning support provided in the home in helping disadvantaged children succeed against the odds].

A sample of students was identified using the pupil level data in RAISEonline, who met the following criteria;

- From a Deprived White British background; and
- Performed better than predicted at GCSE.

The next step was to interview this sample of students. The interviews were carried out by local authority school advisers and research staff using a semi-structured questionnaire. They took place in school with agreement of the students’ form teachers and lasted, on average, half an hour. The interviews were all recorded on tape and transcribed. In this stage of the research, a total of 15 in-depth interviews were carried out during the 2008/09 school year. All of the interviews were carried out
in the school in which the students were studying in Year 12, i.e. the first year of their Post 16 studies.

The desired objective from the interviews was to find out what factors had contributed to the students achieving a higher level of performance at GCSE than their RAISEOnline estimate. The factors which emerged as particularly significant at this stage of the research were then distilled into school improvement strategies aimed at raising the attainment of students from deprived backgrounds, including White British students. These findings were then disseminated to schools in a range of different ways, including a conference and training sessions.

**Findings from the qualitative research**

The first theme to emerge from the interviews was an element of ambition and competitiveness. For several of the students being ambitious for their own success was important for them in achieving that success. It would seem that for some students an element of competition is a spur to achieving success and related to this is the concept of resilience. For many young people taking GCSEs, developing personal resilience and the ability to find solutions to problems is very important. This was demonstrated by one female student who said:

“It depends on you as a person. Always stay positive. If you have a bad situation or you get a barrier or something that is getting in your way, you just turn it into a positive and you think how you can get past that.”

For many students an ability to stay positive through challenging times, both personal and educational, is imperative. This theme of resilience in school age children is one that has been developed in the work of Challen et al in their interim report for the DCSF on the Evaluation of the UK Resilience Programme, a programme, originally developed in Pennsylvania, aimed at building resilience in children in the early years of secondary schooling. Within their initial quantitative work in the UK, they found a significant positive impact on pupils’ depression and anxiety symptom scores for those schools where the intervention and control groups were well matched. An impact of the programme on pupils’ depression and anxiety scores is indicated – as well as heterogeneity of impact by pupil characteristics. In particular, the preliminary results suggest that more disadvantaged or lower attaining pupils gain more from the workshops. This could have implications for Greenwich where the focus of the research is on White pupils from deprived backgrounds and some of these pupils in Greenwich schools might benefit from such an intervention.

The research by Nota et al in Italy found that students who can self-regulate cognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects of their academic functioning are more effective as learners. As well as building personal resilience, some students emphasised the importance of having a supportive family in helping them to achieve success at GCSE. From the interviews there were two models of family support which came through, one which was largely academic support and the other which was mostly emotional support. Some of the students got academic support from family members and one female student specifically observed:

“My family helped me with my coursework when I couldn’t understand the questions and I liked it when my brother helped me to do it.”
Several interviewees reported similar support from family members, including one female student whose parents were not always able to help:

“My parents tried to help me even if they didn’t know they’d still try to help me.”

There is a perception that family support is an important factor influencing young students’ potential to succeed but the family support is not always academic in nature. Sometimes the support is more emotional in nature as one female student observed:

“You need family support as well because if you needed help you’ve got to be able to go to someone for assurance and to let you know that you can do it.”

This concept of emotional support takes one towards the more general perception that family aspiration for the children to succeed academically may be lower in deprived White British households and possibly in some of these households, emotional support acts as a substitute for academic support. In the context of this research this is a broad generalisation, but there is a view that young people in deprived White British households experience lower levels of aspiration for their academic success compared to many of the young people growing up in Black and minority ethnic households. [See previous work by Hayes et al and by Strand and Winston]. In 2008 Strand and Winston concluded that:

“…differences [in aspiration] between ethnic groups were marked. Black African, Asian Other and Pakistani groups had significantly higher educational aspirations than the White British group, who had the lowest aspirations. The results suggest the high aspirations of Black African; Asian Other and Pakistani pupils are mediated through strong academic self-concept, positive peer support, a commitment to schooling and high educational aspirations in the home.”

What the successful students in this research, from a deprived White background, have managed to do is to build, through their own resilience, a strong academic self-concept and have positive peer support. For several of the students who were interviewed, they quoted their friendship groups at school as being an important determinant of their academic success. One male student made a point of changing his friends because he felt that they were holding him back academically:

“I changed my group of friends after Year 9 as I realised that they were not good for me. I could just feel that I was failing…now my old friends are not doing anything in life and I am at college.”

