Gaining and Sustaining Momentum: Accelerating progress in schools project

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE)

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Executive Summary

Context

This study of the characteristics of schools needing to gain or re-gain momentum was undertaken for Teach First as a follow up to a previous study comparing the characteristics of Exceptional and Strong Schools. The core aim was to inform Teach First's planning for providing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) support to schools in which Teach First's own participants and ambassadors are not as well supported as they could and should be. Beyond that, however, the study aimed to look further and explore trends and potentially promising responses to a hiatus in a school's development towards exceptional status.

Methodology

The key phases of the research were to conduct:

- Analysis of the relevant wider evidence (literature review) to shape the development of the research framework and tools;
- Data collection in the project schools and school level analysis and reporting;
- Cross-school analysis and comparison with previous project findings and wider evidence to identify patterns and form conclusions.

The schools had to have had at least three Teach First participants placed with them, and have been a Teach First partner school for over a year. A total of 9 schools were recruited to the research project, all of whom had to meet one of the following selection criteria:

- were not getting strong grades at key stage results (GCSE 40-50% 5+ A*-C); or
- were getting acceptable grades but not making progress (<3% increase in the percentage of students getting 5+ A*-C GCSEs over a three year period).

In-school data collection involved:

- pre-visit student questionnaires; and then
- a visit featuring:

o interviews with members of the senior leadership team (SLT; plus, in one case, governors);
o interviews with teaching staff (including but not limited to Teach First teachers), and;
o a focus group with a cross-section of the teaching staff.

Where logistics allowed, researchers also sat in on leadership team meetings.

Once school-specific analysis was complete, the research team analysed the evidence from across all the schools in order to:

- identify patterns and distinctions between project schools;
- identify similarities and differences between project schools and the wider evidence base including the approaches of the strong and Exceptional Schools from the first study; and
- test the original and emerging hypotheses.

The outcomes of this work are presented in the current report.

Findings

In contrast to the consistent patterns that emerged across the High Performing Schools project, the Gaining and Sustaining Momentum project revealed a wide variety of ways in which project schools needed to change practice in order to accelerate progress. The researchers identified three different positions in relation to achieving sustainable momentum:

- *gathering momentum* - schools that have recently been able to achieve a sustainable trajectory of improvement which is beginning to be reflected in results;
- *approaching momentum* - schools that are on the cusp of achieving a sustainable trajectory of improvement, having just begun to make high impact changes to the areas of practice in need of development;
- *seeking momentum* - schools that have identified many (though not necessarily all) of the building blocks they need to put in place, and have begun to do so, but who still face obstacles in achieving a sustained trajectory of improvement.

The researchers also identified a number of key issues and drivers that were key for these schools in developing sustainable momentum.

Depth of Subject Knowledge

In most project schools, although there was a strong emphasis on developing pedagogic skills and knowledge, the lack of emphasis on depth of subject knowledge as an area for improvement was noticeable. This stood in stark contrast to the practice observed in Exceptional Schools in the High Performing Schools project. Recognising the importance of depth in subject knowledge was a crucial step in developing capacity to improve for a large number of the project schools; one which some, but by no means all, were beginning to address.

Drive to improve

Another pattern that was noticeable across a majority of project schools was that each had achieved significant improvement in one or two areas prior to the research project. These achievements were often at a very advanced level, to the point where schools were legitimately cited as centres of excellence in those areas. However, these achievements, rather than acting as a springboard for

further improvement, instead seemed to cause the schools to be 'distracted' by their success and to e.g. focus on facilitating the learning of other schools. This is particularly noticeable as an issue when comparisons were made with Exceptional Schools, which:

- were routinely relentless in targeting any area of performance which slips even a relatively small amount; but
- did not usually feature any single area of particularly excellent practice.

Consistency and coherence

The schools in this project set out to achieve consistent practice in some contexts although this was frequently unsuccessful and/ or seemed to take the form of bureaucratic compliance in others. Some of these project schools were also keen to celebrate differences, for example, between departments. But the High Performing Schools placed a strong emphasis on taking explicit steps and establishing systems for ensuring consistency of practice throughout the school. As an example of this phenomenon, many Exceptional Schools focussed on behaviour for learning as an integral part of Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) to support improvements in quality of teaching and learning, and this tended to be linked to detailed systems for using behaviour tracking *specifically to provide an early indicator of a need for intervention for students or through CPDL*. The clarity of purpose surrounding the use of behaviour data tracking, not to manage rewards and sanctions, but to inform teacher and school improvement in multiple ways across the school, was striking. It exemplified well the how connections between clarity of purpose enabled and enriched consistency of practice. The connections between systems and learning were also strengthened in Exceptional Schools by the existence of a school wide model of pedagogy. This enabled students to build their own control over learning strategies that they might not experience beyond school, by working with them repeatedly in different subjects. Although we reported this as a focus on consistency in the Exceptional Schools project we think the second project suggests that what the Exceptional School were actually demonstrating was coherence, i.e. an approach to consistency that was linked to a relentless focus on understanding and removing barriers to learning and to securing cumulative learning experiences. This is significant for the Gaining and Sustaining Momentum project because almost all of the project schools had as a key improvement goal, achieving consistently good or outstanding quality of teaching and learning.

Creating a strong learning environment

In general, leadership of CPDL, CPDL activities, and professional learning were all at their strongest in project schools where the links between the curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching and learning were all explicitly attended to and aligned. Those schools which were gathering momentum made stronger links between the curriculum and the learning environment for students and for staff. By contrast, those schools which were still in the early phases of creating a sustainable trajectory of improvement were also still in the early stages of establishing a baseline of high quality teaching and behaviour for learning; developing the curriculum was seen as less of a priority and was not seen as a CPDL driver here. As with the need to create coherence through clarity of purpose in order to feed consistency, the project schools which are still some distance from sustainable improvement need to build a professional learning environment which is focussed upon identifying and removing barriers to learning for all students through CPDL.

Recommendations

The focus of the Gaining and Sustaining Momentum project has been, as it was with the High Performing Schools project, on identifying shared and distinctive characteristics between small groups of schools serving very vulnerable communities. It is a small qualitative study that uses evidence from large scale and experimental studies to create a framework for data collection and analysis, and that captured a wide range of different types of qualitative data from a broad range of sources to triangulate evidence and the perspectives of different stakeholders. But it is not a generalisable study. Nonetheless, and with these limitations in mind, a number of recommendations are offered to inform the thinking of schools seeking to gain or re-gain momentum and of those who support them.

- **Diagnostics** – The 3D diagnostic work that led to creating the research reports for individual schools was for most of these schools a revealing intervention and a form of support in its own right. Some schools are keen to repeat it to record progress. Accessing an independent, evidence rich and fine grained, bird's eye view of where the school sits on so many practical fronts was key to prioritising more effectively. Schools may wish to consider how to access and integrate evidence-rich diagnostic work into the support they access.

- **Maintaining focus and drive** – Many schools felt compelled to focus on a seam of emerging excellence, but this was often a distraction that encouraged a focus on practice and interventions divorced to some degree from the systematic and relentless job of identifying and removing all barriers to learning for vulnerable learners. Focus schools should review, with evidence based support, the balances they strike between building on stronger practices and prioritizing, identifying and removing barriers to learning.

- **Coherence** – Many of the project schools would benefit from focusing on developing an understanding of the principles underpinning good practice as well as on helping colleagues carry them out. Focus schools and those who support them should ensure that support for continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) helps teachers identify drivers and principles; to develop clarity about the underpinning rationale behind strategies for identifying and removing barriers to learning enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

- **The role of monitoring in achieving consistency and coherence** – The way monitoring was used in the project schools was interrogated and revised on a regular basis, usually because the schools were still in the process of learning how to use it as a means of identifying needs to be addressed through, for example, CPDL. For a number of project schools systems and practices (with an eye to summative judgments likely to be made by others) rather than the purpose of the monitoring, was the priority. Focus schools and those who support them are almost certainly already attending closely to building monitoring systems and practices. This evidence suggest it is important to focus on making monitoring meaningful, consistent and formative, and focused especially on shaping CPDL linked with teaching and learning, and interventions.

- **CPDL** – All of the project schools saw CPD as a key driver in gaining momentum, but fewer recognised the importance of CPDL; of supporting teachers as professional learners who assess their own practice and try to improve it on a routine basis. Focus schools and those who support them should consider ways of raising expectations about CPD and professional learning through well-designed support, and in particular by p adopting evidence based and

evidence-rich processes and structures to support CPDL. The national standards for CPDL heralded in the White Paper provide guidance.

- **Behaviour** – All project schools paid close attention to student behaviour, but they did so in very diverse ways. Most noticed the importance of behaviour strategies around positive as well as negative behaviour, but only a few had managed to move on from focussing on rewards and sanctions to an emphasis on behaviour for learning underpinned by high expectations for students. Noticing when and attending to how to move from a focus on behavior toward a partnership with students focused on behaviour for learning would be an important issue for focus schools and those who support them to focus on.

- **Subject knowledge** – Most of the project schools prioritised improving the quality of lessons by focussing on high impact pedagogic strategies, with comparatively limited emphasis on contextualising these strategies in different subjects or developing specialist expertise in subjects. Often this was because the schools did not have a clear idea of how to develop subject knowledge in detail. Focus schools and those who support them need a strategy for developing their knowledge about where and how specialist support can be accessed and in some cases for building specialist capacity where this is no longer available from, for example, Universities or Local Authorities.

- **Literacy** – Several project schools had literacy as a focus, but underestimated the extent to which whole-school efforts targeting literacy could help students access the curriculum and demonstrate their understanding. Specifically, these schools needed help in recognizing the size and nature of the challenge, developing progress monitoring systems for literacy progress in all subjects, and developing all teachers' understanding of and skills in diagnosing gaps in students' literacy. Focus schools and those who support them should review whether sufficient priority is given to supporting the identification of literacy barriers to genuine access to the curriculum in every subject and by every teacher.

- **Stretch and challenge** – All project schools had numbers of lower ability students above the national average, and some had low proportions of high ability students as well. Focus schools with student populations with this profile and those who support them should collect evidence about how far all teachers offer every pupil sufficiently challenging – and this also links to the subject knowledge recommendations outlined above

- **Parental engagement** – Many project schools were making considerable efforts to engage parents and the community with the school as a whole (as opposed to a simple teacher-parent relationship). However, few were content that they had done all they could, and all were continuing to seek new and innovative approaches to building ties with parents and the local community. This is another area where focus schools and those who support them may wish to focus attention.

1. Introduction
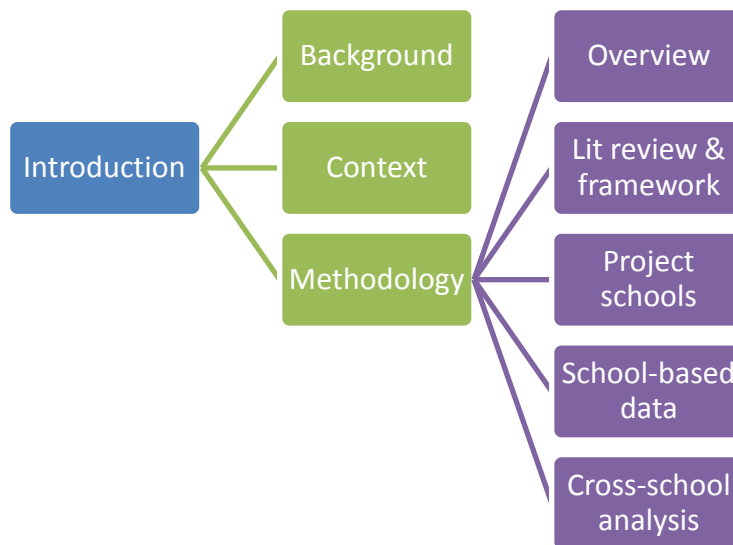
1.1 Background

This study of the characteristics of schools needing to gain or re-gain momentum was undertaken for Teach First as a follow up to a previous study comparing the characteristics of Exceptional and Strong Schools. The core aim was to inform Teach First's planning for providing CPD support to schools in which Teach First's own participants and ambassadors are not as well supported as they could and should be.

