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Succeeding against the odds: can schools 'compensate for society'?

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ABSTRACT

Education researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the UK have debated the question of what, and how much, schools can do to mitigate the effects of parental background on educational outcomes over the last half a century. A range of programmes, strategies and interventions have been implemented, and continue to be implemented in an effort to 'break the link' between socio-economic disadvantage and low educational outcomes, but educational inequalities have persisted. This paper draws on theoretical and empirical research to offer a new analysis of compensatory education in England across three main phases since the 1960s.

Introduction

Education researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the UK have debated the question of what, and how much, schools can do to mitigate the effects of parental background on educational outcomes over the last half a century. In policy and practice terms, a range of programmes, strategies and interventions have been implemented, and continue to be implemented in an effort to 'break the link' between socio-economic disadvantage and low educational outcomes (DfES 2009). To use current policy speak, the aim has been to 'close the gap' in educational attainment between disadvantaged pupils – those who are in receipt of free school meals (FSM) – and their non-FSM peers (DFE, website 2015). These measures have ranged from tinkering with aspects of the system (including attempts to 'raise aspirations' of parents and pupils, increasing

nursery school places and extending pre-school and after hours' education) to wide scale reform and diversification of the education system through changes in the structure and funding of schools (including, most recently, the introduction of Academy and Free Schools). Some of these policies and interventions have met with some measure of success for some individuals and groups of students. However, despite the best efforts of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers, poorer children continue to underperform relative to their more affluent peers. Far fewer of them achieve the institutionalised success criteria of five 'good' (A*-C) GCSE grades, including English and maths, and 'social class' remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK (Archer and Francis 2007; Perry and Francis 2010). According to recent Department for Education (DFE) statistics, around 34% of pupils receiving FSM achieved five good GCSEs, compared to 62% of those who were not in receipt of FSM pupils (DFE 2013). In international rankings, England also has one of the highest correlations of social class with educational performance' (Cassen and Kingdon 2007; OECD 2012).^{1,2}

Against this background of persisting educational inequalities in England, this paper offers new analysis to revisit the question about the extent to which reforms within, and of, education can make a difference in terms of equalising educational outcomes and improving the life chances of poorer children. The paper is organised in three parts. In the first section, I offer a brief overview and analysis of some of the major strategies and policies that UK governments have implemented, since the 1960s, in a bid to narrow the educational attainment gap between poorer and more affluent students. This review is necessarily selective since there have been many initiatives over this period and there is insufficient space here to review each in detail. Instead, I consider some of the major commonalities and divergences across three main phases of what might be termed 'compensatory education' in England – that is, nationally instituted policies and interventions targeted at improving the educational outcomes of poor and disadvantaged pupils. By offering this overview of nationally instituted policies, my aim is to make sense of why educational inequalities have persisted across this period. In the second part

of the paper, I move to briefly consider to a local case study, to consider the strategies that high-performing schools that are located in and around one deprived area of England have used to raise the attainment of their disadvantaged pupils. I draw from the early phase of a research project (reported more fully in Shain et al. 2014) which involved qualitative case-study research across five primary schools that were categorised by Ofsted as at, or near, outstanding. The schools all served higher than average numbers of pupils who qualified for FSM. The successful performances of these schools, like those London schools in equally deprived areas that consistently perform above the national average, show that while underachievement tends to be concentrated in urban areas, there is also ample variation among schools and local authorities. Some schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils can and do perform at a higher rate than the national average (Cassen and Kingdon 2007) and ‘succeed against the odds’. In the third part of the paper, I draw together the issues to address the main question of what and how much schools can do to improve educational outcomes for their disadvantaged students – that is how far schools can ‘compensate for society’. My analysis is framed by the assumption that schools do not operate in a social, economic or political vacuum and that compensatory measures represent strategic compromises between a range of interests and positions in changing economic and political contexts. I argue that in the most recent phase, compensatory measures have enabled some redistribution of resource to schools in more deprived areas. However, these measures have been introduced at a time when overall schools funding has been reduced and in the context of wider public spending cuts, that is, austerity measures, that negatively affect poorer families. Schools are managing to make the most of resources such as the Pupil Premium and certainly from our case studies, some schools have been successful at narrowing the attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM students. However, I question whether schools alone can sustain these efforts in the longer term, especially in the context of growing social inequalities.

