

**IMPROVING FAILING SCHOOLS:
TOWARDS A RESEARCH BASED MODEL
Stating the problem – what are failing schools?**

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Since the emergence of the school effectiveness movement in the 1970's (Teddlie & Reynolds, (2000), increasing attention has been paid to the differential effectiveness of schools. While it is true that the majority of variance in pupil achievement can be seen to result from non-school factors, such as ability and socio-economic background, school level factors account for between 10% and 40% of the variance in pupil outcomes depending on such factors as the specific study reported on, national context (e.g. school level variance is higher in countries with lower levels of central control and higher levels of school choice), population served (school level variance is greater for pupils from low SES backgrounds than for those from more advantaged contexts), and subject (school level variance is greatest for those subjects that are least reliant on previous out-of-school knowledge, and is thus greater for English than maths, for example). While school effectiveness research has pointed to the existence of between school variance and some of the factors associated, school improvement research has pointed to the possibility of improving the performance of schools in different contexts, and has made many practical contributions to helping schools better serve their communities and pupils, as well as building up a knowledge base on some of the processes that need to be put into motion to do this.

This interest in between-school variance and in ways of improving schools, exists not just at the academic level but is strong among policymakers and practitioners as well. Policymakers in many countries, not least in England, have increasingly attempted to put in place systems and programmes that can help improve the performance of individual schools as well as the system as a whole. Programmes such as the Leadership Incentives Grant and Education Action Zones in the UK are examples of this attempt to help individual schools improve, as is the stress on improvement through inspection in the national inspection system run by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

While school effectiveness research has highlighted this variance in school performance, the majority of research into school practices has taken place in effective schools. Typically, school effectiveness researchers have either done outlier studies, focusing on what schools that are (statistically) identified as highly effective are doing and then defining less effective practices as an absence of these factors, or they have done correlational studies in which process variables have been correlated to outcome variables in (multilevel) regression models of a sample of schools, that may or may not include schools that could be defined as failing. Studies that focus specifically on schools that are not effective are rare, and studies of failing schools even rarer (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Muijs, 2006). Improvement efforts have more often been aimed at less effective schools, seen as more in need of improvement, though again typically an absence of effective strategies is seen as the problem to be remedied through the introduction of more effective strategies. The specific characteristics of failing schools, which make them somewhat unique in the educational landscape, have rarely been addressed (Hopkins et al, 1997; Clarke, 2004).

This situation contrasts starkly with that at policy level in England. There, interest in ineffective schools, seen as failing their pupils has been high, and, typically, effective schools

have largely been allowed to get on with things while perceived ineffective schools have been targeted by policy interventions, going from targeted support and financial help to closure and reconstitution. It is from the policy side that interest in ‘failing’ schools emerged, rather than from effectiveness or improvement researchers. Failing schools can be seen as a more extreme subset of ineffective schools in effectiveness terms, though the term is often left undefined or unclearly defined.

Official government interventions targeting failing schools typically focus on schools achieving ‘unacceptable’ levels of performance in national examinations. In the UK, the government inspection service can judge schools to be failing following an inspection focused on four main elements:

- Educational standards achieved in the school
- Quality of education provided by the school
- Efficiency of financial management
- Spiritual, moral and cultural development in the school

Schools are put into ‘Special Measures’ if they are seen by inspectors as ‘failing to give learners an acceptable standard of education, and when the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement’ (DfES, 2006). It is these schools that are typically described as failing schools in the English context. A slightly less ‘failing’ category are those schools that are given a ‘Notice to improve’. These are schools that ‘require significant improvement if they are performing significantly less well than they might in all circumstances reasonably be expected to perform. A school which is currently failing to provide an acceptable standard of education, but has demonstrated the capacity to improve, will also be in this category. Schools that require significant improvement receive a notice to improve.’ (DfES, 2006)