The study involved extensive work in recruiting schools who already felt under considerable pressure and scrutiny, working with them to explore key issues and practices during a diagnostic phase and then supporting them in further development work and/ or planning through an enquiry/action research process. The project took place during a year in which many of the changes flowing from curriculum, examination and accountability reforms were implemented in depth. Also during the gap between the first and second Teach First projects the impact of the introduction of another school based training route, School Direct and also the impact of improvements in the economy had begun to impact upon how Teach First is understood within schools.

The report starts with a brief statement of the context for the research, a description of its methodology and headline messages from the research literature. Section 2 offers an analysis of patterns across the schools against the evidence-based research framework and the patterns in practices and approaches observed in Strong and particularly Exceptional Schools. The report concludes with reflections on the project schools' capacity to sustain improvement and recommendations to Teach First. Appendices include the full literature review and an overview of schools' improvement and development work carried out during the life of the project.

1.2 Context: The system changes in the last year

The period during which this research took place (October 2014 to August 2015) has been a period of intense change in the education system. The schools in this study all serve very vulnerable communities and have also been contending with a number of structural, examination and accountability changes which bear specifically on them and on the communities they serve. These include but are not limited to:

- the introduction of new GCSE examinations that require students to provide extended written answers to probing, complex text based questions in almost all subjects;
- the further tightening of the effects of the English Baccalaureate (E-BACC) which narrows considerably the vocational examination options for students that are counted in overall assessments of schools' success;
- an ever increasing focus on the success and progress of vulnerable students including increasing emphasis on those who are able but underachieving;
- growing recruitment challenges - teacher supply and retention has been an issue intersecting with quality in almost all project schools;
- improving graduate employment opportunities, particularly in the South East and in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, is linked with increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining both trainee and qualified teachers;
- the significant shift from university-based to school-based teacher training approaches brings benefits but also many demands on schools; and
- safeguarding has become a major concern reflected in changing guidance to OFSTED inspectors arising from, for example:
  - The risk of extremism ('prevent') following high profile 'extremism' headlines in schools (e.g. Birmingham 'Trojan Horse'); and
  - Further cases of child abuse/neglect and grooming.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Overview

This project was designed as a follow on to the previous piece of research[1] CUREE carried out for Teach First, which explored the characteristics of schools that ensure exceptional progress of their students, despite challenging circumstances (in particular, high levels of economic and social disadvantage in the communities served by the schools). Consequently, a similar research design and tools were used to enable comparisons between the previous and the current project schools to identify some drivers and inhibitors to accelerated student progress and school improvement. The key phases of the research included:

- Analysis of the relevant wider evidence (literature review), to shape the development of the research framework and tools;
- Data collection in the project schools and school level analysis and reporting;
- Cross-school analysis and comparison with previous project findings and wider evidence to identify patterns and form conclusions.

In addition, the current study also included a phase of development work with the project schools, the overview of which is provided in Appendix 2.

1.3.2 The literature review and research framework

Like its predecessor the project commenced with a literature review. It focussed on the practices and challenges found in schools where progress lacked momentum or was stationary as well as

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[1] Bell, M. & Cordingley, P. (2014) *Characteristics of high performing schools.* Coventry: Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education [CUREE]. Available at: http://www.curee.co.uk/files/publication/[site-timestamp]/Teach%20First%20Research%20Report.pdf

considering the findings from the Exceptional Schools project and wider evidence about effective school improvement and student performance strategies that underpinned it.

Findings from the literature review carried out for the Gaining and Sustaining Momentum project (available in Appendix 1) shaped the development of the research framework which comprised four key areas: professional learning environment, leadership, teaching and learning, and relations with students, parents and the community. The best evidence from research within these four key areas was used to frame the research questions. Some headline messages from the literature review and research framework are included below.

1.3.2.1 Professional learning environment

In *schools where progress lacks momentum*, collaboration and professional development are often inconsistent, and are sometimes mediated through teaching methods at odds with the professional learning content they are supporting (such as the use of heavily instructional methods despite this being discouraged within classroom practice).

Consistent professionalism in support for continuing professional development and learning also emerges as a *distinction between Strong and Exceptional Schools*.

The evidence about improving schools also highlights the importance of departments and phases as cultural reference points and the context in which much professional learning takes place, and therefore of middle leadership for Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL).

Other high-leverage professional learning practices highlighted by the research included:

- more rigorous recruitment and induction processes;
- targeted programmes of professional development;
- dedicated mentoring and coaching;
- peer and team teaching;
- sharing and celebrating best practice; and
- teachers taking responsibility for their own performance and development.

1.3.2.2 Leadership

In *schools where progress lacks momentum* there are often problems related to the role and skills of head teachers (or the lack of them in some cases), the SLT, governors, and middle management/subject leaders.

Leaders in *improving schools* were found to focus on 'communicating the vision', by for example:

- insisting that all pupils could achieve highly, regardless of their background;
- establishing a non-negotiable requirement for teaching of good or outstanding quality;
- expecting good behaviour at all times from all pupils;
- expecting teachers and leaders to take responsibility for their own development; and
- focussed on systems, data and monitoring to identify strengths/target weaknesses.

The findings from the Exceptional Schools project suggest that leaders of *High Performing Schools* also:

- use challenging conversations to ensure expectations are met and enhance staff attitudes;
- create an environment where students participate actively in school and progress reviews;

- strengthen middle leadership;
- establish a SLT with the right skills and attitude to drive improvement;
- lead by example - e.g. modelling behaviour management strategies; and
- put in place in depth and rigorous approaches to Performance Management.

1.3.2.3 Teaching and Learning

For *schools that are struggling to accelerate* and support good levels of progress for their students, inconsistency emerges as a key challenge despite pockets of good and sometimes even outstanding teaching and assessment. Problem areas included:

- teacher-dominated pedagogy;
- low expectations;
- lack of effective approaches to behaviour management, teaching quality and classroom behaviour and underpinning systems;
- inadequate assessment practice and use of assessment information.

Schools which improved change their ways of working to ensure a strong focus on improving teaching and learning: for example, changing the focus of staff meetings to developing teaching, and making teaching the leadership focus. They develop evidence-based systems and approaches to ensure that the overwhelming majority of teaching classrooms are at least good, and usually excellent.

The earlier Teach First research also found that *Exceptional Schools* tended to articulate whole-school, evidence-based pedagogies and/or cross-school targeting of key learning areas such as literacy and to expect and monitor buy-in to their use .

1.3.2.4 Relations with parents and the community

In *schools where improvements are not in evidence*, lack of strategic engagement with parents is often highlighted.

In *improving schools,* developing and maintaining mutually productive relationships and communications with parents, and the wider local community, feature much more.

Evidence from the *Strong and Exceptional Schools* study highlights the importance of:

- working with outside organisations as a way to enrich the curriculum;
- taking a leading role in networks to extend and deepen leadership capacity and knowledge of the community; and
- working extremely hard at involving every parent and ensuring no parents are seen as "impossible to reach".

1.3.3 The project schools

Schools that took part in this project were all identified because they either:

- were not getting strong grades at key stage results (GCSE 40-50% 5+ A*-C), or
- were getting acceptable grades but not making progress (<3% increase in the percentage of students getting 5+ A*-C GCSEs over a three year period).

The schools had to have had at least three Teach First participants, and been a Teach First partner school for over a year.

In total, nine schools took part in the project. This included one school involved in the previous project. The latter did fit the above criteria towards the end of the previous study yet has achieved considerably better results since then. This school therefore offered an important opportunity to explore the factors that triggered rapid improvements in student progress and performance after a period in which this had stalled. The two tables that follow provide a snapshot of the project school characteristics and levels of student performance.

Table 1 Background characteristics of the project schools

School name	Phase	No of pupils	No of staff	Ofsted grade	FSM ('ever 6')	SEN	EAL
Island School	Sec	872	75	3	53%	6%	37%
Forest School	Sec	943	131	2	43%	4%	59%
River School	All through	1598	208	2	46%	10%	53%
Beach School	All through	841	110	2	48%	4%	93%
Harbour School	All through	1471	172	2	47%	14%	54%
Valley School	Sec	1177	164	3	49%	5%	38%
Mountain School	Sec	858	104	2	42%	17%	1%
Lake School	Pri	327	33	4	67%	9%	23%
Treetop School	Sec	1494	200	2	61%	28%	40%

The majority of the project schools were secondary, ranging in size from small (just over 850) to large (over 1500 students). They were urban schools, from London and other areas around the country, including Yorkshire, North West and the Midlands.

All project schools, as expected from schools working with Teach First, given its mission, catered for large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, so the average number of students on Free School Meals (FSM) across the cohort was high (at around 48%), with some of the project schools having as many as nearly 70% of FSM students. There was a lot more diversity between the schools with regards to Special Educational Needs (SEN) and number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). Some of the project schools had a proportion of students with special needs which was well below the national average, whilst in others the number of SEN students (28%) was three times higher than found nationally. Similarly, one of the project schools had virtually no EAL students whilst for another school over 90% of all its students were EAL. The majority of project schools had a high number of EAL students with the average across the cohort being around 47%.

For the project schools taken as a group, there tended to be higher numbers of low attaining students on entry than found nationally (e.g. most schools had at least 22% of low attaining students

comparing to the national average figure of under 16%). Similarly, all of the project schools had lower than the national average numbers of high attaining students on entry. In one instance, where a school was operating in a selective secondary school environment, the number of high attaining students on entry was as low as 11%, compared to 32% nationally.

Table 2 Patterns in student performance in the project schools

School name	2012 GCSES	2013 GCSEs	2014 GCSEs	Best 8 VA[2] (2014)	VA lower confidence limit	VA higher confidence limit	Comparison to similar schools
Island School	38%	37%	38%	991.3	979.6	1002.9	39/55
Forest School	42%	52%	50%	1018	1007.7	1028.3	25/55
River School	51%	66%	49%	1028.6	1019.4	1037.7	17/55
Beach School	49%	53%	48%	1016.9	1005.1	1028.6	10/55
Harbour School	43%	36%	50%	1002.1	989.1	1015.1	36/55
Valley School	48%	49%	40%	985	976.2	993.9	43/55
Mountain School	50%	52%	50%	961.6	949.8	973.4	47/55
Treetop school	54%	67%	63%	1006.1	995.1	1016.4	5/55

As Table 2 indicates, pupil performance in the majority of these schools is below the national average. Sometimes this happens in the context of great value added, in others the value added as well as pupil performance are low. In some cases the schools are on strong improvement trajectory, in others this is inconsistent or not visible at all.

These schools work under considerable pressure and recruitment to the project involved extensive communication and reassurance about the ways in which the project team would limit the demands on the schools and teachers and maximise the benefits to them. The two phase design through which schools were offered support for action research at the end of the project, based on the findings from the fieldwork undertaken during phase one was a way of achieving this balance for most schools.