Framing ‘compensatory education’ in England – from 1960s to 2015

This question of whether schools can compensate for society continues to be debated with education policy-makers, past and present, not only contending that schools can (compensate for society) but that schools should also be held to account for the performance of their disadvantaged students. For example, the Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan was cited in 2015 as saying that schools’ failure to raise attainment rates would not be tolerated and that measures would be taken to ‘support’ (convert to Academies) schools that were ‘coasting’ – those whose attainment rates have ‘flatlined’ in the past few years. Education researchers have, however, been divided on the issue, with some arguing that the reasons of poverty lie beyond the school gate and that educational policy is the wrong place to reform if we want to equalise education (see e.g. Ball 2010). Others, however, believe that schools, through targeted strategies can go some way towards buffering the impact of wider social inequalities (see Dyson and Raffo 2007).

This section draws and builds on Power’s (2008) analysis of compensatory education in which she analyses some similarities and differences across two phases of compensatory education in England: the Educational Priority Area programmes introduced in the late 1960s and the set of reforms introduced by the New Labour in later 1990s to address ‘social exclusion’. I discuss these below. I also add a third phase to the analysis, by considering the ‘Pupil Premium’, introduced by the Coalition government in 2011 as a new form of compensatory education and set out the case below. I agree with Power (2008, 19) that while education is not able to compensate for society, we must also ‘reject the stance that attempts to reduce educational inequalities are inevitably futile’.

Prioritising schools in disadvantaged areas – 1960s–1980s

The notion of compensatory education is most commonly associated in western countries, with the large-scale, government-funded pre-school projects developed in 1960s and 1970s such as Operation Headstart in North America and Educational Priority Areas

(EPAs) in the UK. The programmes were designed to address educational underachievement by offering poor children in the USA and UK in targeted areas, the opportunities to ‘catch up’ with their more affluent peers through additional funding being allocated to support activities such as pre-school education, investment in teacher salaries and school building projects. The EPAs programme, a form of action research, was developed in late 1960s in England, following a decade of educational research showing various ways in which social class – coded through language (Bernstein 1971), values (Hyman 1967), ‘achievement motivation’ (McClelland 1953), and parental interest and support (Douglas 1964) – shaped educational outcomes in unequal ways. In areas designated as Educational Priorities, a range of activities were developed that were designed to help children to get the most out of their education and increase parental involvement in schools including through the development of community schools. The Plowden Committee, which recommended the introduction of EPAs, contended also that teachers should receive a special allowance for working in difficult schools. The outcomes of the EPA programmes were to be evaluated by researchers, led by A H Halsey.

Education researchers, including Bernstein (1970), were critical of the deficit assumptions underpinning these programmes that implied that these children and their parents were, in general, linguistically or culturally deprived and in need of compensation. The American sociolinguist, Labov (1970) also argued that compensatory programmes in the USA were problematic and supported a cultural pathologising of the black child since they were designed to ‘repair the child rather than the school’ (Labov 1970). The argument, in essence, put forward by Bernstein and Labov, was that schools alone could not deal with the ills of society.

Addressing ‘social exclusion’ – 1997–2010

Following some mixed evaluations of the EPA programme in England, and with little evidence of any change in patterns of educational advantage and disadvantage, the EPA

programme was phased out in the UK by the Conservative governments in the mid-1980s. The phasing out was also part of the Conservative government's reform of the welfare state and various social welfare cuts. However, the election of the New Labour government in 1997 brought a renewed commitment to tackling 'social exclusion' – the new proxy for class and poverty and a second phase of compensatory education. Social exclusion was considered by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair and his new established **Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to be more than 'material poverty' and something that was damaging to self-esteem. Education was seen as key to tackling social exclusion:

The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience. (SEU 1998, 6)