In practice, the key determinant for being labelled as failing appears to be the academic achievement of the pupils, specifically their performance on national tests. Failing schools, defined as those put in special measures by the government, are usually low performing schools, typically serving highly disadvantaged communities. This is problematic, as Ofsted and the national government do not appear to take much account of the intake of the school when deciding to put a school in special measures. As is clear from the figure of 10-30% of variance at the school level, and much educational research over decades, socio-economic background remains the key variable influencing achievement, and therefore schools serving disadvantaged communities can be expected to do less well on national tests than schools serving more middle class communities (Stoll & Myers, 1998). The list of schools in special measures in England shows a strong bias towards those serving low SES communities (Harris & Chapman, 2002). This, however, does not necessarily mean that schools serving these communities are more likely to be ineffective as defined in school effectiveness research. Taking a truly value-added approach where pupils background is properly measured (not by a weak proxy variable such as Free School Meals, and not by drawing up random categories of disadvantage into which schools fall as is the methodology favoured by the English government), research shows that schools serving disadvantaged communities are no less likely to be adding value than those serving middle class communities (e.g. Gray, 2004; Stoll & Myers, 1998). A definition of failing schools which therefore does not take background into account is fundamentally flawed.

Other English speaking countries likewise have used the term failing schools to describe particular groups of schools. Under the No Child Left Behind Act in the US, failing schools are described as those that fail to make ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’. Adequate Yearly

Progress is defined by each State, but under strict guidelines from the Federal government. This definition has to "(i) Apply the same high standards of academic achievement to all public elementary school and secondary school students in the State; (ii) is statistically valid and reliable; (iii) results in continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students; (iv) measures the progress of public elementary schools, secondary schools and local educational agencies and the State based primarily on the academic assessments ... (v) includes separate measurable annual objectives for continuous and substantial improvement for each of the following: (I) The achievement of all public elementary school and secondary school students. (II) The achievement of—(aa) economically disadvantaged students; (bb) students from major racial and ethnic groups; (cc) students with disabilities; and (dd) students with limited English proficiency" (NCLB, 2002, Part A, Subpart 1, Sec. 1111, 2[c]). This definition has always been contentious, and it took Congress a long time to come up with it, but it is clear that it has resulted in a process of standardised testing and central target setting for schools within districts and states (NCREL, 2003).

While in England failing schools are put into special measures, NCLB requires failing schools to offer both school choice and supplemental services, such as tutoring. They are also required to assign 10% of their Title I expenditure on professional development in their area of weakness. As in England, most schools identified as not making Adequate yearly Progress will once again predominantly be serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and the connection between NCLB and Title I funding (for schools serving disadvantaged areas) makes it clear that the US government likewise conflates failure with low SES background of students (REF HIER). In the second year of not making adequate progress students are given the choice to transfer to another school with paid transport, while in the third year parents can access additional services such as tutoring from organisations outside the school. In the fourth year corrective action needs to be taken, such as replacement of staff, curriculum and the appointment of external advisors. If failure persists for a fifth year the school is usually reconstituted. serving disadvantaged contexts, pointing again to the conflation of SES and school performance in official definitions of failure.

As is clear from the above, failing schools are usually perceived as serving disadvantaged communities. This is certainly the case when one looks at schools put in special measures in England, which disproportionately serve disadvantaged communities. Whether this is a true reflection of the effectiveness of schools in these contexts is doubtful, however, in view of the strong correlation between achievement and social class, and the challenges faced by these schools (see below) It is obviously fallacious to judge schools purely on the basis of raw test scores. Value added scores, where the intake of pupils is taken into account, would seem a fairer way of measuring performance, and can lead to quite different results. Gray (2005), for example, found that when comparing schools on raw scores only 44% of schools categorized as good, average or weak in terms of performance fell into the same category in terms of value added. However, the way in which value added is calculated matters as well. The English government has attempted to provide value added data. These are, however, based on a crude measure of social background (free school meal eligibility), made even cruder by reduction into a limited number of categories. Doing this does not change the ranking of schools by effectiveness that much, leading some commentators to deride the value of this methodology (Gorrard, 2005). However, when valid measurement of value added is used, employing better measures of background such as parental occupation or postcode, and using multilevel modeling to look at outliers, orders do change quite dramatically (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001). What such methods also show, however, is that it is far harder to discern differences between schools than with simple rankings of achievement. The confidence