1.3.4 School-based data collection and analysis

Data collection started with an extensive analysis of school documentation including school development/improvement plans, progress tracking policies and documentation, CPD policies and materials and performance review policies and anonymised review notes. This was used to focus site visits to the project schools. On site data collection included interviews with both the SLT and a range of other staff (including Teach First teachers and ambassadors), focus groups with staff, learning walks/lesson observations, and observations of CPD sessions. In addition to this, supplementary data was collected via an online student survey (with a total of 912 responses, 27 of which were from primary school respondents).

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[2] VA – Value Added

Following school specific analysis of all evidence, the research team prepared detailed case study reports for each of the project schools. These included summaries of key strengths to build on and recommendations for further development. The schools found the reports detailed and helpful and many had started to act dynamically in response to specific issues raised in their reports.

The evidence presented in the reports was checked with the schools for accuracy.

1.3.5 Cross-school analysis and comparison with previous project findings and wider evidence

Once school-specific analysis was complete, the research team analysed the evidence from across all the schools in order to:

- identify patterns and distinctions between project schools;
- identify similarities and differences between project schools and the wider evidence base including the approaches of the strong and Exceptional Schools from the first study; and
- test the original and emerging hypotheses.

The outcomes of this work are presented in the current report.

2. What did we learn about the practices of schools struggling to gain momentum?

2.1 Professional Learning

2.1.1 What does the research say about best practice?

The 2013 research project funded by Teach First[3] explored the practices of strong and Exceptional Schools serving vulnerable communities and found a number of practices which were common to the most Exceptional Schools and which were aimed at creating an effective learning environment. Exceptional Schools:

- invested heavily in mentoring and coaching training for staff across the school;
- made strong links between teacher and student learning in identifying CPD needs and in shaping the professional learning process;
- exhibited a clear focus on explicit, cross-school pedagogical strategies linked to student achievement;
- invested systematically in professional learning, and secured buy-in to professional learning initiatives;
- focussed on collaborative learning for teachers and for students;
- made extensive use of Advanced Skills or lead teachers, as well as internal expertise; and
- made subject knowledge a high priority.

Strong Schools did many, but not all, of the same things but with less depth and consistency.

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[3] Bell, M. & Cordingley, P. (2014) *Characteristics of high performing schools.* Coventry: Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education [CUREE]. Available at: http://www.curee.co.uk/files/publication/[site-timestamp]/Teach%20First%20Research%20Report.pdf

But Exceptional Schools were wholly *distinctive* in their commitment to a shared, school specific model of pedagogy, to professionalising and formalising support not just for CPD but also for professional learning, in developing a strong sense of personal responsibility for professional learning for colleagues at every level and in giving priority to in-depth subject knowledge. Interestingly, Strong Schools gave much more emphasis to pedagogic knowledge and skills than subject knowledge.

2.1.2 What practice did the researchers find in project schools?
2.1.2.1 Teachers as professional learners

Although project schools all saw CPD as a key improvement strategy and one or two also recognised in principle the importance of professional learning, most were some way off focussing on professional learning consistently and systematically as a strong driver for improvement. For example, no project schools had, at the time of carrying out the fieldwork, spotted the need to share responsibility with teachers for professional learning *as a way of achieving* the consistency in teacher and student learning evident in the Exceptional Schools.

Two project schools were starting to build more personalised and focussed approaches to CPDL. Of the remainder all but two are beginning to recognise that non-personalised, non-targeted CPD has a number of weaknesses, and are now considering how to address this. For example:
- Four of the project schools described focussing on *support for professional learning* as well as providing CPD to teachers as a core aim, or were explicitly working to get there in the near future
  - Of these schools two were significantly further in their progress, while another had developed the big picture idea but was still working on implementation plans
- Another school meanwhile had achieved implicit progress in this direction as a result of a single, large-scale, in-depth and externally facilitated literacy programme, but had not yet linked this with building capacity through developing professional learners as active agents in their own learning. For this school the focus remained CPD rather than CPDL, and even though its CPD capacity had been significantly improved through the literacy programme, the school was not yet transferring learning about CPDL from it.

2.1.2.2 Linking professional and student learning

Across all project schools, there was a strong focus on using student outcomes for diagnostic purposes to shape the content of the CPD offer. For example, at its strongest there was universal recognition that linking student and professional learning is key at the level of both teacher and school, albeit through diagnostic activities.

Most project schools made a link between performance review and CPD as a way of connecting staff and student learning. But how they did this, and the extent to which it was understood as a strategic lever, varied. Sometimes links were made by shaping the CPD offer on the basis of senior leaders reading across the results of performance management. In other contexts links were only evident at the level of some individuals. Two schools connect staff and student learning not just diagnostically, but also through embedding use of evidence about how pupils are responding to changes into the CPDL process. A third helps colleagues engage with evidence through the learning process within the

research activity elements of the MA programme. Two other schools were also starting to experiment with this approach tentatively at the time of our visit.

In one outlier school, evidence from observation as part of performance management seemed not to be understood as a strategic driver within performance management; here some of the leadership team seemed to depend on inferring quality from monitoring student work. In another school, there are leadership plans in place for strengthening these links, however the approach is not yet embedded as they are described variably by different colleagues.

2.1.2.3 Addressing staff needs

In general the project schools fell into two groups in addressing the needs of individual colleagues in the context of whole school needs; they either:

- had systems in place for balancing and connecting individual, departmental or phase needs and school needs; or
- saw problems with a non-personalised CPD approach which focussed on school priorities without considering how these relate to individual needs and starting points.

Of the first category, two schools in particular stood out. One seemed to have a balance which was appreciated by staff. The school links its professional development, overviews of student progress, and analysis of individual performance management targets together and also gets middle leaders involved in analysing these. Similarly, at the other school in this category CPD is personalised and targeted, with the overarching goal being to move (suitable) colleagues towards leadership positions quickly.

Other schools were making progress but had not got as far. For example, one of the project schools had improved the quality of its performance management but targets for many teachers remained generic. Another school had tried using Blue Sky CPD and performance management software to systematise approaches to balancing needs but were sceptical about its impact.

One or two of the project schools had only just begun to recognise that there was an issue here which needed addressing; not least because in one, the balancing of individual and broader needs had partly been addressed through an intensive, albeit mainly externally led, cross curriculum literacy programme. Such balances were attended to through CPD processes but were implicit.

2.1.2.4 Collaboration

Mentoring was quite a prominent approach to collaboration in the project schools, especially for Newly-Qualified Teachers (NQTs) and teachers whose practice had been judged to require improvement. Around half the project schools made use of mentoring as a component of their professional learning environment. Coaching was both less common than mentoring among the project schools, and also more variable in terms of quality, but still present in some form in several of the schools.

Examples of strong, collaborative CPD practices were observed in each of the project schools, and were deeply embedded in the professional makeup of many of them. In the strongest schools these practices included coaching trios, research lesson study and collaborative enquiry, although trios

were reported as being of varying quality. In one school, for example, a teacher described them as "wishy washy" and the leadership team was focussing on adding structure and focus to their work. In another school Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) were working through a third or fourth iteration and leaders were adding increasing structure, tools and goals at each stage.

So collaboration was extensive and support and structure for collaborative learning is slowly being added to it. But the broader research (Cordingley et al, 2015) indicates that if collaboration is not linked to teachers taking responsibility for trying new things as part of professional learning, or exploring with each other evidence about how students are responding to changes in teaching and learning approaches, it is likely that collaboration will ultimately be limited to senior leaders "collaborating" with junior ones in what is fundamentally a line management, rather than a reciprocal risk-taking, relationship. In general, it was only rarely that collaboration was linked to factors highlighted by wider evidence as being important such as supporting risk-taking or developing theory and practice side by side, even though working together to understand why things do and don't work in different teachers' contexts provides a natural and meaningful environment for building a practical theory or rationale that is important for transferring learning between contexts. The full potential of collaborative professional learning is thus still a work in progress across the project schools.

2.1.2.5 Use of evidence in professional learning

All the project schools made extensive use of student progress data diagnostically for CPD – i.e. they used progress data to identify both the starting points and goals for professional development. But for most project schools there was much less evidence from classroom exchanges and students' work integrated into the CPD activities as a means of focussing and refining strategies developed through the CPD. Those project schools which were moving towards increasing the responsibility teachers took for their own learning and independence were also starting to emphasise the collection and use of process evidence, each drawing on a different focussing project or mechanism. Examples of these focussing projects included Research Lesson Study, IRIS Connect, a new Open Door policy, faculty use of video, and coaching trios who explore evidence from lessons each week. One school even goes as far as to use evidence from CPD processes or arising from actions taken as a result, four weeks after an event, to explore connections.

Recommendation

CPDL

All of these schools saw CPD as a key driver in gaining momentum. Fewer schools recognised the importance of focussing on supporting teachers as professional learners as well as on providing high quality CPD, with expectations of teachers taking responsibility for their own learning as an explicit goal. In the main, the emphasis was on improving the quality of support from senior leadership teams and on supporting middle leaders in the same way. *Raising expectations about CPD and professional learning through well designed support, which models improving the quality and structure of both CPD and support for ongoing professional learning is likely to bring rapid benefits. Structures to support enquiry and the use of evidence about how students respond to teachers' learning seem to be absent or at an early stage of development in most of these schools and an area where Teach First may well be in a position to provide welcome and much needed support.*

2.2 School Leadership, Systems and Monitoring

2.2.1 What does the research say about best practice?

The research project exploring the practices of Strong and Exceptional Schools and the literature review carried out for this project identified a number of leadership practices and characteristics which were present in High Performing Schools or important for school progress and development. These included leaders:

- being committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for their very vulnerable students. There was a clear sense of moral purpose underpinning the work of all of the schools in that project, at times making Exceptional Schools almost ruthless in responding to any potential weaknesses in practice. Importantly, leaders in schools that were on a rapid journey to being effective learning environments focussed on 'communicating the vision', that all students could achieve highly, regardless of their background;

- focussing on strengthening the environment for improvement, for example by establishing clear and explicit guidelines on what constitutes good teaching and learning practice;

- establishing a SLT with the right skills and attitude to drive improvement and at the same time developing middle leaders;

- paying a great deal of attention to professionalising professional learning, usually with one member of the SLT taking responsibility for leading CPDL in the school. Coaches and mentors were all trained and the effectiveness of their work and of other forms of support for CPD was carefully evaluated and refined over time. In most Exceptional Schools leaders both delivered CPD, participated in learning facilitated by others, and regarded the lesson observation process as part of their own professional learning;

- ensuring that CPD centred on curriculum development, mostly relating to the introduction of new, or changed curricula; and

- developing a strong focus on systems, using good quality data and data analysis. Exceptional Schools, used data rigorously for monitoring, planning and intervention purposes, and a focus on the progress of the individual child was evident in all schools across the sample. Similarly, they had effective Performance Management systems in place and all were used both to identify areas where Professional Learning (PL) was required and to set targets in relation to student achievement for which teachers were held to account.

2.2.2 What practice did the researchers find in project schools?

2.2.2.1 Vision and values

In all schools, staff and leaders alike saw the purpose of the school as helping pupils achieve well. In most cases, this was discussed in terms of "improving life chances" – the low starting points and disadvantaged backgrounds which some pupils have to deal with were recognised. In several cases, this attitude was combined with a belief in the need to challenge students' fixed mindsets and lack of belief that they too can achieve and do well. These schools' vision was that there is a need to raise the aspirations of the learners themselves, their parents, and all staff, and to "give them a reason for learning".