As part of its commitment to providing for a socially excluded 'underclass' of young people, New Labour introduced over its three terms in office many initiatives that targeted disadvantaged areas and schools for improvement. In England, these included area-based initiatives such as Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities and later the London Challenge and City Challenge; pre-school and integrated services in the form of Sure Start Local Programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries, Early Excellence Centres and Extended School programmes. The stated aim of Education Action Zones (EAZs), for example, was to raise standards in disadvantaged urban and rural areas, so that young people could become high achievers, effective learners and key contributors to the renewal of their communities. One of the fundamentals underpinning the policy, like the EPAs, was that educational attainment could be improved by enhanced parental and community involvement in schools. The City Academies, launched in 2002, were essentially a conversion and re-opening of 'failing' schools. The stated aim of the programmes was 'to challenge the culture of educational under attainment and to deliver real improvements in standards' and 'to break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation' (DfES 2004).

While many of the schemes were later merged, for example, by 2005, the EAZ's had

become part of 134 Excellence in Cities Action Zones and 80 Excellence Clusters, the emphasis on targeting extra resources at deprived schools and areas remained a consistent theme which tied New Labour's programmes with the earlier compensatory measures introduced in the 1960s. Another common thread with earlier compensatory programmes was the language of cultural deficit that pervaded these schemes although the focus under New Labour was more on aspiration than attributes as in the earlier EPA programmes. New Labour's focus on 'raising aspirations', nevertheless implied that working-class parents needed to emulate the practices of middle-class parents in order to help their children to achieve (Power 2008; see also Gewirtz 2001).

As Power (2008) has observed, there were also some differences between the 1960s' programmes and the compensatory measures introduced by New Labour in the 1990s and 2000s. While the 1960s' programmes received long-term investments and were directly managed by governments, New Labour's interventions were generally governed by partnerships rather than state administrations, as were the EPA's. The Education Action Zones, for example, she notes, were managed by teams of business partners, professionals, community and parent representatives. And, while the development of earlier programmes was typically measured in terms of how much money had been invested, the new programmes were issued performance targets which needed to be met (Power 2008, 23). Funding was committed for a shorter term of between 3 and 5 years. The strategies were also often 'ground-up' in their development, as the commitment of those actors operating at a local level was required in order for the strategies to have a chance at taking off (Power 2008, 23).

Many such policies were not successful in terms of the overall targets, that is, to reduce the attainment gap between rich and poor students. There were some gains under New Labour including increases in the numbers of working class, or 'non-traditional' students attending universities – a 15% rise between 1997 and 2012 (Gokay and Shain 2011). Exam performance rates also rose overall, ('dumbing down' debates, aside). However,

the gap between rich and poor students was not fundamentally altered. Indeed, some researchers reflecting on New Labour's education legacy towards the end of Tony Blair's leadership in 2008 contended that educational inequalities had in fact been exacerbated by New Labour's continued acceptance of a market-based model of education inherited from the previous Conservative governments. The impact of class and ethnicity on educational achievement was more stark than it had been before New Labour's terms in Office (Gillborn 2008; Reay 2008; Tomlinson 2008; Shain 2013).

Another major difference between the compensatory education policy of the 1960s and the more recent attempts to 'narrow the attainment gap' was the changing balance of the relationship between educational research and policy-makers. In the 1960s, a general vision or project of 'social engineering' was shared by many social and political researchers and formal policy-makers, who tended to work in collaboration. Later, in the 1990s, measures, however, took place in a markedly different economic and political era, in terms of British position in the world and sharply declining resources, but also an era when policy-makers rejected much of the sociologically inspired education research, because it seemed too pessimistic about the prospects of reforming society through education. Instead, policy-makers, since the early 1990s, tended to draw on school improvement or 'what works' studies with shorter term and performance-related priorities (Shain and Ozga 2001).