A female student said that she also changed her group of friends:

“I got in with a different social group and then they were more like heads down sort of people…we’d revise together before exams.”

There is possibly a strong link between the resilience these students have shown and their capacity and strength of purpose to actually change their friendship groups while still only being 15 or 16 years old.

Finding solutions to problems was considered to be important and students needed to access a number of strategies to self-support. A common theme was that of finding
support for learning, including added clarity, good exemplars of work and self motivation, through working with friendship groups. Where these were successful, the network continued outside of the classroom into an incentive to engage with intervention and revision classes both within the school and at each others’ houses.

Another type of support that the students referred to was support within school from teachers being encouraging in the classroom through to teachers providing additional support beyond the classroom and outside the normal school day. One male student observed how he received support from school with problems that he was having outside of school and how that support continued when he returned to school:

“They made extra time with me because they understood the situation [family problems]. They gave me time off and then brought me back in and got me up to date [with my studies].”

In addition to supportive teachers within and beyond the classroom, several students observed how important the revision classes and the weekend classes were in helping them to achieve academic success. One male student put it thus:

“For English we had an extra half hour lesson at the start of school from 8 till 8.30. Close to the exams we were revising exam techniques and there were also half terms when they let you come in, get coursework done and revise.”

There were other factors which the students raised in the interviews which had a less positive impact on their GCSE performance. Some students were not impressed by the quality of careers advice that they were getting. One student described their experience of careers advice as follows:

“We had the careers lady come down but to be honest I don’t know how to get to my sort of career. They could improve on the careers section, like more detailed talks; they [only] gave you a general one.”

Some of the feedback from the interviews on the careers service was positive but one student even suggested that they were actually answering the careers adviser’s questions for them:

“They need to get more information on it because when I would say surveyor, they’d be like, ‘oh what, do you need maths for that?’ But they would be asking me, like they weren’t too sure.”

Some students were able to express their ability to see the bigger picture, that is, beyond the boundaries of school and where they live and also the bigger picture in terms of where the right qualifications might take them if they achieve them. One female student expressed this very clearly when she commented on the possibilities that the subject art might open up to her:

“Everything can lead to anything. Like art, people think it’s drawing and painting but art is so much, it can lead to surveying, architecture, everything. Everything’s got such open doors and I guess I’ve always looked at it like that.”

For some students finding a vision of oneself within the wider community was considered to be very important and this can be linked to raised aspirations and
increasing personal resilience and maturation. Opportunities to explore a different slice of life via trips, including social and educational trips and visits to universities and colleges were all deemed to be of benefit.

**Disseminating the research findings**

This research project began with a quantitative analysis of the 2006 pupil outcomes and the earliest work on disseminating findings began with the sharing of this analysis with schools and local partners in Greenwich. The researchers in Greenwich also networked closely with research and school improvement colleagues in other local authorities including Islington Council, who ran a national conference on the topic of: “White Underachievement” in May 2007. This conference was supported by a comprehensive review of the relevant research literature available at that time and produced by Frayman and Edge from The Institute of Education in London. In a concerted effort to build on the work begun by Islington, Greenwich Council decided to host a national conference, which was held in the University of Greenwich and in conjunction with The Institute of Education, with the title: “Raising White Working Class Achievement” in July 2008. This was the second opportunity to share the early aspects of the research with schools in Greenwich and with a wider audience locally and nationally. Several teachers from Greenwich schools were also involved in delivering two of the conference workshops. These teachers were from schools that had identified the potential low performance of pupils from deprived backgrounds as an emerging issue and had developed their own strategies for raising their performance.

By 2008 other local authorities had begun to show an interest in this area of work and in the London context, Lambeth, Camden and Southwark were already carrying out research and project work of their own. Throughout this period researchers in Greenwich maintained links with a range of local authority and other partners who were involved in this area of work. The work being done by Demie and Lewis in Lambeth was finally showcased in another national conference, which this time was organised by Lambeth Council in January 2010, with the title: “Raising the Achievement of White Working Class Pupils”. Lambeth’s conference added to the general dissemination of knowledge and research findings. The researchers in Lambeth initially identified the barriers to raising achievement and then identified several important school improvement strategies aimed at overcoming these barriers in relation to the achievement of White working class children. These strategies included:

- Strong and visionary leadership;
- Use of data to raise achievement;
- Use of a relevant inclusive curriculum;
- Targeted support for these pupils;
- Use of learning mentors; and
- Engaging parents and breaking the cycle of low aspiration.