Most schools had existing – in some instances recently refined – accounts of their values and vision; what their school is about, what it wants to achieve, and how it plans to get there. For example, in one school the vision includes things like "Be better than you thought you could be" and "Respect others". One or two schools had commissioned consultations or used co-construction approaches to

agree vision, values and expectations with staff, pupils, and the wider community (i.e. parents). Several schools had also made attempts to make these visible to pupils and staff through:

- websites and other publicity/promotional materials;
- the physical school environment and objects such as student books made for the school and visually reflecting its values;
- staff performance management records/pro formas; and
- written or oral communications with staff, such as a termly letter to staff from the head teacher, departmental meetings etc.

A small number of project schools described themselves in their vision as developing 'whole people', with the clear implication being that they see their responsibility as going beyond simply addressing attainment and progression. Where this was the case, the values and vision were also modelled and enacted through extra-curricular options/activities and cross-school approaches such as giving priority to stretch and challenge or to embedding Expansive Education's approach to developing 'learning how to learn' skills, 'Building Learning Power (BLP)', or the SSAT's Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP).

For some schools, while the big picture vision was shared and understood, the mechanics of what staff should/can do to contribute to it, or the interfaces between the vision and the relative importance ascribed to different priorities, remain unclear to some or all individual colleagues. By contrast, there were some (rare) instances among the most sophisticated schools in the project where the overall vision was translated into values and specific expectations in terms of attitudes and behaviours for both pupils and staff, and these were made transparent through tools and modelling of the expected behaviours.

Another point worth noting is that whilst there was no evidence suggesting that any of the project schools had low expectations of students, there was evidence that leaders and staff found it hard to keep this in focus. The sheer range and complexity of the overall task of juggling:

- a focus on attainment in relation to a particular subject area, progress within a key stage, value added, and the performance of disadvantaged pupils compared to the rest of the cohort;
- recognition of the specific obstacles to student attainment that had to be overcome;
- the complexity of creating a coherent pathway from the status quo to an ambitious vision for the future; and
- the daily realities of managing complex organisations that are characterised by dynamic human exchanges.

These factors combined to make it hard for many of the project schools to keep a relentless focus on continuing improvement. In particular the range and dynamic connections between these different challenges threatened senior and middle school leaders' day to day focus on removing each and every barrier to pupil learning so as to ensure pupils had access to consistently effective learning experiences. This was visible, for example, in a tendency among most project school leaders, to focus at length on what had been done and achieved without a matching clarity about, or attention to, identifying and moving onto the 'next thing' that needs urgent development. Where project schools had achieved pockets of particularly impressive practice, this risk was even greater.

2.2.2.2 Expectations of staff

Teachers across the project schools were held accountable for pupil progress through performance management. In addition, expectations of teaching and learning practice were sometimes made explicit through policies and other tools. Several schools defined a small number of approaches as "non-negotiables". In one of these schools, members of the SLT have recently been involved in modelling lessons to illustrate expectations around practice. This happened frequently across the school until the number of teachers graded "good" or "outstanding" increased significantly.

More commonly, however, teachers in the project schools were aware of the drive to improve teaching and learning in their school, but not necessarily what precisely was meant beyond the requirement that lessons be good or outstanding. In some schools the mechanisms through which expectations of staff were articulated were unclear.

2.2.2.3 Leadership skills and development

The degree of stability of the SLTs in the project schools differed. There were instances of well established SLTs and of SLT reconfiguration during the life of the project. In several cases, head teachers or other core members of the SLT were new to post/school (in post two years or less) at the time of data collection and analysis. In these instances, their arrival was associated with new systems, priorities and approaches and was often linked with rapid, recent school improvement.

In around half of the project schools the rate of staff turnover was high, which whilst bringing with it issues and challenges, also released a plentiful supply of leadership posts and responsibilities at different levels. Yet, the project schools' approaches to promotion of staff to leadership positions differed considerably.

Some were adamant about the importance of experience. Consequently, these schools were unlikely to promote colleagues new to teaching or during the first few years of their career; this included Teach First Ambassadors. There were also schools that were explicit about exemplary teaching practice being a prerequisite for colleagues to be considered for promotion. These schools expected all their leaders to be outstanding or at least solid 'good' teachers. Other schools took a different view and identified non-teaching related skills and attitudes (e.g. being proactive, with a 'can do' attitude; ability to build relationships with colleagues; passion for their subject) and their combination as main criteria for promotion. In the latter group of schools there were multiple instances of promoting colleagues during their NQT years as well as those in the second and third years of their career.

A strong sense of moral purpose and a growth mindset were seen as essential requirements for a leader in most of the schools. This makes Teach First teachers, supported in developing these characteristics from the outset, well positioned for leadership in such schools.

In terms of mechanisms for supporting their new and existing middle leaders, all schools participated in formal accredited programmes[4] which were paired with in-school support. The latter was responsive and ad hoc in many schools (addressing the issues as they arose and providing relevant

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[4] Examples included: National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership (MPQML), Teaching leaders, Masters Programmes, Leadership pathways, Leading from the Middle, Middle Leader Development Programme(MLDP), National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)

support). In just under half of the schools internal support for middle leaders was more structured (e.g. through regular mentoring) and focussed on:

- (line-)managing colleagues (observations, holding difficult conversations, challenging staff) and developing relationships with colleagues;
- working with parents; and
- curriculum development.

2.2.2.4 Curriculum, its ability to meet student needs, and its alignment with CPDL

With one exception, none of the project schools explicitly linked their CPDL and curriculum development work. In contrast with the practice of Exceptional Schools, curriculum development was generally seen as the responsibility of each department and "getting the job done", rather than a key component of a strategic approach to staff learning. So the extent to which the curriculum contributed to staff learning and particularly subject knowledge and expertise, was rather limited.

2.2.2.5 Leadership of and engagement in CPD

Senior leaders of the project schools were personally involved in CPDL in a variety of different ways, including: leading CPDL sessions with staff; supporting colleagues as mentors and specialist coaches, and participating in development activities alongside other staff. In one school, teams that had leaders as part of their CPDL groups were described by staff during interviews as more dynamic and effective when role modelling effective use of CPDL opportunities. In several project schools, leaders showed extensive understanding of the evidence about effective CPDL, including, crucially, the importance of modelling professional learning and practice and making these visible. This "practicing what we [they] preach" was done by:

- leaders applying the same criteria to their own teaching practice and then modelling it for colleagues. There are two schools which explicitly require all leaders to be outstanding teachers; and
- leaders modelling participation in professional learning, by engaging in activities alongside other staff, pioneering new approaches (such as video recording own practice to be used in professional learning in Valley), or running *and writing up* action research projects (such as at Lake School).

In Exceptional Schools and, to a lesser extent, in Strong Schools, leaders took pains to model professional learning quite explicitly. But in project schools, leaders' own learning and development was often obscure to staff. At its most extensive, in a few cases, staff were only able in interviews to say that, for example, SLT members took part in formal programmes, such as Ofsted inspector training, or in visiting other schools.

2.2.2.6 Systems and Monitoring

2.2.2.6.1 Student progress and performance

In the majority of the project schools there were established systems for capturing and analysing pupil progress and performance data. In many cases this was a result of recent purposeful development and improvement: several schools had identified (or were advised about) issues with the overall monitoring or the quality of teacher assessments and student target setting for example. Measures put in place to address the latter included offering internal training sessions for all staff

and external CPD for key staff, drawing on specialist support (e.g. exam boards, partner/local outstanding schools) and consultancy (e.g. from Local Authority staff) and creating opportunities and requirements around peer and external moderation. In order to support staff and leaders at different levels in entry, analysis and use of data, most schools ran one-off or periodical training sessions focussing on, e.g. specialist assessment and monitoring software (e.g. 4 Matrix or Sisra).

In a small number of schools monitoring systems still needed further development; for example they were in place for some key stages/year groups but not yet the entire school, or they were being put in place at the time of evidence collection for this project. In most instances there were multiple, often parallel, layers of progress and performance monitoring. For example, in most schools, SLT had a responsibility for high level student progress monitoring which they carried out on a six-weekly (every half term) basis. Typically this was to check progress against expectations at cohort level. In the majority of the schools there were also at least termly meetings between SLT/middle leaders and individual teachers, where progress of pupils at individual, subgroup and class level was discussed. This was commonly linked to and/or part of teachers' performance management.

In around half of the schools, as well as whole school and individual levels, there were also departmental accountability systems in place, i.e. departments had a responsibility to report to SLT how students were progressing in their curriculum areas. To this end, some of them had departmental meetings to explore pupil progress and performance data with all staff from the department, others used individual meetings with teachers. As well as using teacher assessment data for monitoring purposes, the project schools collected and analysed other evidence including students' book scrutiny, capturing student feedback and perspectives about teaching and learning (via surveys and focus groups, student enquiries), attendance data, and behaviour/effort grades.

Regular book scrutiny was common in virtually all schools and was used as a way of triangulating evidence about both pupil progress and teacher performance. Typically it was done by SLT, at least termly, often as frequent as fortnightly or monthly. Some book trawls were 'thematic' or had a specific focus, e.g. quality of and response to feedback. In a very small number of schools there were instances of in-depth analysis of the progress or lack of it of individual/small groups of students: their books for all subjects were scrutinised to identify barriers to learning and strategies that could be used to support their progress.

2.2.2.6.2 Performance management

In the majority of the schools, teacher performance was directly linked to student progress (and in some cases performance). At least one of teachers' performance management targets was typically to do with this. There were schools where teachers also had performance management targets aimed at improving the general quality of their practice rather than in specific defined areas. This was particularly true for those whose practice was below 'good'. Commonly, intensive and often individualised and multi-dimensional support systems were put in place for colleagues where this was the case. These included observations of good and outstanding practice being modelled, own practice being observed and feedback provided, coaching, support with planning, and team teaching.

Other targets for development within performance management were typically around either whole school priorities, colleagues' additional responsibilities or own development choices. Several schools

highlighted that they were very serious about targets and 'strict' about ensuring all colleagues' targets were achieved and, if not, investigating why this was the case.

Virtually all project schools were explicit about using a range of evidence to make judgements about teacher performance (typically observations, book trawls and student progress data). A small number of the schools made recent adaptations to their appraisal/performance management process to ensure continuity throughout the year, making it less stressful for staff (despite being directly linked to their pay and promotion opportunities) and better capable of picking up and addressing any issues in a timely manner. Approaches varied but, in general, in line with changes in guidance from Ofsted emerging during the research period, schools were integrating evidence from pupils' work and from progress tracking with evidence from observations evidence within performance review discussions.

2.3 Teaching and Learning

2.3.1 What does the research say about best practice?

The research project on High Performing Schools found a number of teaching and learning processes which were common to the most Exceptional Schools. In Strong Schools, teachers felt they could benefit from more support in behaviour management, and there was evidence of less sharing of pedagogy and resources compared with Exceptional Schools. In Exceptional Schools, behaviour issues were addressed very effectively by way of whole-school, cross-curricular strategies and models of pedagogy complemented by active steps to identify, address and overcome learning barriers and increase students' ability to make effective use of their experiences in school. These varied from school to school but all involved consistent use of group and peer learning. Teachers arriving in the schools were given extensive support in becoming acquainted with their school's considered and focussed, often research-based, approaches and using them effectively. In order to ensure the models helped colleagues to fully realise their aspirations for all students, the schools were also systematic in providing the appropriate resources and illustrating the strategies. Most went as far as publishing a whole-school model of pedagogy which all staff were required to incorporate into their practice. Their use was also actively monitored.