The Pupil Premium was one of the flagship policies of the David Cameron-led Coalition government, launched alongside an expansion of the Academies programme and the introduction of a controversial Free Schools programme. The Pupil Premium, introduced in April 2011, fits the bill as a compensatory programme, in that it targets resources at schools serving the poorest members of society. The stated aim of the government through the Pupil Premium programme is to support schools to 'close the attainment gap' and 'raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils' between the ages of 4 and 16 (DFE Website 2015). Schools receive funding for each pupil that has been eligible

for FSM at any time over the previous 6 years (Ever6) and those who have been looked after by a local authority. Funding increased from an initial total £625 million in 2011–2012 to £2545 billion in 2015–2016. In 2015–2016, the funding stands at £1320 for pupils in reception – year 6 (aged 4–11) and £935 for pupils in years 7–11 (aged 11–16). Schools also, at the present time, receive £1900 for each pupil who has left local authority care because of one of the following: adoption, a special guardianship order, a child arrangements order or a residence order.

While it is left to schools to determine which interventions and initiatives to put in place, as in New Labour's compensatory education reforms, schools are held to account for this funding through Ofsted inspections which require them to publish Pupil Premium performance tables. These tables include data on the attainment and progress of pupils who attract the funding, and the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Pupil Premium awards ceremonies are also held annually for schools that demonstrate excellent results in closing the attainment gap between Pupil Premium and non-Pupil Premium pupils and so the scheme is, in its current form, closely performance monitored.

Although the Pupil Premium seems to be having some positive benefits for some individual students, it is too early to measure its impact on the attainment gap. The Pupil Premium does matter a great deal to schools because of the political and economic context in which it has been introduced. While Pupil Premium budgets to schools have increased annually since 2011 and to some extent represent a redistribution of resources to schools in deprived areas, it is significant that this compensatory measure has been introduced in a climate of public sector cuts and harsh austerity measures which have impacted heavily on poorer families. As part of these recent austerity measures, government spending in education and school budgets have been reduced substantially so that schools operate with less funding overall (Lupton and Thomson 2015).

How we read the implementation of this latest compensatory measure is therefore closely related to our understanding of what has been happening since the 2007–2008 global financial crisis and economic downturn. A number of reports including those from global institutions such as the IMF (2015) and OECD (2015) have warned that harsh austerity measures introduced by the Conservative-led Coalition government and continued by the current Conservative government in the UK are impacting most starkly on the poorest in society, and that the gap between rich and poor in the UK is widening. Critics have also argued that recent and current austerity measures are not the result of economic necessity but rather represent the extension of the Conservative government's strong conviction in neoliberalism, and accordingly in a conservative ideological commitment to structurally changing the UK economy and society. Compensatory measures like the Pupil Premium need to be understood as more than just measures to 'equalise' education. Programmes and policies do not exist in a political, social and economic vacuum. They represent strategic compromises between the many interests and groups that surround their emergence. For example, the Pupil Premium was most likely the result of a compromise and a concession to the Liberal Democrats by the Conservatives in return for their support of harsh austerity measures during the five years of the coalition government. It could also be seen as a concession to poor families as their benefits and credits and allowances are cut, and as the competition for higher education places rises.

There are other interests too that are served by the 'redistributive' measures of the Pupil Premium in the context of Britain's declining position as a global economic player and its slippage in the international educational rankings such as the OECD's PISA. 'Closing the gap' between FSM and non-FSM pupils also serves as a tool for improving attainment levels overall and considerable policy effort is being expended to achieve this. It is against this background that we conducted our local case study that is reported in the next section.

Succeeding against the odds? A local case study

This section draws on empirical research from an ongoing project investigating the strategies that primary schools in one local area use to raise the attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The initial phase of the research (reported in more detail in Shain et al. 2014) involved qualitative case-study research across five institutions that reflected the demographic profile of deprivation in the local area in terms of their pupil intake, but also showed rising levels of attainment over a 3–5-year period. The research, conducted in 2013, involved focus groups and interviews with senior managers, teachers and teaching assistants. The research team also conducted group and individual interviews with parents and governors and classroom observations were undertaken in nursery, and key stage one teaching and learning across literacy and numeracy.³

Our findings in this first phase revealed that no one factor accounted for the increasing levels of success of these schools. However, resources matter in schools' attempts to improve the educational outcomes of all their pupils and their most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils in particular. All of our case-study schools had in place a range of specific interventions prior to the introduction of the Pupil Premium, but Pupil Premium and other funding such as national sports funding had supported them to achieve the desired results more rapidly. One of our five case-study schools was using Pupil Premium money to purchase school uniform (jumper and tie) and a sports kit for every child registered at the school, every year. This meant that Pupil Premium money was being used to target disadvantage across the school. For the head teacher, this strategy aimed at removing barriers so that equal access to learning and activities was the first step to equalising opportunity and outcomes: 'that's the barrier removed, isn't it?' (Head Teacher, School, E).