intervals of most schools overlap, meaning they do not differ reliably in terms of value added, and in most cases confidence intervals do not differ significantly from the score the school would be predicted to obtain from the intake measures taken into account. Therefore, it is problematic that failing schools are continuously equated with low SES intakes, and that raw achievement is such a strong factor in the decision. Of course, other factors are taken into account in the definition of failing schools as not provide an adequate education, but in practice the impact of achievement and behaviour on judgements predominate, the many factors in Ofsted judgements when looked at statistically tending towards one large halo effect.

However, in view of the way policy, practice and research conflate the two, the following discussion will inevitably concentrate largely on failing schools serving disadvantaged communities. They are not the same thing: there are highly effective schools in low SES areas, and there are, statistically, failing schools in middle class communities (as I experienced in one study during which I was able to observe a highly ineffective and dysfunctional school in a highly affluent ‘stockbroker belt’ exurb of London). However, as little is known about these schools, and English policy has not addressed these, we will discuss schools that are both failing and located in disadvantaged areas.

How then would we define a failing school from an effectiveness perspective? A logical assumption would be simply to declare such schools synonymous with ineffective, and define them as either doing poorly in value-added terms or as lacking effectiveness characteristics. This, however, would be too deny that there is a subset of schools who are failing their pupils in a far more fundamental way, that Reynolds (1999) has described in terms of an almost psychological dysfunction, where denial, dysfunctional relationships and lack of sublimation of the reality of the situation predominate. Failing schools are not just characterized by poor performance in terms of pupils’ value-added, but by a lack of internal capacity to improve matters, a lack of functional relationships between staff and often poor relationships between leadership and staff. Cliques appear common, and where schools are organized as departments these are frequently balkanized, with good practice that may exist in pockets not communicated or disseminating within the school (Hargreaves, 1994). As Fink (1999) has described, individualization frequently is typical of these schools, with teachers working in an isolated way. Low expectations of students are ever present, and staff are typically demoralized, feeling unsupported by senior managers and the LEA. There is usually little leadership capacity across the organisation, a lack of effective organisational structures, and often a preoccupation with short term behaviour management rather than learning and teaching. Poor leadership is endemic in failing schools (Hopkins et al, 1997). Particularly problematic for school improvement is the fact that these schools, due to their multiple problems, are least sustainable to regular improvement programmes, which usually result in failure (Potter et al, 2002).

Such schools are likely to need radical measures to improve. In the following section, we will discuss some of the research findings on improving failing schools.

Correlates and causes of school failure

Why do schools fail? It is clear from the findings mentioned above on schools in special measures that intake is a crucial factor. As mentioned above, part of this is undoubtedly due to

the established relationship between achievement and social background, with correlations up to .45 being common (Muijs, 1997). However, there is more to the relationship than that. Schools serving disadvantaged communities suffer from greater challenges than schools serving more advantaged intakes, which go beyond the simple effect of individual students' background, or even the aggregate effect of a mass of low SES background students in a school (Thrupp, 1999). These factors in turn may help explain why a greater number of schools in these contexts are deemed to be failing.

Firstly, schools in disadvantaged areas face greater staff recruitment and retention problems than schools serving middle class communities. Graduate teachers are often less keen to work in schools perceived as difficult due to lower parental expectations and less well behaved children, and school leaders likewise are less likely to want to take on this challenge (Ansell, 2004). The pressures and stresses of the job lead to greater teacher turnover, as many of the best teachers may leave to work in less challenging schools. The extent to which this is an issue varies across contexts. It is greatest in those systems where school funding is at least part based on local taxation, leading to the perverse phenomenon whereby schools serving middle class communities may be more advantaged due to the higher tax takes, leading to the possibility of offering higher levels of remuneration (Meier et al, 1999). It is lowest where teacher choice in terms of employment is limited, such as where teachers are employed by the state (or its education ministry) and placed in schools by the government. In many contexts this is a major issue, however. England takes up an intermediate position between these two extremes, in that while salaries and school funding generally are not determined by local taxes, but are nationally determined, with schools serving disadvantaged communities gaining additional funding, school based management does mean that teachers have choice in terms of where they work.