2.3.2 What practice did the researchers find in project schools?

2.3.2.1 Effective teaching and learning approaches

Exceptional Schools in the earlier research had developed prescribed, whole-school, evidence-based pedagogical models strongly linked to and underpinned by their CPD programmes and in- depth investment in extending and deepening subject knowledge. None of the secondary project schools were found to adopt prescribed models of teaching and learning, although individual schools cite a number of common principles/strategies – for example, an explicit emphasis on Assessment for Learning was common across all schools. One of the project schools focussed on a "five to drive" approach, with shared language around feedback and questioning, climate for learning, independence, challenge and progress. Some schools were concerned to promote teacher creativity, which they saw as being connected to effective pedagogy and so actively avoided developing a single or unifying model.

There was also some evidence that high staff turnover had proved an impediment to embedding high quality, shared models of high quality teaching and learning across some of the project schools.

Fostering a culture of independent learning amongst students has also consistently proved to be a challenge for those project schools which aspired to embed this across the curriculum. In some cases teachers reported this as a function of the student learning culture: students expected to be told exactly what they had to do. In others, the time taken from curriculum delivery for independent learning was thought to be a problem. In schools where behaviour for learning was not well established, some teachers were risk averse, finding it easier to maintain control from the front.

Low literacy skills and low aspirations were identified by most schools as common barriers to learning. This is understandable; during the year in which fieldwork took place the much more extensive writing demands made in every subject by the new GCSEs had become apparent as had the impact of the E-BACC on increasing the pressure on students to take GCSE rather than vocational courses. Unsurprisingly therefore, during the course of the research the main focus for development of the quality of teaching and learning across all the schools was significantly strengthening literacy. One school made extensive use of an external literacy programme to help teachers of all subjects enhance and reinforce language and literacy. Many staff had been trained by an external provider and some had become qualified trainers themselves. Achievement in reading and writing had risen significantly and this was seen by the school as a result of the CPD intervention. But most other schools found literacy, especially supporting literacy in all subjects, to be a challenging focus. One, for example, had literacy as a major priority but cross curricular literacy strategies are still inconsistent. There is an English writing focus and accelerated reading programme, plus Lexia (a commercial reading programme) for Year 9 but there is not a clear picture of specific literacy issues for different groups of students. At primary level, one school tackles literacy aspirations by, for example, giving pupils confidence through developing their social skills and modelling talk in group work. At the same time, in this school, there is a relentless focus on literacy where the impact of interventions (e.g. grammar hammer and peer writing critique) are routinely assessed for impact on student learning.

2.3.2.2 Behaviour management

There is evidence from broader research that indicates a strong link between the quality of teaching and learning and the nature of classroom behaviour. Disruptive classroom behaviour limits teachers' confidence in taking risks, so there are strong incentives for schools to develop effective responses to disrupted classrooms. Looking across the project schools, the researchers found that behaviour policies were not always consistently implemented, and that students generally seemed to respond positively to rewards but were not as motivated by sanctions. Schools operating "house systems" involving rewards such as house points seemed to experience positive results, with noticeable and sustained impact on behaviour. A number of schools had recently implemented reward systems, whereby students accumulated points for positive behaviour, culminating in the award of badges or vouchers for local restaurants. Student perceptions were that low level disruptive behaviour in lessons was widespread. In one school, where GCSE results were generally poor, there was a marked disparity between students' perceptions of disruptive behaviour and the quality of relationships (also observed by researchers), and those of school staff. For example, in one school students understood why some very rigid behaviour systems had been introduced but they believed these were no longer necessary, becoming counterproductive and were, in any case being used inconsistently.

2.3.2.3 Barriers to learning

The project schools naturally had to deal with a spread of barriers to learning that are atypical for English schools. However, the exact nature of the demographics each school was engaging with varied substantially. Most project schools had high proportions of EAL students and/or low prior literacy attainment, but the numbers of SEND students, for example, varied across the sample. Two of the schools had identified groups of boys as underachieving. One, for example, now use subject on a page (SOAP) and gender on a page (GOAP) to help spot achievement gaps. All of the schools used data effectively to identify vulnerable groups and have employed a variety of intervention strategies. Some schools had Learning Support and Inclusion faculties with specialist staff. Another had recruited Specific Achievement and Progression teachers for Years 7/8 and 9/10 who mentor at risk individuals or groups of students.

Recommendations

Maintaining focus and drive

Many schools felt compelled to continue to focus on a seam of emerging excellence and assume that such successes will trickle through to other areas of school development. But there is a risk in this preoccupation with progress in depth on a narrow front, of distraction from the systematic and relentless job of identifying and removing all barriers to learning for specific sub groups of students. *Teach First could look for ways of helping schools recognise the value of structured external/peer reviews which would identify early signs of complacency and lack of internal challenge. Developing Teach First ambassadors' skills to contribute to peer reviews at a school leadership level (a model of leadership learning and school improvement that is rapidly spreading across the country) might be another way of acting on this finding.*

Coherence

Many of the project schools could benefit from help in moving beyond a focus on doing the right things to a focus on developing an understanding of the principles underpinning them side by side with practising them and using this practical theory to structure priorities at every level*. This could be another area where approaches such as structured, external and/ or peer review could provide a useful trigger. Involving Teach First teachers and ambassadors in identifying drivers and principles for support for school improvement and using the resulting evidence to shape TF supported development work could help to focus attention on building consistency in order to achieve coherence. This could develop school improvement and leadership capacity for schools serving vulnerable communities more generally.*

The role of monitoring in achieving consistency and coherence

In some of the project schools there have been significant overhauls of monitoring and tracking systems during the time in which the project took place. Sometimes this was because previous systems were insufficient, inconsistently implemented or insufficiently followed through. But more frequently it was because monitoring had previously operated either as an end in itself, thus risking a compliance mentality, rather than as a means of focussing CPD, intervention and/or teaching efforts to support improvements in student learning. *Support for school leaders in making monitoring meaningful, consistent and formative and focussed in particular.*

Recommendations

Subject knowledge The priority for most schools was improving the quality of lessons by focussing on and promoting high impact strategies such as use of feedback. The importance of helping teachers contextualise strategies for different subjects and a strategic approach to developing teachers' subject knowledge is rarely a priority for leadership teams although it is often keenly felt by teachers who feel left to fend on their own, especially if departmental/ subject leadership is weak. The situation is acute in schools where many teachers have to teach in subjects that are not their own, especially those with falling rolls. Equally, lack of a strategic focus on developing teachers' subject knowledge (especially in schools where they are not challenged to extend their expertise due to the absence of a sixth form) appeared to hold back schools with otherwise strong systems. In the instances where these schools wished to change the situation, they did not know how to support subject knowledge development or where to access expertise from and in what form, despite being very efficient and sophisticated professional learning environments in other respects. *Providing access to specialists or information about where specialist support can be accessed to school leaders and middle leaders is an urgent priority, especially for Teach First ambassadors and trainee teachers who are being asked to teach in other subjects. This might also be linked with developing skills in designing schemes of learning; an area at an early stage of development in many of these schools.*

Literacy Most schools, even those who had made literacy a priority, had underestimated the extent to which enabling all students to access the curriculum and communicate their understanding effectively and formally through extended writing can only be achieved through whole school efforts. *Specifically, these schools need help in recognising the size and nature of the challenge, developing or making use of literacy progress monitoring systems (e.g. hardly any schools had an evidence-informed overview of their students' needs and progress in specific reading and writing skills) and in undertaking the work of developing all teachers' understanding of and skills in diagnosing and supporting students as they grapple with the big building blocks of literacy in different subject contexts. One might be helpful in supporting this*.

Recommendations

Stretch and *challenge* *Ensuring that all students achieve all they can is another area where support from Teach First might be needed and welcome.* All project schools had larger than the national average numbers of lower ability students and some had very low proportions of high ability students*. Teachers working in such environments, need help in offering sufficiently challenging work to all their students*.

Behaviour Attention to student behaviour was visible in all project schools. Some were able to address significant challenges linked with poor behaviour but continued to monitor it very closely. For others this remained a priority in need of urgent action as it acted as a barrier to learning and improvement. All project schools had realised, some quite recently, the importance of clear behaviour guidance and expectations, consistently reinforced by all staff. Equally, most schools noticed the importance of *positive* behaviour strategies (typically this meant rewards as well as sanctions based policies) and having a strategic, evidence-based, overview of student behaviour. Yet, only a few of the project schools have managed to move from focusing on consistently applied rewards and sanctions, to an emphasis on behaviour for learning underpinned by high aspirations for students, positive relationships with them and explicit links being made between behaviour in lessons and capacity to learn. Some identified a need for such a transition but were struggling to find a way to do it*. This would be an important focus for support for CPDL and school improvement and the case studies from this project and from the first one might be helpful in supporting this*.

2.4 Relationships with parents and the community

2.4.1 What does the research say about best practice?

The research project on High Performing Schools found that in Exceptional Schools, leaders were likely to work extensively with outside organisations forming deep partnerships as a way to enrich the curriculum of their school. There is also broader evidence that lack of strategic engagement with parents can be a feature of some schools where improvements were not evident. Developing and maintaining mutually productive relationships and communications with parents and the wider local community, often extending to national and international contacts, featured widely in the literature on improving schools.

2.4.2 What practice did the researchers find in project schools?

All the project schools clearly recognised the value of and need for establishing a positive and close relationship with parents of their students, and in some (though not necessarily all) cases this extended further to include the broader community they serve. However, there were considerable differences between project schools in terms of how successful their efforts had been in achieving this. One third of the project schools had managed to establish a close rapport and regular contact with parents of their students, while the other two thirds were still struggling to get parents on board.

Three schools appeared to have established excellent relationships with parents; surveys revealed that the majority of parents had a very positive view of their children's school at all three. Another two appeared to have strong connections with local schools and other organisations in the broader local community.

There was one school which was in something of a transition state. A clear majority of *students* surveyed felt that their school made sure that parents were involved in their learning, and the head teacher of the school also had a strong background in school-to-school networking, suggesting a strong infrastructure and further potential for development. However, from the school's perspective there is still a need for much greater engagement of *parents* of secondary students and for getting them to attend events. So they are still prioritising finding ways to improve links between the academy's primary and secondary phases, other schools in the area, and attendance at school events.

The rest of the schools were still struggling to realise their ambitions to get parents to be involved on a regular basis in their children's education, and many are also not networking with other organisations in ways that consistently satisfy all colleagues (though there are exceptions to this, such as one school which has good links with local community police, behaviour support and social services). It is worth noting that none of the schools were lacking in motivation where establishing closer links with parents was concerned, but they had yet to find strategies that worked consistently.

Recommendation

Parental engagement

Many project schools were making considerable efforts to engage parents and the community at a strategic (rather than individual teacher) level, e.g. to ensure behaviour expectations of students were consistent, to raise aspirations, or as part of their 'developing the whole person' and Prevent work. Yet, few were content with the extent to which their efforts were successful and many of them continued to seek new and innovative approaches. Some schools that recognised parental engagement and support as a priority looked for members of staff who could lead this area of their work. This is an area around which Teach First could provide information and support to its schools and offer development opportunities for its teachers and ambassadors.