Across all the schools, there was considerable investment in developing a highly

structured approach in early years' provision, including the arrangement of home visits as part of enrolment process and the co-option of parents as educators in their children's learning. The results were very noticeable with children leaving nursery being able to write a complete sentence. One parent commented about her daughter who was currently in nursery:

She's only just turned four, and she is my only child, so I haven't got other children to compare to, so I'm comparing her to relatives' children or friends' children, but she can write her own name properly, she is starting to spell words. She's started to read, whereas normally that comes on in reception, so for me, I do think she's advanced. She's more aware of everything that's going on when we're out and about, and she says, she'll point to things that she's learned about in the class. (Parent, School D)

These investments in early years provision and support are in tune with the attempts of earlier compensatory programmes, including the EPAs and New Labour's Sure Start, but, in the current climate, are monitored in very different ways. Considerable money and time were invested in developing standardised systems across the whole schools to support the monitoring and evaluations of student performance in order to hit Ofsted targets (see also Dann (2016), in this issue for a consideration of how these issues impacted on the teaching and learning strategies).

Other activities or resources that our case-study schools invested in included out-of-hours activities; teaching assistants and specific interventions such as Reading Recovery and Assertive Mentoring of pupils to improve self-awareness and confidence of their educational progress. Schools were drawing on all available resources to raise attainment for all pupils, but especially for students on FSM, which was a major part of the Ofsted agenda. One school employed a full-time speech therapist and also offered staff training in a language package (ELKLAN) to improve communication techniques between teachers and pupils. School trips and other enrichment activities including music and riding lessons were designed to give poorer children a 'middle-class' experience'. One school invested in its own minibus so that school trips could be heavily subsidised by the

school or offered free to parents:

The school gives the children opportunities that maybe some parents wouldn't be able to afford, like we can't afford to go on holiday to Paris and things like that at the minute, so it makes all children from whatever back-ground all have the same opportunity at a reasonable price. Most of the trips are free anyway, I know the Paris one isn't. (Parent , School D)

There were two main issues in connection with schools' attempts to resource such enrichment activities. First, these activities while regularly provided were not available every week for every child, but rather in 6–8 weekly cycles. The capacity of schools to offer a 'middle-class' experience to all children was therefore limited by the availability of resources. Second, as in the studies conducted by Gewirtz et al (2005) of EAZs, cultural deficit operated to frame some staff assumptions about working-class parents. 'Low aspirations' were frequently cited across our interviews with staff and managers as a cultural barrier to raising attainment that needed to be overcome. Measures such as celebration or achievement ceremonies and trips to local universities were used to address such barriers (see also Watt 2016 in this issue for further details of the parental engagement strategies that schools used). The assumption that disadvantaged parents and children are not aspirational has, however, been challenged in recent research. Studies have found that disadvantaged parents and children can and do have high aspirations – but they may lack the 'know-how' (cultural capital) and resources (social and financial capital) to realise these aspirations (St Clair, Kintrea, and Houston 2011; Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2014).

Some parents also expressed concern about the long-term sustainability of the success achieved in these primary schools in the transition from primary to secondary school. The secondary school referred to in the extract below was poorly resourced and attainment there was low in comparison to the primary school that the child attended.

It's a big enough transition for them anyway, going from Primary to Secondary, but for them to go from an outstanding school to one that is actually underperforming, that's what happened to my son, it's really difficult. Investment is needed in secondary schools. (Parent, School B)

What this suggests is that investment in ‘narrowing the gap’ remains patchy and that progress made through primary schooling is at risk if the levels of resource and support are not sustained once children reach secondary schools. While the Pupil Premium has enabled additional funds to be redistributed to schools in areas of high deprivation, this has also made those schools heavily dependent on additional and specific sources of money. If a child transfers to a secondary school with a more varied and less deprived intake, the overall funding in that school is going to be less.