As well as staff mobility, pupil mobility is a major problem for many schools serving disadvantaged communities. Highly disadvantaged communities are often transient, as job opportunities, council housing policies, and family instability can lead to changes in circumstances necessitating moves. Disadvantaged areas also take on the majority of immigrants and asylum seekers into the country, leading to further demographic instability (Subrha, 2005). This is problematic for schools as it leads to problems in terms of both accountability for achievement of pupils who may not have been in the school for more than a short period of time, and to problems of adaptation for pupils. Failing schools have the additional problem of this pupil mobility in part being caused by them having to take on pupils excluded from or not given a place in more popular schools in the locality.

From Ofsted reports it is clear that failing schools have to deal with greater issues in terms of behaviour, attendance and expectations of pupils than schools serving more advantaged areas (Ofsted, 2004). This in part results from the fact that failing schools as defined in England typically serve disadvantaged communities, where parents, who often have not had good experiences of school themselves have low expectations of education and schooling. In less mobile communities, such as the former mining communities of England, this problem may be exacerbated as most parents will have attended the same school, seen as having failed them in the past (Harris et al, 2005). Pupils often do not see the point of school and education, which does not appear to be delivering for them, and therefore it is not surprising that behaviour is often poor, as is attendance. These problems may be exacerbated in failing schools because staff morale may be low. Staff often have very low expectations of students, leading to a lack of discipline and attention to behaviour management in the school. These

low expectations of staff appear to distinguish failing schools from more successful schools serving disadvantaged communities in a number of studies (MacBeath & Stoll, 2006).

Where failing schools are serving disadvantaged communities, there are additional problems of unemployment, physical and mental health problems and malnutrition that often underlie educational problems, as well as in some cases lack of proficiency in English (MacBeath & Stoll, 2004).

In a system of school choice, such as operates in England, competition from nearby schools, perceived as more effective, is often a contributor to failure, as these schools are able to cream off the best pupils and those of the most ambitious and upwardly mobile parents who choose to send their children there, leaving the failing schools with a more disadvantaged intake than catchment area statistics would in themselves reveal (Fink, 1999).

Schools perceived as failing also suffer a great deal of government scrutiny and external accountability, and may be subject to even more government intervention than schools generally. While this intervention is usually well meaning and intended to improve the school, it may paradoxically lead to more problems for schools where the capacity to manage change is limited not just at senior management level but throughout the school. Having initiatives forced on them may force this problem to become even more acute, and thus speed up failure rather than relieve it.

There is evidence that suggests that poor leadership and succession planning may lie at the heart of the move of schools from effective or averagely effective to ineffective and failing. Especially where schools have relied strongly for their success on the work of a strong headteacher, with little or no distribution of leadership, the succession moment can be crucial. If successors are chosen who are less effective, or do not show good fit with the organization, the school, especially when working within the often volatile constraints of challenging circumstances, can quickly regress into a state of dysfunction (Harris & Chapman, 2002).

It is clear therefore that school failure is a complex process, in which a number of factors may interplay, with usually more than one of the above factors present. It is also clear that these factors should mean that failure is more likely to occur in low SES contexts due to the additional problems these schools face. However, the extent to which this is actually the case is unclear. Because the focus of government initiatives, accountability mechanisms and research has been on school in disadvantaged contexts, it is not actually clear how many schools in middle class contexts are failing, and what factors may be in play in these contexts. There is clearly an urgent need for more research on failing schools that are not facing challenging circumstances, as the statistical evidence in terms of value added performance suggest that these schools are likely to exist.

What do we know about improving failing schools?