In another research project in the same field, Mongon and Chapman focused on successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils and identified some of the features associated with headteachers who were successful in helping young people exceed expectations. They summarised it as follows:
“The best of school leadership raises the work of adults and the attainment of young people to levels that exceed expectations and, sometimes, even their own ambitions…It has its most remarkable expression in circumstances where poverty and culture might otherwise corrode the potential of young people to fulfil their talent.”

This links with Lambeth’s strategy on the importance of strong and visionary leadership. The Lambeth research and the work of Mongon and Chapman provide a focus for raising white working class achievement which, to quote their own work: “comes from the considerable library of school improvement and effectiveness literature”. The variation from the above focus, on leadership and school improvement strategies, in the work being reported here, is that it focuses on what it was about the individual learners themselves from this background that helped them to succeed against the odds. In the context of Greenwich Council and its schools the dissemination was more focused on the learners themselves. This does not mean that the importance of leadership or the quality of teaching and learning were any less important. All of the different research methodologies, themes and findings are relevant and one does not have primacy over another and nor can they be seen in isolation, it just means that the research in Greenwich had a different emphasis.

The key dissemination event in Greenwich was a training day for middle leaders in secondary schools which went under the title: “Securing Learning and Progression: Narrowing the Gap – White British Performance”.

The training session began with an overview of the quantitative and qualitative findings from the research. Middle leaders listened to a selection of recordings from the in depth interviews to highlight factors which had contributed to students exceeding expectations at GCSE. Following this, middle leaders participated in three consecutive focus groups based on key themes arising from the qualitative research:

- **Helping pupils to help themselves**: The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme; resilience; self-regulation strategies; problem-solving; and, teaching and learning;
- **Seeing the bigger picture**: careers and Connexions; the workplace; work placements; extended schools; and, their place in the world;
- **Targeting underperformance by working with families and carers**: emotional and academic support; building aspiration; and, social and educational capital.

The aim of all three focus groups was to discuss current good practice which could be shared across schools and to identify further strategies and actions to improve performance. Notes from all the focus groups were written up into a set of support materials for secondary schools.

For theme 1 (helping pupils to help themselves), middle leaders discussed strategies to support resilience and problem solving in learning, strategies to support resilience and problem solving in emotional and social areas and strategies which covered both focuses. Some of the strategies that were identified included mentoring of students assessed as being at risk of underachieving, Super Learning Days, one to one tutorials, SEAL assemblies, self and peer assessment, learning discussions in form time, extending the Learning to Learn (L2L) initiative and extending Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) across the curriculum. Other strategies included
increasing links with PGCE students through the ‘Beyond Partnership’ TDA model and extending the “Illuminate Young Researchers” project (initially run with students aged 12 to 14 years old at Kidbrooke School and delivered by researchers at Goldsmith’s University).

On theme 2 (the bigger picture/careers), middle leaders discussed current practice and what could be developed at Key Stage 3 and 4. The examples of strategies which could be developed included increasing opportunities for young people to visit a wide range of workplace settings and to meet people who are successful in a range of occupations, improving links with local businesses and increasing the number of assemblies or lessons with guest speakers. Another strategy was to arrange for students to meet successful people from the same background as them, with the aim of getting former students to visit the school. The provision of better support to parents about careers for their children was suggested as was the scope for increasing discussion about possible careers within individual subject lessons.

For theme 3 (work with families), middle leaders discussed current practice and what could be developed to target underperformance by working with families and carers. Examples of strategies included home visits/liaison, increasing use of the Team Around the Child (TAC) process, sending positive text messages to parents when students have done well with a piece of work, increasing involvement of parents in reading, buddies, learning mentors and behaviour support and increasing use of the Managed Learning Environment (MLE) for online communications with parents.

One of the dominant themes emerging from this research is resilience and specifically relating to the resilience of children and young people, using the definition quoted above from Cassen. Resilience is also a key theme in the work of Greenwich Children’s Service, as evidenced in the model the service has adopted to illustrate its approach to safeguarding and social care. What the dissemination of this research has tried to do is to bring together notions of resilience, firstly that of children and young people in the school improvement context and secondly, in relation to safeguarding and child protection. To reflect this ambition, the training team from the local authority brought together a broad range of partners from across the Children’s Service and beyond to reflect an integrated approach to the delivery of the training. The training team included research staff, school improvement advisors, behaviour specialists, a secondary school teacher, extended school staff, careers staff, a lead officer on family learning, a choice advisor and an external partner from Goldsmith’s University, involved in PGCE training and in the “Illuminate Young Researchers project”.