3. Capacity to improve
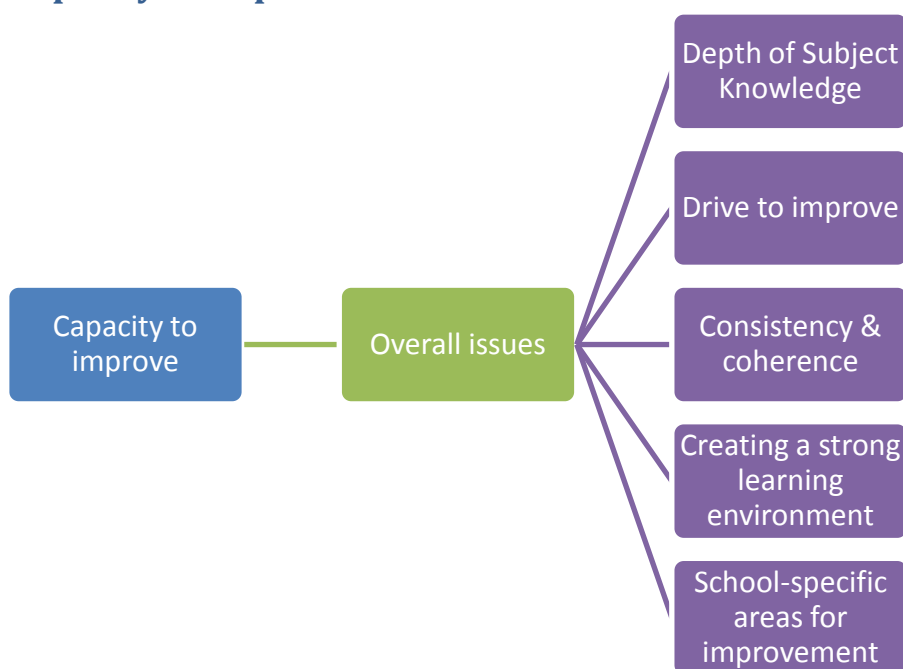
Each of the schools was able to show evidence of progress within the year during which the research took place. The appendix describing the Action Research phase provides some concrete illustrations of this. We wanted to test whether the shared characteristics of Exceptional Schools and the approaches highlighted as effective in the wider evidence might have predictive potential. So we have also analysed the approaches of the schools during phase one and two in relation to the extent to which this evidence suggests the schools have reached or are approaching the point where there is an improvement trajectory that is sustainable. We were trying to understand what this evidence might mean in relation to the CPDL support that schools needing to gain momentum might find helpful from Teach First.

 In this context three clusters emerge.

The first, group of schools, our two *gathering momentum* schools, seem to have recently achieved a sustainable trajectory of improvement.

The second cluster, our *approaching momentum* group, seemed to be on the point of achieving a sustainable trajectory of improvement:

- One is approaching this from a relatively strong starting point, and current plans to restructure and significantly refine its approach to CPDL, if successful are likely to be very helpful. There may be a need to focus too on providing greater coherence in developing learning skills and strategies for students.
- Another is doing many of the things that the Exceptional Schools do, and doing them quite well. Interestingly and unusually for many project schools it is also managing to do this with a degree of consistency across the school. But, it needs to invest more significantly and in more depth in both CPDL and performance management to move this activity forward from

uncomplaining acceptance to full ownership and the depth of understanding that creates a virtuous cycle of sustainable improvement.

- A third has many of the core ingredients in place, sharing many aspects of practice with the stronger schools, but many of these, especially those regarding the monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning and linking this with performance management are very new and need time to have an impact.

The final cluster, our *seeking momentum* group, consists of three schools which have already identified many of the big building blocks they need to put in place and made progress in doing so, but still face obstacles to achieving a sustainable improvement trajectory of the kind evident in the Exceptional Schools and, to a lesser degree, the progress evident in the other schools in this study:

- One has many big leadership building blocks in place but is starting from a challenging base in relation to student achievement and needs a significant reorientation of its approach to behaviour. Pupils are often frustrated by, and ready to progress beyond, strategies that were necessary to establish an orderly environment earlier on in the school's development. Also, the views of behaviour challenges and how to respond to them held by staff and students stand a long way apart. Developing trust between staff and students and a sense that school improvement is a shared enterprise and responsibility is a vital next step if the leadership strategies and actions are to fulfil their potential (which is considerable). A focus on behaviour for learning rather than simply behaviour in its own right and moving beyond simple rewards and sanctions is essential.
- Another has made considerable progress in building teacher capacity and student progress, thanks significantly to the focus and content of the in-depth, cross-curricular literacy programme. However, attempts to capitalise on this success are somewhat piecemeal, and the significance of different elements of success from the CPD programme has not yet been analysed or understood in ways that enable leadership of CPDL and teaching and learning to work together to create a coherent and mutually-reinforcing sense of direction. So strategies for further improvement identified by the research also appeared to lack synergy or have the capacity to align efforts consistently to enable the school to capitalise on the considerable successes deriving from progress in literacy.
- A third has considerable teacher buy-in and strength at middle leadership level, but its SLT is struggling with being extremely broad and lacking in a structure for establishing strong priorities to shape the energy and commitment demonstrated at the middle leadership and classroom teacher levels.

3.1 Overall issues in relation to capacity to improve

3.1.1 Depth of Subject Knowledge

In phase one, in most schools, as has been remarked, the lack of emphasis on depth of subject knowledge as an improvement driver was marked and stood in stark contrast to the practice in Exceptional Schools. As noted above this is a crucial step in developing capacity to improve for a significant number of project schools. One gathering momentum school, has already made significant plans to address this and the other used phase two action research to reflect upon and plan how to address this once some important baseline quality of teaching and behaviour issues had been resolved.

3.1.2 Drive to improve

Another pattern that was noticeable in all but the two gathering momentum schools, was that each school had achieved significant improvement and success in one or two areas, prior to this research. These achievements and successes were often at a very advanced level; the schools were legitimately cited as centres of excellence in these respects. But most of these schools seemed to have become distracted by this success or to assume that the benefits and effects would gradually permeate other aspects of school life. Exceptional Schools, by contrast, rarely exhibited specific leading edge practices. It was rather the case that all practices were consistently a) good, b) linked with each other and c) organised through the lens of what would enhance students' learning experiences. For example Exceptional Schools, in their different ways, all had developed a single model of the teaching and learning approaches most likely to build their students' confidence and control over their own learning. The use of this model, which was regularly monitored, represented a narrowing of teacher autonomy but one which teachers could see benefitted their students. The restricted menu of learning activities and strategies, and consistent and cumulative reinforcement of them, was seen as helping to build students' own control over their learning and their ability to make connections between subjects. The emphasis in these schools on the importance of in-depth subject knowledge also enabled these teachers to use their professional creativity and judgement in a different domain: in contextualising the curriculum so that it is meaningful to students whose experience beyond school does not connect easily with the formal and examined curriculum content.

3.1.3 Consistency & coherence

The schools in this project set out to achieve consistent practice in some contexts although this was frequently unsuccessful and/ or seemed to take the form of bureaucratic compliance in others. Some of these project schools were also keen to celebrate differences, for example, between departments. But the High Performing Schools placed a strong emphasis on taking explicit steps and establishing systems for ensuring consistency of practice throughout the school. The clarity of purpose surrounding the use of behaviour data tracking, not to manage rewards and sanctions, but to inform teacher and school improvement in multiple ways across the school, was striking; It exemplified well the how connections between clarity of purpose enabled and systems enriched consistency of practice. The connections between systems and learning were also strengthened in Exceptional Schools by the existence of a school wide model of pedagogy. This enabled students to build their own control over learning strategies that they might not experience beyond school, by working with them repeatedly in different subjects. Although we reported this as a focus on consistency in the Exceptional Schools project we think the second project suggests that what the Exceptional School were actually demonstrating was coherence, i.e. an approach to consistency that was linked to a relentless focus on understanding and removing barriers to learning and to securing cumulative learning experiences. This is significant for the Gaining and Sustaining Momentum project because almost all of the project schools had as a key improvement goal, achieving consistently good or outstanding quality of teaching and learning.

3.1.4 Creating a strong learning environment
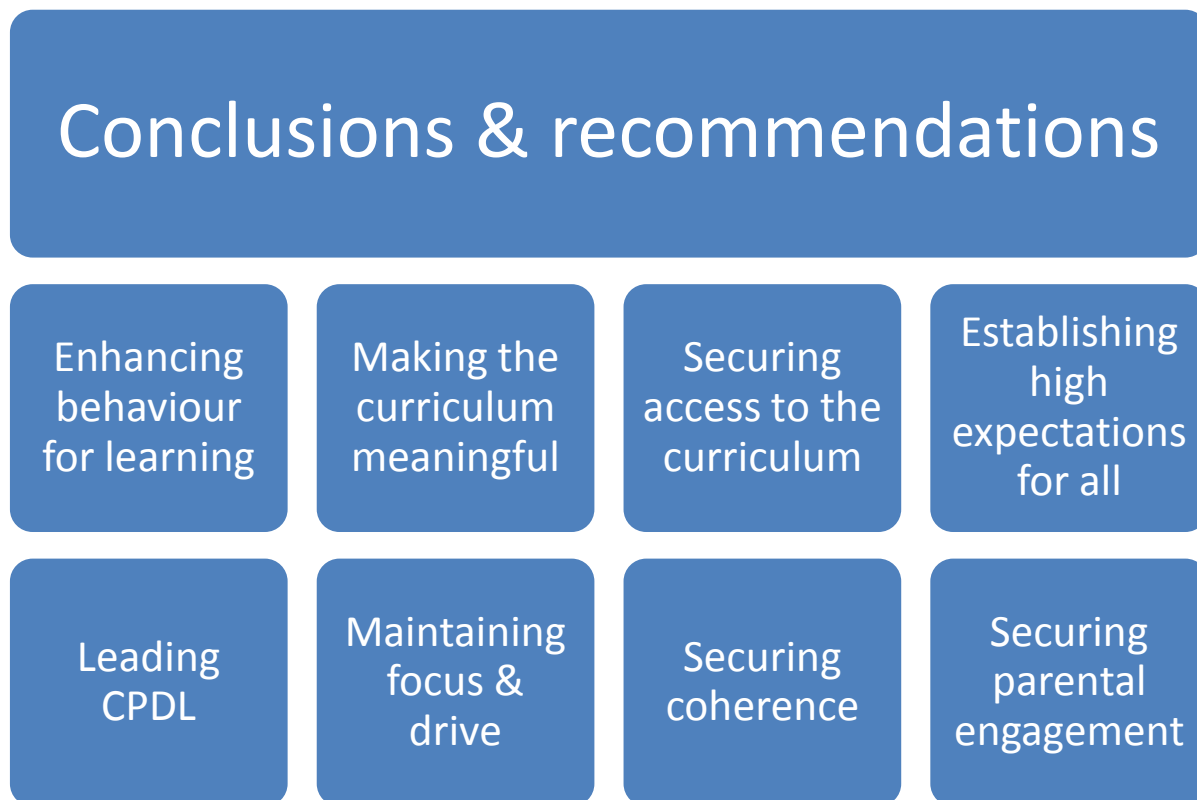
In general leadership of CPDL, CPDL activities and professional learning were at their strongest where the links between the curriculum, teaching and learning and pedagogy were all attended to and aligned very explicitly; CPDL supported effective and cumulative approaches to enabling students to access the curriculum. The gathering momentum schools made stronger links between

the curriculum and the learning environment for both students and for staff. In Exceptional Schools, their explicit models of teaching and learning and the focus on in-depth subject expertise in order to secure access to the curriculum were key to creating this synergy. A significant number of the approaching and seeking momentum schools were still working to establish a powerful baseline of high quality teaching and purposeful behaviour for learning and so were battling on too many fronts to manage to establish and align these complex elements across faculties or phases. But it is noticeable that in the gathering momentum schools where student progress seems to be accelerating significantly there is a strong approach to alignment even if, in at least one case, this is embedded within a coherent, cross school approach to literacy rather than an explicit approach to increasing alignment more generally.