As governments have increasingly paid attention to the issue of failing schools, a number of solutions have been proposed and developed in terms of improving them. While research is somewhat limited, there are some significant findings that point to possible methods for improving this type of school.

Reconstitution

A first approach to improving failing schools that has been implemented first in parts of the US, and then in England, is reconstitution.

The seemingly unchangeable problems of failing schools, such as poor leadership, staffing, morale and reputation, have led school districts and local education authorities to implement forms of reconstitution, whereby the failing school is closed and reopened with new leadership and staff, and usually a new name as well. Buildings will often be improved in this process, and all staff invited to apply for their old jobs without guarantees. While making some sense intuitively, in view of the importance of leadership and teacher effectiveness in school effectiveness and improvement, it is also true that reconstitution as a strategy has had very mixed results, with success only being present in selected cases (Hardy, 1999).

Reasons for this are several, but among those are the fact that failing schools, as mentioned above usually defined as schools serving disadvantaged areas, are still serving the same catchment after reconstitution, and that reputations within communities may linger. Furthermore, as other local schools may have improved their intake by creaming of the best pupils from the failing schools, the new school may have a significant catch up operation in this area and still be less popular with parents. Good staff may also be hard to recruit to these schools in view of the poor reputation of the school and area, which cannot easily be disguised by changes in name. The wrenching change resulting from reconstitution may also lead to a period, before and shortly after the process, in which morale plummets among staff and results decrease even more (Hardy, 1999; Ainscow et al, 2004).

The most recent form that reconstitution has taken in England is the formation of so-called Academies serving disadvantaged pupils, often in place of previously failing schools. These schools have been given a very significant capital injection from government, along with an investment of 2.5 million from private investors, who in return get a key voice in governance, and greater freedom than other state schools in England to shape the curriculum. Again, even with the very significant investment and new building going up, findings so far indicate mixed results in terms of improved performance in these schools (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2005). The emphasis on changes in governance, which can also be seen in a number of other recent government approaches, appears misguided, as evidence from school effectiveness research, and indeed from evaluations of these programmes (Lindsay et al, 2006) suggests that governance is far from being a key factor in school improvement for failing schools.

Collaboration and external support

Rather than reconstitution, therefore, we have recently seen a movement towards collaboration between schools as a strategy for improvement. During recent years the Government's strategies for reforming education have placed increasing emphasis on the need for schools to work together. Four major national initiatives, in particular, have encouraged such collaboration. These are: Excellence in Cities, the Leadership Incentive Grant, Networked Learning Communities and School Federations. These initiatives have stimulated a variety of cooperative arrangements, from groups of schools that have volunteered to work together, to groups that have been induced to do so in the context of incentives, to others that have been subject to direct external pressure to collaborate. Such activities have sponsored widespread and serious efforts at collaboration (West et al, 2006).

Collaboration with peers is seen as potentially leading to improvement through the advantages of collaborative learning and knowledge construction, the ability to draw on the social capital that exists in other schools, and on the ability to draw on staff and skills that may not be present in the failing school (Muijs et al, 2006). There is some evidence that this way of working can indeed be fruitful in failing schools, Ainscow et al (2004) for example reporting on a failing school that was able to improve strongly after the three local heads had forged links with the new headteacher of the failing school. However, collaboration, notwithstanding the emphasis on this in recent English policy, is no panacea. Firstly, the conditions need to be in place for it to work. Support from staff and the right mix of skills are key here. Secondly, collaboration may be more suitable to creating improvement in some areas than in others. Thus, research suggests that the evidence is

- *strong* that collaboration can widen opportunities and help address vulnerable groups of learners,
- *moderate* that collaboration is effective in helping solve immediate problems, and
- *modest to weak* that it is effective in raising expectations (Ainscow et al, 2006).

Nevertheless, this evidence is stronger here than for reconstitution or many school improvement initiatives.