Finally, a critical factor in shaping the positive outcomes that the schools achieved was the considerable investment by teachers, teaching assistants and managers, beyond their contracted hours. Staff in our case-study schools reported working on average 60 hours a week with some working 72 hours. This is higher than the average of number of hours reported in the Talis OECD teacher survey of teachers working in 34 countries (OECD 2014). This survey reported that full-time teachers in English secondary schools worked 48 hours a week, with one in 10 reporting working weeks of 65 hours or more. The survey drew on a sample of 154 schools and nearly 2500 secondary teachers from both state and independent schools in England (See also the results of recent DFE commissioned Teacher Workload Survey (DFE 2015)).

Discussion: can schools narrow the attainment gap or ‘compensate for society’?

The short-term answer, after looking at the above case studies, and wider evidence on the success of schools serving disadvantaged pupils is, yes. This is in terms of schools achieving specifically identified outcomes measured by exam results. Whether this is sustainable on a more widespread and longer term basis is another and more complicated question, the answer to which depends on a number of factors.

The first is the long-term availability of resources and this depends on both the economic

and political contexts in which policies are made and the ideological convictions of the governments making the policies. There are some major differences between early 1960s' compensatory education programmes and the more recent attempts to close the attainment gap. The 1960s was still a period of investment and expansion, a so-called 'golden era of capitalism' for Britain, aimed at building a strong infrastructure of British economy and society. Later measures, including those introduced by the New Labour government and in the current period, were implemented in an era of decline in industrial output, economic activity and investment, and, a sharp decline in the British position and competitiveness in the global economy. However, how governments respond to this changing economic and political context is equally important as well as what the key drivers are on policy decision-making.

New Labour governments, for example, invested heavily in education in the 10 years before the onset of the global financial crisis and economic downturn in 2007–2008. More than 35,000 new teachers and 172,000 teaching assistants were recruited to the profession. 'Per-pupil' funding rose by 55% between 1997 and 1998 and teachers pay rose by 18%, in real terms. Capital investment in schools also increased eightfold. (DfES 2009) Set in the context of international competition, this massive investment brought British education spending only to the average level (5.5% of GDP) of OECD countries. Global competition and Britain's falling position in international rankings were also key factors in the commitment to tackling social exclusion. As stated earlier, exam performances of pupils rose over the 10-year period from 1997 with 45.1% of pupils achieving five good A–C GCSE grades. This was up from 35.6% in 1997, but a significant social class attainment gap remained.

Under the Coalition government, total expenditure rose from £46.1 bn in 2009/10 to £46.6 bn in 2013/14 (in real terms in 2009/2010 prices) – a rise of 1% but capital spending fell by 57% (Lupton and Thomson 2015). Education was first in line for cuts in public spending: the Future Jobs Fund, the cancellation of school building and

refurbishment, the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and funding cuts in university teaching budgets, fewer university places and a large increase in university tuition fees. That these cuts have disproportionately affected poorer communities the most means that schools will have a hard time closing the gap. While the results of primary school testing and GCSE exams continued to rise until 2013, in 2014, GCSE attainment fell, and socio-economic gaps opened up for lower attainers (Lupton and Thomson 2015)