3.1.5 School-specific areas for improvement

Finally, several of the project schools have made good progress on beginning to address some of the areas that were identified by the researchers as requiring attention and development. Details are included in Appendix 2.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions & recommendations

Enhancing behaviour for learning	Making the curriculum meaningful	Securing access to the curriculum	Establishing high expectations for all
Leading CPDL	Maintaining focus & drive	Securing coherence	Securing parental engagement

This study illustrates vividly the fact that whilst practice in Exceptional Schools tends to converge, schools where progress lacks momentum differ markedly in their practices and the obstacles they encounter. What this study has also highlighted is that what we noted as consistency in Exceptional Schools is actually coherence. The clarity and strength of purpose created by, for example, the unified models of teaching and learning and investment in CPDL provide an important underpinning logic to systems and enable staff to experience these as approaches to enhancing students' learning experience and capacity.

But the focus in this report is mainly upon the particular challenges facing these schools and the steps Teach First might take to address them. Several aspects emerged as important yet challenging for schools wishing to (re)gain momentum in their development and student progress, which Teach First should consider when offering CPD, support and development opportunities to its participants and ambassadors and its work with partner schools.

The focus of the Gaining and Sustaining Momentum project has been, as it was with the High Performing Schools project, on identifying shared and distinctive characteristics between small groups of schools serving very vulnerable communities. It is a small qualitative study that uses evidence from large scale and experimental studies to create a framework for data collection and analysis, and that captured a wide range of different types of qualitative data from a broad range of sources to triangulate evidence and the perspectives of different stakeholders. But it is not a generalisable study. Nonetheless, and with these limitations in mind, a number of recommendations are offered to inform the thinking of schools seeking to gain or re-gain momentum and of those who support them.

- **Diagnostics** – The 3D diagnostic work that led to creating the research reports for individual schools was for most of these schools a revealing intervention and a form of support in its own right. Some schools are keen to repeat it to record progress. Accessing an independent, evidence rich and fine grained, bird's eye view of where the school sits on so many practical fronts was key to prioritising more effectively. Schools may wish to consider how to access and integrate evidence-rich diagnostic work into the support they access.

- **Maintaining focus and drive** – Many schools felt compelled to focus on a seam of emerging excellence, but this was often a distraction that encouraged a focus on practice and interventions divorced to some degree from the systematic and relentless job of identifying and removing all barriers to learning for vulnerable learners. Focus schools should review, with evidence based support, the balances they strike between building on stronger practices and prioritizing, identifying and removing barriers to learning.

- **Coherence** – Many of the project schools would benefit from focusing on developing an understanding of the principles underpinning good practice as well as on helping colleagues carry them out. Focus schools and those who support them should ensure that support for continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) helps teachers identify drivers and principles; to develop clarity about the underpinning rationale behind strategies for identifying and removing barriers to learning enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

- **The role of monitoring in achieving consistency and coherence** – The way monitoring was used in the project schools was interrogated and revised on a regular basis, usually because the schools were still in the process of learning how to use it as a means of identifying needs to be addressed through, for example, CPDL. For a number of project schools systems and practices (with an eye to summative judgments likely to be made by others) rather than the purpose of the monitoring, was the priority. Focus schools and those who support them are almost certainly already attending closely to building monitoring systems and practices. This evidence suggest it is important to focus on making monitoring meaningful, consistent and formative, and focused especially on shaping CPDL linked with teaching and learning, and interventions.

- **CPDL** – All of the project schools saw CPD as a key driver in gaining momentum, but fewer recognised the importance of CPDL; of supporting teachers as professional learners who assess their own practice and try to improve it on a routine basis. Focus schools and those who support them should consider ways of raising expectations about CPD and professional learning through well-designed support, and in particular by p adopting evidence based and evidence-rich processes and structures to support CPDL. The national standards for CPDL heralded in the White Paper provide guidance.

- **Behaviour** – All project schools paid close attention to student behaviour, but they did so in very diverse ways. Most noticed the importance of behaviour strategies around positive as well as negative behaviour, but only a few had managed to move on from focussing on rewards and sanctions to an emphasis on behaviour for learning underpinned by high expectations for students. Noticing when and attending to how to move from a focus on behavior toward a partnership with students focused on behaviour for learning would be an important issue for focus schools and those who support them to focus on.

- **Subject knowledge** – Most of the project schools prioritised improving the quality of lessons by focussing on high impact pedagogic strategies, with comparatively limited emphasis on contextualising these strategies in different subjects or developing specialist expertise in

subjects. Often this was because the schools did not have a clear idea of how to develop subject knowledge in detail. Focus schools and those who support them need a strategy for developing their knowledge about where and how specialist support can be accessed and in some cases for building specialist capacity where this is no longer available from, for example, Universities or Local Authorities.

- **Literacy** – Several project schools had literacy as a focus, but underestimated the extent to which whole-school efforts targeting literacy could help students access the curriculum and demonstrate their understanding. Specifically, these schools needed help in recognizing the size and nature of the challenge, developing progress monitoring systems for literacy progress in all subjects, and developing all teachers' understanding of and skills in diagnosing gaps in students' literacy. Focus schools and those who support them should review whether sufficient priority is given to supporting the identification of literacy barriers to genuine access to the curriculum in every subject and by every teacher.

- **Stretch and challenge** – All project schools had numbers of lower ability students above the national average, and some had low proportions of high ability students as well. Focus schools with student populations with this profile and those who support them should collect evidence about how far all teachers offer every pupil sufficiently challenging – and this also links to the subject knowledge recommendations outlined above

- **Parental engagement** – Many project schools were making considerable efforts to engage parents and the community with the school as a whole (as opposed to a simple teacher-parent relationship). However, few were content that they had done all they could, and all were continuing to seek new and innovative approaches to building ties with parents and the local community. This is another area where focus schools and those who support them may wish to focus attention.

Appendix 1- Literature review

Gaining and Sustaining Momentum Project: Key Findings from cornerstone studies

The literature about schools where progress lacks momentum or seems to be stationary is not extensive. No doubt the practical and ethical challenges involved in gaining access to such schools to carry out research are an important consideration. Nonetheless we identified five cornerstone studies, which, together with CUREE's 2014 report on Strong and Exceptional Schools. We have used these studies as a basis for creating an evidence-based framework for this project. These comprise of:

- The RSA report *"(Un)Satisfactory? Enhancing Life Chances by Improving "Satisfactory" Schools"* (Francis, 2011);
- Ofsted's *"Getting to Good"* report (Ofsted, 2012);
- CfBT's "*To the next level: good schools becoming outstanding"* report (Dougill et al, 2011);
- The *Teacher Turnover, Wastage and Movements Between Schools* report (Smithers & Robinson, 2004); and
- a report on *Teacher Turnover in High Poverty Schools* from Harvard University (Simon & Johnson, 2013).

These studies were selected for their capacity to provide helpful context. It should be pointed out that those published by RSA and CfBT only looked at secondary schools, while Ofsted and Smithers & Robinson looked across phases but didn't mention phase as a factor, and the Harvard study does not make any mention of phase. In general we think the findings are stronger for secondary than for primary schools, but it is possible that further investigation during this project will reveal some interesting results in this area.

Broadly these cornerstone studies highlight five key areas of activity for gaining momentum, of which the most important is Teaching and Learning (T&L). The others are Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Leadership, External Relations (including relations with parents), and Systems and Monitoring. These areas are consistent with those highlighted in the research (Bell & Cordingley, 2013) about the characteristics of Strong and Exceptional Schools.

T&L: Quality of teaching and learning.

Inconsistency in the quality of teaching and learning is an issue for schools where progress lacks momentum. In some schools which are struggling to move forward there is good and sometimes even outstanding teaching and assessment, but this is inconsistently practised across the school. Some of the problem areas in schools that are struggling were:

- teacher-dominated pedagogy, which constrained pupils' independent learning and resulted in lack of extension/reinforcement of learning and negative impact on classroom behaviour;
- low expectations about learner achievement;
- behaviour management- teaching quality and classroom behaviour were often seen to be linked, although problems were also sometimes indicative of a lack of effectively applied school systems with regard to behaviour; and

- inadequate assessment practice and use of assessment information, including a lack of use of assessment to plan lessons and activities that meet the needs of particular pupils and groups; and a lack of use of assessment to identify where any remedial work is required.

Schools which improved changed their ways of working to ensure a strong focus on improving teaching and learning: for example, changing the focus of staff meetings to developing teaching, and making teaching the leadership focus. They developed evidence-based systems and approaches to ensure that the overwhelming majority of teaching classrooms was at least good, and usually excellent.

Strong Schools continued this emphasis on improving teaching and learning. Exceptional Schools took this further to focus deeply on developing a shared model of pedagogy. But they also put a much greater emphasis on depth in subject knowledge as a means of achieving this.

The earlier (Bell & Cordingley, 2014) research into the differences between Strong and Exceptional Schools also found that Exceptional Schools tended to articulate and to expect buy-in to a whole-school, evidence-based model of pedagogy, developing a shared understanding of quality in teaching and learning and/or cross-school targeting of key learning areas such as literacy. This shared understanding was established and reinforced through monitoring and feedback approaches, such as in-school Quality Assurance and monitoring systems and "learning walks" carried out by leadership teams to enable them to keep in touch with what is happening on the ground. This evidence also highlighted the importance of systematic approaches across the school to collaborative learning and of recognising and developing in–depth subject knowledge as the basis for realising the potential of effective pedagogic strategies. Strong Schools, by contrast tended to focus on pedagogic skills and knowledge as being more important than subject knowledge. Even though Strong School leaders reported relatively coherent systems for supporting behaviour management in lessons, more of their teachers wanted additional support in behaviour management; they did not feel, for example, that the systems or guidance were working sufficiently to help them tackle low level disruption challenges.

CPD

In schools where progress lacks momentum, collaboration and professional development has been found to be inconsistent and sometimes mediated through teaching methods at odds with the professional learning content being proposed to colleagues (e.g. transmission teaching of independent learning strategies). Collaborative sharing and development was identified by the research as an issue for the schools' leadership of teaching and learning, but it was also the responsibility of all staff in relation to their professionalism, their continued learning, and continuous focus on good practice. Inconsistencies in following through on CPD and in collaborative practice were also highlighted as findings in the earlier Teach First research into the differences between Strong and Exceptional Schools. CPD in secondary schools may be a particular issue for middle leaders, given that for many secondary teachers their department is their cultural and organisational reference point and the context in which subject-based professional learning takes place.

The evidence from Strong and Exceptional Schools suggests that strengthening professional development should involve consistently collecting evidence to inform evaluation of how teachers' learning through CPD is affecting pupils' learning and using this evidence to fine tune emerging strategies. The evidence indicates that this can ensure CPD is making the contribution it needs to

make, and connecting this with strategies for improving the quality and focus of professional learning and development. In Strong and Exceptional Schools the latter encompasses a wide range of activities including:

- investment in mentoring and coaching training across all or most of the school;
- a clear focus on formal coaching, in particular around explicit pedagogical strategies linked to student achievement;
- a consistent and obvious focus on collaborative learning;
- systematic investment in CPD, and strategies for securing a higher buy-in to CPD initiatives;
- more extensive use of internal expertise and greater use of Advanced Skills Teachers;
- prioritising advanced, specialist subject knowledge; and
- consistent approaches which made teachers feel they had some influence over their own CPD.