More generally, external support is an important element in improving failing schools (Stoll & Myer, 2002). This is more strongly the case in failing schools than in schools that are moderately effective, and the level of external support needed may be very high for these schools (Hopkins et al, 1997). This may come from the LEA, but in the light of their varying effectiveness, and also the continuing reduction in their role and resources certainly in the English system, the need for networks within and beyond the LA seems pressing (Fink, 1999), and the evidence mentioned above suggests that other schools may be effective partners, possibly alongside HE's or school improvement programmes. This support needs to be long-term and sustained over time, rather than exist for just the short time needed for the school to get out of special measures as is often the case, as in these cases schools may easily revert back to poorer levels of performance (Hargreaves, 2004).

Accountability and inspection

Inspection has frequently been criticized as not having a positive impact, with the naming and shaming of school sometimes seen as contributing to problems rather than solving them (Stool & Myers, 2002). However, there is some evidence that the external pressure from inspection is necessary if schools are to realize their problems and start to improve (Ainscow et al, 2006). External accountability is seen as both a necessary spur to change, and a means of ensuring that effort is kept up and sustained. Quality control of the improvement programme is seen as key, and accountability and inspection have even been claimed to have some positive motivational benefits in terms of providing feedback on the progress of the school in turning itself around.

However, some authors disagree on the utility of inspection for failing schools. Harris & Chapman (2004), for example, categorise schools facing challenging circumstances along two axes in terms of teaching culture, described as either individualised or collaborative, and accountability, described as either external or internal. Failing schools would clearly fit into the individualized culture/external accountability sphere, described by them as immobile, and the authors claim that the key to improvement in these schools is firstly improving capacity by

fostering internal accountability without which external interventions will not be successful. External accountability mechanisms can in this respect be a hindrance rather than a help to failing schools, as they can slow down the growth of internal accountability through an overdependence on external systems. Overly heavy-handed external accountability mechanisms may also lead to a heightened anxiety and risk-averseness that hinders the school in developing suitable change processes and strategies. Therefore, it is possible that while accountability is essential to identify initial problems and force the school to improve, it may be helpful to withdraw overly intrusive accountability mechanisms while the school is implementing an improvement strategy.

Changing school conditions

What has become increasingly clear is that there can be no one size fits all method for improving failing schools. As Nicolaidou (2005) has pointed out, each failing school is unique in the way it is failing, and in the circumstances it confronts. Capacity for improvement and change is highly differential between schools. However, there are some strategies that can be seen to help many schools.

One of these is fast intervention, focused on factors that are relatively easy to change, lead to quick results and are highly visible (Hopkins et al, 1997). These can be aimed at quick improvement in exam results, such as implementing a new curriculum (in England some courses may be highly advantageous in terms of allowing students to gain several GCSE's with one course), changes to building infrastructure, such as major cleaning operations or new uniforms, all of which are highly visible and have the potential to quickly improve morale. The exact strategies to be chosen is once again contingent on school conditions and capacity, however.

Leadership is a key prerequisite of improvement in failing schools (Harris, 2002). Strong leadership is necessary to help these schools take the necessary steps to improvement. While recently distributed leadership has been touted as more effective and sustainable than relying on strong leadership from the head, there is some evidence that for failing schools this may not be true. Certainly in the initial phases, strong directive leadership from the head appears to be necessary if the school is to be turned around. This will usually mean that if a failing school is to improve, new leadership will have to be appointed, as existing leadership is usually weak or ineffective (Stoll & Myers, 2002; Hopkins et al, 1997). Change in leadership is not simply a matter of importing strong leaders from other schools. Leadership is contingent, with success being strongly dependent on the fit between leader and organization, as can be seen in the relative failure of the Super Heads programme, where the government drafted in heads who had been successful in other schools to take over failing schools in the latter years of the last century (Dimmock & Walker, 2002). Furthermore, the fact that strong leadership from the head may be the key factor in improving failing schools at the outset, does not mean that this is the best strategy for these schools throughout their progress. Rather, it appears that once the schools has taken the initial steps on the way to improvement, leadership needs to become more distributed in order for improvement to be sustained and capacity built across the school (Chapman, 2005). In many cases, this may necessitate further change in leadership, as it can be hard for existing leaders to change their style from a very directive to a more distributed way of operating, not least due to the suspicion that this may arouse among staff used to one way of operating from their head.

