

(UN)SATISFACTORY? ENHANCING LIFE CHANCES BY IMPROVING 'SATISFACTORY' SCHOOLS

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FOREWORD: MATTHEW TAYLOR

This timely and important report on ‘satisfactory’ schools has direct relevance for the RSA’s concern with ‘The social aspiration gap’ - the growing gap between society’s expectations for life in the 21st century and the trajectory upon which it is now set. On the one hand, in providing today’s young people with an education which combines academic rigour, the development of wider skills and competencies, and finding and developing each individual’s enthusiasms, schools are vital to developing the citizens modern Britain needs. On the other hand, one of the most profound examples of the social aspiration gap lies between our yearning for a fairer society and the apparent inability of policymakers to develop popular, credible ways of achieving greater social justice. Given the importance of schooling for the life chances of disadvantaged pupils and the concentration of such pupils in (un) ‘satisfactory’ schools, a step change in the performance of these schools could make an important contribution to closing this aspect of the gap.

This report contains many striking findings and important recommendations. One that stands out as emblematic of our approach is that the ‘Satisfactory’ category be renamed as ‘Performing Inconsistently’. This is not merely a matter of presentation or semantics. It highlights the key challenge in these schools of spreading the good practice which they contain across the whole school. Lying behind the call both for greater support and guidance for these schools, and a more granular approach to performance and accountability is the view that the current status of ‘satisfactory’ is only acceptable if it is explicitly seen as a foundation for improvement.

This report reflects the hard work not just of RSA staff, but of Ofsted colleagues, who have supplied and modelled the data, and have maintained enthusiastic engagement as the project has developed. Working with Ofsted has made us aware of the rich public resource of robust data and wealth of committed expertise underpinning the organisation’s work. Our collaboration with Ofsted supports the current Government’s contention that making information about public service standards available in an accessible form can itself be an important driver of policy development, public engagement and service improvement.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Taylor', is written over a light blue rectangular stamp or watermark.

Matthew Taylor
Chief Executive RSA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

Becky Francis would like to thank Sally Morgan and Richard Brooks for their commitment to the project. She is especially grateful to Adrian Gray HMI for his wisdom and induction into the world of Ofsted inspection criteria, and to Helen Barugh and Weichao Wang for their modelling and provision of data. She would also like to thank Ruth Lupton (LSE) and Bob Burgess (King's College London) for their feedback.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PRÉCIS

This report maps the location, improvement trends, and demographics of ‘Satisfactory’ schools. It shows that disadvantaged pupils are over-represented in these schools, and that inconsistent quality of teaching practice is the strongest characteristic of ‘Satisfactory’ schools. Especially key are the findings that: 1) many ‘Satisfactory’ schools do not improve; 2) children who are already disadvantaged are disproportionately being let down; and 3) that the problem, while inevitably contextual, can be addressed by concerted efforts to improve teaching. David Cameron recently referred to a ‘hidden crisis’ of ‘coasting schools’ which are “content to muddle through”, and promises that such schools will be pressed to do betterⁱ. This report speaks directly to his agenda. However, while the government has concentrated policy on school structures (Free Schools and Academies), a significant proportion of schools — including some of the new models — continue to provide lower quality educational provision, and there is little in the way of a framework for supporting them to improve.

Our analysis amounts to a call for action. A bold new approach to support and challenge ‘Satisfactory’ schools is urgently needed. We present a set of recommendations that incentivise and support improvement in ‘Satisfactory’ schools, through a dual approach of support and accountability. We would start by changing the Ofsted term ‘Satisfactory’. The ascription ‘Satisfactory’ suits no one: it is pejorative enough to deter (some) families from choosing a school and to dampen staff morale, but at present there is little to help schools and their stakeholder constituents to identify what specifically needs to improve, and little support to achieve improvement. The term ‘Performing Inconsistently’ is a more accurate reflection of the school’s situation, and clearly flags that while some aspects of the school’s provision may be good or better, improvement is needed in others.