Leadership

In Ofsted reports for schools where progress lacks momentum there were some concerns about head teachers (or the lack of them in some cases), the senior leadership team (SLT), governors, and middle management/subject leaders providing consistently good/outstanding practice.

Leaders in improving schools focus on 'communicating the vision' through for example:

- insisting that all pupils could achieve highly, regardless of their background;
- establishing a non-negotiable requirement for teaching of good or outstanding quality;
- expecting good behaviour at all times from all pupils;
- expecting teachers and leaders to take responsibility for their own development;
- changing the curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of all pupils;
- an awareness of the importance of modelling learning, with most of the teachers being aware of their leaders' own professional learning; and
- an extensive engagement in networked learning.

Leaders of high performing schools also:

- engage in challenging conversations with staff to ensure that expectations are met and to positively influence staff attitudes;
- create an environment in which students participate actively in school and in regular reviews of their work and progress;
- address weaknesses at middle leadership level: e.g. by promoting teamwork between departments, modelling observation or mentoring/training middle leaders in it, or offering accredited training;
- focus on strengthening the environment for improvement- for example:
  - establishing a SLT with the right skills and attitude to drive improvement and if necessary replacing certain members of the SLT;
  - establishing clear and explicit guidelines on what constitutes good teaching and learning practice;
  - head teachers and senior leaders leading by example - e.g. modelling behaviour management strategies; and

- provide 'inspirational leadership'. CfBT research (Dougill et al 2011) suggests that head teachers whose schools have moved from good to outstanding have translated their overall, long-term vision for their school into "practical and successful effort on the part of a critical mass of staff, especially of senior staff. They know how to appoint excellent people to other leadership positions in the school, and then trust them to do their jobs; distribution of leadership is normal. While encouraging innovation and measured risk-taking on the part of staff, they are uncompromising and, if necessary, ruthless in addressing poor performance." By contrast, schools requiring intervention were often characterised by falling enrolment numbers, high staff turnover and low staff retention.

The evidence from Strong and Exceptional Schools highlights the importance of:

- explicit modelling of professional learning;
- engaging extensively in learning through external partnerships;
- requiring all new recruits explicitly to own schools' values and pedagogical priorities and helping them understand these in sufficient depth to do so;
- being involved in initial teacher education;
- in-depth and rigorous approaches to Performance Management including:
    - rigorous , consistent and systematic processes;
    - making very explicit connections between Performance Management and CPD & Learning planning *and* forms of support;
    - triggering intense support for persistent under performers; and
    - ensuring that persistent underperformers leave if not progressing quickly in the context of strong support.

Staff turnover

In terms of staff turnover, research indicates that there is no single factor which adequately explains why some schools have high turnover and others do not. However, secondary schools with more challenged students ("challenged" in terms of ability, social background and special needs) were more likely to lose teachers to other schools. Case study analysis also suggests that teachers are more likely to stay in schools where there is a clear sense of purpose, where they feel/are valued and supported, and where "appropriate appointments have been made". Making sure that teachers who will fit well within the school environment are hired in the first place is also a significant factor. The Harvard study concluded that the working environment plays a significant role in a teacher's decision to leave a struggling school.

Exceptional Schools in the earlier study also invested particularly strongly in the induction of new colleagues at every level, ensuring they understood in-depth, owned and were able to deploy the strategies highlighted in the school's model of pedagogy. This was much less consistently the case in Strong Schools.

At governor level, steps to address effective governance include:

- ensuring that all governors are committed to the role (with support from local authorities);
- laying on structured training programmes for governors;
- establishing partnerships between governing bodies from different schools to share good practice; and

- working partnerships between governing bodies and head teachers, focussing on school improvement.

External Relations

Lack of strategic engagement with parents was found to be a feature of some schools where improvements were not evident. Developing and maintaining mutually productive relationships and communications with parents and the wider local community, often extending to national and international contacts, featured far more widely in improving schools.

Evidence from the Strong and Exceptional Schools study highlights the importance of:

- working with outside organisations as a way to enrich the curriculum;
- taking a leading role in networks to extend and deepen leadership capacity and knowledge of the community; and
- working extremely hard at involving every parent and ensuring no parents are seen as "impossible to reach".

Systems and Monitoring

The research highlighted inconsistencies and limitations in assessment practice in schools which were not improving. This included the use of assessment data in lesson planning, setting precise targets, giving consistent, high quality feedback, inconsistency in checking progress/ following up, and employing a range of forms of assessment methods. There was inconsistency in the use of assessment to plan lessons and activities that met the needs of particular pupils and groups; and a lack of use of assessment to identify where any remedial work was required.

Schools which were progressing developed a strong focus on systems. They collected, centrally, information from lesson observations, samples of pupils' work, analysis of examination results and data on pupils' progress. This was monitored in relation to each teacher and used to plan future monitoring work. They introduced/refined/developed rigorous monitoring and evaluation procedures to identify strengths and target weaknesses: using rigorous target-setting, assessment and tracking strategies to ensure that pupil progress was consistent and progressing in line with school aims. Using good quality data and data analysis was also found by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2012) to be a trend within schools which moved successfully to good status.

Sophisticated monitoring and data-handling systems give staff a constantly updated understanding of a student's progress, leading, according to the RSA study, to "prompt and apt" interventions in the work of students who under-achieve. Schools can adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the students, so that every student has an individual pathway through his or her school career, agreed with staff at key moments in that career, in consultation with parents.

Evidence from the Strong and Exceptional Schools study highlights the importance of systems tools and protocols for ensuring consistency and the extensive use of CPD to ensure the purpose of these is understood and the skills are in place to make them work. This was especially evident in relation to the school specific models of pedagogy, the development of talent and performance review in Exceptional Schools.

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Appendix 2 The schools' development work (Phase 2 of the project)

After completing the in-school diagnostic/research activities, each school was given an in-depth individual report. On completion of all case studies, schools were also offered a summary of the headline findings across the schools and a series of recommendations for development/ action research around priority areas to focus on and ways of doing so.

The following emerged as common areas for development amongst the project schools:

- behaviour management and creating a positive learning environment;
- Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL), including use of (subject) specialist expertise;
- literacy and supporting extended/academic writing in every subject;
- stretch and challenge;
- assessment for learning and feedback; and
- parental engagement.

Schools were offered tools and resources for each of these areas, accompanied by training on how to use them in their setting, plus one-to-one support in carrying out action research/development work in the schools, following the initial investigations by CUREE.

For logistical reasons (timing of their engagement with the project) not all schools in the project were able to take part in phase two. The majority of the schools that did take part in phase two worked (through action research, enquiry and planning and or making strategic changes to their approaches and systems) on at least one, often several of the priority areas identified by the research team.

Below is a snapshot of the schools' phase two activities and plans. Their work is described in more detail at the end of the individual case studies.

Action research was supported through workshops, the provision of research summaries, tools and resources and via bespoke, remote (telephone and email) coaching and catching up on progress via face-to-face meetings. It was undertaken through partnerships between Teach First ambassadors and school leaders. Schools were supported to carry out action research projects on areas that emerged as priorities in phase one, such as stretch and challenge, developing independent learning, and engaging parents. Seven schools participated. Evidence from action research was used to test and explore key findings arising from the data analysis process for phase one described below rather than as a primary source of evidence.

School	Phase 2 Activity	Future plans
Harbour School	Chose to focus on revamping their CPD offer, with a particular emphasis on developing Growth Mindsets further. Harbour changed their CPD approach for the next year to involve groups of nine (i.e. three triads in each) working on priorities such as growth mindsets, literacy across the	Will draw on CUREE resources, to explore research and evidence relevant to each priority area, try it out while collecting enquiry data, write it up, share with colleagues within the group and discuss what might come next. Intend to use this pattern of CPD in lieu of the

School	Phase 2 Activity	Future plans
	curriculum, and high-level questioning. Led by a member of the SLT.	INSET/whole-school CPD model in practice at Harbour previously.
Lake School	Chose to focus on literacy (specifically oracy as a means of supporting literacy development) and parental engagement. Led by 2 SLTs.	Plan to create videos for parents to engage those who had negative schooling experiences themselves. Will also do an audit of existing school resources and approaches relevant to literacy, and try out CUREE's research and evidence-based approaches to developing oracy/talk.
Forest School	Chose to focus on behaviour and parental engagement. Led by TF ambassador middle leader and SLT member. Particular focus on parents of students from younger cohorts (Yr 7 and 8) who had been previously frequently contacted by the school on issues around their children's behaviour. Successfully shared views/suggestions about behaviour.	Priorities for next year include parental contributions to website and newsletter, sharing homework with parents and offering them access to their children's books. The school is also exploring setting up a parental association, parents running assemblies, a football mentoring clinic, and a session involving both parents and students to explain the need for and logic behind the school's behaviour rules.
Mountain School	Chose to focus on clarifying and operationalising the school's vision and priorities, and the depth and consistency of effective approaches to teaching and learning –particularly around challenge. SLT redefined roles and responsibilities to focus them more closely on the school priorities. Also connected with another project school with strong practice regarding values/vision. Led by middle leader with support from the deputy head.	Next year the school will focus on defining (through consultation with staff and connecting individual staff enquiries) their school's approach to pedagogy and teaching and learning, including non-negotiables, and ensuring school policies and documents are consistent. A teaching and learning action group will pull together evidence from different enquiries to create an outline of common obstacles to providing students with an appropriate level of challenge, and effective approaches which can break down these barriers.
Beach School	The school decided to focus on the development of subject knowledge. Participating colleagues, including a member of the SLT and some (Teach First) early career teachers, carried out enquiries into what other schools were doing to support subject knowledge development. Linked up with a project run by state and independent schools focussing on	The school made changes to the CPD approach for next year, with subject knowledge being one of the main CPD strands alongside Safeguarding/Prevent and pedagogy with an explicit requirement for departments to take responsibility for subject knowledge development, including allocating time and resources to it. SLT will lead this

School	Phase 2 Activity	Future plans
	similar issues and were considering partnering with a local independent school to learn more about approaches and share expertise.	work, and identify what support is needed by particular departments.
Island School	Focus on 'challenging all students.' Including growth mindsets in science, authentic activities/resources to challenge Yr 9; use of attainment data to plan challenging work. Teachers carried out and made enquiries in their own practice, using CUREE resources. They noted positive changes to the learning environment and greater levels of engagement from students. Staff involved three early career teachers (2 TF) and a middle leader with cross-school responsibility for more able.	Their plans for next year are to see the extent to which existing school assessment/monitoring systems and the physical environment reinforce fixed mindsets for the lowest achieving students, and whether this can be counteracted by using at a larger scale some of the approaches trialled by colleagues.
Valley School	Chose to focus on growing internal capacity to support the development of teaching and learning practice, by identifying and recruiting staff to be part of the teaching and learning group, and deciding on principles and approaches to be used within CPD and T&L practice. Led by Deputy head. 12 staff recruited and given responsibility for leading diagnostic and development work next year using peer support approaches.	Will use the first training day of the next year to focus on "what it means to be a professional" and will use this as a framework to contextualise all other professional development sessions through the rest of the year, as well as performance management templates and CPD policies/programs. Moving away from observations by the SLT as a means of driving improvement, and towards models which emphasise peer support. The school has purchased IRIS Connect to increase the numbers of staff experimenting with practice and using evidence in professional dialogue with colleagues.