A key part of leadership will in the initial phases being the development of a shared vision for improvement with staff, and the choice of a limited number of goals (Muijs et al, 2004). This is obviously easier said than done, especially as a new leader may initially be viewed with some suspicion, especially where the existing (leaving) head was popular and respected by staff, which even in failing schools may well be the case (e.g. Nicolaidou et al, 2005). This will therefore necessitate a great deal of sustained communication, possible teambuilding activities and, in some cases, staff changes in order to be able to create this shared vision. A limited number of goals is key in order to be able to concentrate activities on those areas that can be changed and not dissipating effort over a range of disparate activities and actions.

Improving staff capacity is key if there is to be any chance of school improvement in failing schools to be sustained. Merely replacing the headteacher is insufficient. Staff in the school need to undergo rigorous professional development, and slowly be given responsibility in order to start to develop a genuine learning community (Hagreaves, 2004). In many cases staff will have to be replaced, however. In some recent examples we have recently been involved with, where rapid improvements have taken place, in researching, up to 60% of staff have been replaced (West et al, 2006). The ability to attract high quality new staff is key here though, and this may depend on the reputation of the headteacher. Reputation can be enhanced through connections to a more highly rated school.

As mentioned above, failing schools are often highly preoccupied with managing behaviour, at the expense of a focus on learning. However, some of the factors that contribute strongly to poor behaviour are a curriculum that is poorly adapted to the needs of the students, and teaching that fails to connect to learners or draw their interest (Muijs et al, 2005). Therefore, a focus on learning and teaching may not merely lead to improvements in this area, but may actually improve behaviour as well. In the past, curriculum change has been hard in England due to the imposition of an inflexible national curriculum. Recently, however, schools have been given more freedom in curriculum development, leading to a resurgence of vocational education often more suited to the students in particular schools. However, more flexibility in terms of the content of core subjects like English and maths would clearly help schools do this better. Research findings show that compared to students from middle and high SES backgrounds, low SES students need more structure and more positive reinforcement from the teacher, and need to receive the curriculum in smaller packages followed by rapid feedback (Ledoux & Overmaat, 2001). They will generally need more instruction, and be more responsive to external rewards (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Teddlie et al., 1989). While mid and high ability students do not benefit from praise unrelated to the task, there is some evidence that low achievers do benefit from non-contingent praise, due to the low self-esteem of many of the students (Brophy, 1992). Pupils from lower SES backgrounds have been found to benefit from a more integrated curriculum across grades and subjects (Connell, 1996). Connecting learning to real-life experience and stressing practical applications have been found to be particularly important to low-SES pupils, as has making the curriculum relevant to their daily lives. This may diminish disaffection as well as promoting learning (Guthrie, Guthrie, Van Heusden, & Burns, 1989; Henchey, 2001; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2002; Montgomery et al., 1993). According to Mortimore (1991) effective teaching in this type of school should be teacher-led and practically focussed, but not low-level or undemanding. Creating consistency in teaching approach is important for pupils from low SES backgrounds, and has been found to be related to improved outcomes (Mortimore, 1991).

Related to this is the need to upskill teachers, who in failing schools may often have an outdated view of teaching. As a concentration on learning and teaching is crucial, staff

development focussed on teaching methods and a better understanding of learning may be highly beneficial to schools (Joyce et al, 1999; Harris & Chapman, 2002). These approaches do need to be tailored to individual schools, in that the strengths and weaknesses of the staff and school may differ substantially.

Discussion

All these factors may contribute to improvement, but do not form a recipe for success. Differential approaches are needed tailored to the individual circumstances of the school, which may benefit more or less strongly from work in these different areas. Where possible, staff should be consulted on needs, though strong leadership may in some cases mean enforcing needed reforms.