Using the findings from the latest quantitative data on GCSE performance in Greenwich and from the interviews, the following summarises some of the key messages that came out of the training session:

- The middle leaders from schools recognised the importance of building resilience in students and were instrumental in identifying ways to achieve this in their schools and sharing their practice with other schools;
- The 2009 data presented at the training session clearly showed that the attainment gap by FSM/Non-FSM at GCSE is bigger for White British students than for any other ethnic group in the local authority, with sufficient numbers to allow meaningful comparisons. However, the gap is not as big as the national gap and it has narrowed over time, but there are still improvements to be made
because overall performance at GCSE in Greenwich is not good enough and lags behind national by over 6% points for the percentage of students achieving 5+ A* - C (Incl. Eng & maths);

- The underlying trend of year on year improvement at GCSE in Greenwich, suggests that there is some evidence that knowing about the issue since 2006 may have encouraged schools to begin addressing the challenge of the attainment gap by FSM/Non-FSM;
- Effective partnership working is key across the local authority and within schools. This was evidenced by the broad range of local authority staff and other partners who worked together to deliver the training;
- The Narrowing the Gap agenda remains an important focus for all of our work in Greenwich and it is imperative that schools and the local authority keep this item high on the school improvement agenda;
- Bringing improved academic success to children and young people from deprived backgrounds will greatly increase their life chances and contribute to raising attainment across the local authority.

Following the training the schools’ middle leaders agreed to incorporate elements from the identified improvement strategies into their own school action plans which would be discussed at a later date with their local authority school improvement advisers. This means that the on-going work can continue to be monitored by the school improvement service.

Findings from this research have also been disseminated in ways other than the earlier national conference and the more recent training for schools. The work was presented as part of a London Education Research Network (LERN) “Masterclass on Research Methods” in association with the BERA Special Interest Group for Educational Effectiveness and Improvement.

Conclusion

The answers to the three research questions are as follows: Does RAISEonline serve a useful purpose as a research tool? The answer is yes, RAISEonline has provided reliable and robust data from a national system which has supported the selection of a sample of students that enabled a valid qualitative research project to be carried out. What factors helped students to achieve success at GCSE above what they were predicted to achieve, given their background and prior attainment? The factors that helped students to achieve success which was over and above their predicted performance included; personal ambition, the importance of friendship groups, the ability to employ self-regulation strategies in relation to their own learning and the development of personal resilience. In addition, family support, in-school support and the ability to see the bigger picture were all considered to be important. How can these findings be successfully disseminated to schools? Within the context of Greenwich local authority, effective ways have been found to successfully disseminate these research findings to schools, including conferences and training.

The earlier quantitative research by Hayes et al demonstrated that pupils from a deprived White British background were increasingly at risk of under-performing in Greenwich schools. Through the qualitative research, there is emerging evidence that students from this background can overcome this trend and achieve higher levels of performance than their estimates, that is, they can achieve success apparently against the odds.
What emerges from the qualitative research is that the successful students from a deprived White British background have developed a range of approaches and strategies to help them succeed. These include a degree of ambition for their success and a level of resilience that they have developed for themselves, often leading to a capacity for self regulation, especially when it comes to organising their own learning. Other factors that emerged included family support, in some cases academic support and in others emotional support. Sometimes the emotional support may have acted as an alternative to parental aspiration for their child’s education. Students’ friendship groups at school were also important and in several cases students demonstrated their resilience by changing their friendship group to ensure that they focused their efforts on studying for their GCSEs. Support within school was also perceived as being very important by some students both from individual teachers and through the additional interventions and study programmes that schools organised as the examinations approached. Based on the research so far, one of the most important factors to emerge from the qualitative work has been resilience and how the local authority and its schools can help young people build resilience is one of the key outcomes from all of this work.
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Notes

This paper is currently in draft format and is being presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick, from 1 – 4 September 2010. This paper is confidential and should only be used with the express permission of the authors, (contact details below).

The work on this research project has been on-going since 2007 and will continue through to 2011 as school improvement strategies continue to be developed in response to the emerging issues from the research.

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