The Coalition and Conservative governments also extended New Labour's Academies programme with the stated rationale that offering choice and getting businesses to invest in education will pay off for poorer students. By 2014, 57% of secondary schools and 1 in 10 primary schools were Academies. However, the evidence on the effectiveness of academies is mixed. A Sutton Trust Report (Hutchings, Francis, and Kirby 2015) includes an index comparing 34 Academy chains' 2014 performance for disadvantaged pupils on the following attainment measures: the percentage achieving five A–C grades GCSEs or equivalent; the percentage making expected progress in English and maths; and students' performance in the English Baccalaureate (five core academic subjects). The research found that in 2014, 11 of the academy chains analysed performed higher than the national average. The proportion of disadvantaged students achieving five good GCSEs was at least 15% points higher than the average for disadvantaged students in mainstream schools. However, 44% of the academies analysed were below the government's new 'coasting' level in 2014 (Hutchings, Francis, and Kirby 2015). Teachers are also an invaluable and arguably, the most important, resource of schools. However, the increasing numbers of teachers leaving the profession poses a significant challenge to schools that are attempting to narrow the gap or at least the long-term sustainability of doing so. Recent figures released by the teachers union, the Association for Teachers and Lecturers in 2013, revealed that almost 40% of new teachers leave the profession within a year of qualifying and that record numbers of teachers are also leaving the profession mid career. According to DFE figures, almost 50,000 teachers left

the profession in the 12 months to November 2013 representing an increase of 25% over four years. The DFE workload consultation (DFE 2015) survey, which generated around 44,000 responses, gives an insight into the kinds of issues that teachers cite as ‘unnecessary’ demands on their time. This includes the hours spent recording data, marking and lesson planning and the pressures of Ofsted and from government.

There is a further reason to be sceptical about whether the attainment gap can be closed within the current framework of competition and choice. Gewirtz (2001) claims that education remains a positional good and thus there will always be ‘winners and losers’. Even if the attainment gap were narrowed, would this necessarily lead to better life chances for working-class students? There is now a wealth of evidence (Ball, Gewirtz, and Bowe 1995; Gewirtz 2001, Ball 2010; Reay 2008) that shows how the middle and upper classes are very good at maintaining their advantage and will go to great lengths to ensure that their children do very well out of the education system whatever measures are introduced to equalise outcomes. A series of studies from the 1990s have established how this advantage and privilege are maintained through active strategising – from buying in additional private tutoring to making the most of their social networks to being ‘active choosers’ in the education place (see also Ball 2010). All this means that the odds are stacked against schools operating in disadvantaged urban areas and serving disadvantaged pupils as they face an uphill battle to sustain the success of their pupils with the goal posts continuously shifting by the competition for educational success.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on theoretical and empirical data to revisit the question of whether schools ‘can compensate for society’. I have reviewed three main phases of compensatory education since the 1960s in England, highlighting continuities and differences across these periods. These compensatory measures have been implemented in different economic and political climates, by governments holding different

ideological and political convictions about how education should be resourced. In the most recent phase, the Pupil Premium has enabled some redistribution of resource to schools in more deprived areas. However, despite annual increases in funding, the Pupil Premium is being implemented in the context of public spending and education cuts overall. Schools have, and indeed are, managing to make the most of this resource and certainly from our case studies, become successful at narrowing the attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM students. However, there is a question over whether this success can be sustained on a longer term basis in the context of reduced capital funding for schools, problems and issues over the retention of teachers and the evidence of increasing wider social inequalities.

It is clear that some schools can improve educational outcomes for some disadvantaged students and ‘narrow the gap’ in the shorter term, but the stark evidence remains that over the past 50 years, the socio-economic attainment gap has not been narrowed. Schools can lead the way but they cannot address the impact of wider social inequalities alone, and certainly not without significant investment. As this paper has shown, compensatory measures, within social structures that do little to challenge inequality, will always be just concessions – but at the current time, they, especially Pupil Premium, are concessions that really do matter for schools.

Notes

1. The paper draws on the ‘Raising Attainment at Key Stage 1 in Stoke-on-Trent’ project, which was funded by Stoke City Council (2013–16). The research team comprised: Farzana Shain (PI, Keele University), Ruth Dann (Manchester Metropolitan University, Laura Watt (Keele University) and Steve Cropper (Keele University).
2. Although I draw on this collaborative project, the views expressed in this paper are my own and reflect neither those of other members of the research team nor those of the City Council.
3. The sample in phase 1 of the project consisted of: 6 head teachers; 26 teachers (22 were EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) or KS1); 5 family support workers (one from each school); 3 Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs); 1 speech therapist ; 25 parents; 8 governors; 26

teaching assistants (22 EYFS and KS1).

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