A key issue here is also that of the limitations of school interventions. As failing schools are usually defined as serving disadvantaged communities, it is worth pointing out that, firstly, the school effect is typically limited to around 10%-30% of variance in pupil performance, and that there are furthermore complex interactions between schools and contexts. This means that if sustainable improvement is to occur, work on the social disadvantage that underlies many of the problems faced by schools needs to be addressed directly. Schools cannot compensate for society, and the ultimate form of improvement for many schools identified by government agencies as failing would be a reduction in the poverty and disadvantage of their students. Action to fight poverty and disadvantage is therefore key. This issue is being increasingly acknowledged by government and researchers in school improvement in recent years, and in many cases attempts are being made to address this through connecting schools to other agencies dealing with child welfare, such as social services. Full service extended schools in England do exactly that, with social services working with, and on the site of, schools. This effort is recent in England, but first findings from the national evaluation (Dyson et al, 2006) suggest that this approach may have a positive impact on individual students, though it does not appear to have the transformational effect on the school as a whole that some of its supporters claim. Muijs (2006) similarly identified many problems and limited impacts in his small scale study in the North East of England.

Research in other countries has likewise shown limited impact. In an earlier smaller scale study by Atkinson et al (2002), positive impacts were found in terms of delivering a wider range of services and leading staff involved to have a broader perspective on their work, though increased demands and pressures were also mentioned. Competing priorities and resourcing were mentioned as problems associated with multiagency work. Communication between agency staff was seen as a key challenge. Common aims, commitment and clear structures needed to be in place for the work to be successful. In particular, agencies and staff needed to want to be involved and be committed to multiagency work, rather than be coerced into it. In a review on the literature on supporting children in special circumstances, Statham (2004) found multiagency work that addressed the whole child rather than compartmentalizing services to be characteristic of the most promising approaches, as were links between adult and children's services.

These findings point to the limits of approaches that concentrate on improving existing agencies collaboration, rather than getting at the heart of the problem through more radical interventions. Poverty and disadvantage are major societal issues, which cannot be solved through technocratic interventions on their own.

These issues of the limitations of school level interventions, and of the need for tailored approaches for individual schools notwithstanding, the research findings discussed above are starting to point to some strategies that are specific to improving failing schools, and that can even be perceived as forming a sequence of necessary actions. This sequence appears to look something like this:

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7
Action	External pressure	Leadership	External support and collaboration	Teaching staff and creating vision and plans	Short term wins	Focus on Learning and teaching and staff development	Focus on community and fighting poverty
Reasoning	Necessary initially to alert school and local authority to problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change in leadership is often the start to turning around the school - Strong leadership needed - Leadership must fit school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support networks are key - Needs to be intensive at start - Peer networks with other schools are often particularly effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes in teaching staff necessary at the discretion of the head - A shared vision around key improvement goals need to be developed - School improvement plan developed, involving staff 	Short term wins need to be built into plans, to create necessary morale boost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs to be focus if improvement is to be sustained - Staff development activities focused on learning and teaching stepped up 	Key for genuine long term improvement
Comments	May be counterproductive in failing school after that, and probably needs to be withdrawn once support is in place	Sustaining improvement requires distributed leadership, so strong leadership cannot be sustained.	Needs to be tailored to individual school – bespoke programmes rather than bought in school improvement programmes	This step will be fraught and disruptive, but appears essential in failing schools	Do not lead to genuine sustained improvement, however	External links and support can provide stimulus, as well as allowing joint staff development activities with other schools	Interagency working can help, but is no substitute to addressing societal problems

However, one thing that must be remembered is that while schools may come out of special measures, or be seen as no longer failing, for those schools serving disadvantaged communities (while not being synonymous with failing in a scientific sense, are in terms of government practice) it is hard to sustain improvement in the light of the many challenges faced. Schools in these circumstances frequently relapse into poor performance, and it is well known that harder work is required from staff to help these schools perform than at schools operating in more favourable circumstances (Madden et al, 2001). The challenge of supporting failing schools is never one that will be easily solved.

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