This new title is emblematic of the thinking driving all our recommendations: ‘Satisfactory’ schools are not doing well enough, and our recommendations for policy reflect the need to provide better information, support, resource and advice to schools in addressing these areas for improvement, and to hold schools to account for doing so. Our recommendations, including the changed title ‘Performing Inconsistently’, offer a more granular approach to improvement and accountability that allows identification and targeting of areas that need improving. But also, rather than simply focusing on isolated areas, our recommendations emphasise whole-school responsibility for improvement, and the simultaneous highlighting of strengths that can be drawn upon to support weaker areas in a school. Clearly, our recommendations have resource implications at a time when these are severely stretched. However, the government maintains that school improvement and social mobility are policy priorities. We need action to ensure that all our young people, whatever their background, attend a school that is ‘Good’ or better.

INTRODUCTION

There is much in the school improvement literature on strategies and techniques by which to develop outstanding schools. At the other end of the spectrum, ‘failing schools’ – those in Special Measures or with a Notice to Improve – have also been given significant attention by policymakers. However, ‘Satisfactory’ schools are rarely given significant attention, despite providing for a large proportion of pupils across the country. Some research has indicated that poorer quality schools contain a disproportionate amount of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, generating the RSA’s interest in ‘Satisfactory’ schools from a social justice perspective.

ⁱ Cameron, D. (2011) ‘We shall shame schools that “muddle through”’, The Telegraph, 13/11/11.

Our study sought to achieve three things:

- To provide a map of these schools in terms of their location, pupil demographic and the reasons they are categorised as ‘Satisfactory’ by Ofsted.
- To analyse any relationship between socio-economic background and attendance of a ‘Satisfactory’ school.
- To identify key issues arising and make recommendations for policy regarding ‘Satisfactory’ schools.

The study was undertaken in collaboration with Ofsted, who have supplied the data underpinning this study. The study is based on Ofsted’s data for state maintained secondary schools in Englandⁱⁱ, and analysis of the inspection reports for a sample of those schools ‘stuck’ at ‘satisfactory’ — schools which have been graded ‘Satisfactory’ at least twice in their last full inspections, and as having only ‘Satisfactory’ Capacity to Improve.

FINDINGS

The proportion of secondary schools inspected in 2010/11 that were graded ‘Satisfactory’ stood at 40%. Overall, 32% of secondary schools in England (not including Special Schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)) are graded ‘Satisfactory’ at their latest inspection.

The data shows that:

- The likelihood of attending a ‘Satisfactory’ school is affected by where you live.
- More affluent pupils tend to attend better schools. For disadvantaged pupils, the reverse is true.
- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in ‘Satisfactory’ (and ‘Inadequate’) schools.
- The stronger likelihood of attending a poorer quality school applies to working class pupils (‘disadvantaged’) as much as highly disadvantaged pupils.

Given the larger proportion of ‘satisfactory’ schools compared to failing schools, they are having a more widespread impact on outcomes for disadvantaged children than are failing schools. Research shows that youth from poorer backgrounds consistently make the least progress in school: the findings from this report demonstrate that the quality of disadvantaged pupils’ schooling contributes to the poor educational outcomes of these (particularly vulnerable) young people.

In terms of school improvement, the findings show that:

- Schools are more likely to be graded ‘Satisfactory’ or ‘Inadequate’ if they have previously been judged ‘Satisfactory’ — hence suggesting a lower capacity to improve among these ‘longer term’ ‘satisfactory’ schools.
- Schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils are more likely to decline from ‘Outstanding’ and ‘Good’ grades, than are schools with advantaged pupil populations.
- ‘Satisfactory’ schools with disadvantaged pupil populations are significantly less likely to improve at the next inspection than are those with advantaged populations.

The over-all picture emerging from the data is that a) students from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented at ‘satisfactory’ (or worse) schools; and b) that schools with disadvantaged demographics are less likely to improve.

WHY ARE THEY ‘SATISFACTORY’? THE PRACTICES OF ‘SATISFACTORY’ SCHOOLS

The strongest finding is the importance of teaching and learning. What came across overwhelmingly is the inconsistent quality of teaching and assessment practice

ii That have been subject to an inspection. State maintained secondary schools excluding Special Schools and PRUs (see main report for elaboration).

within ‘satisfactory’ schools. However, there are specific trends in relation to this wide area that offer useful insight for schools wishing to improve, and for policymakers. Other key findings relate to systems and monitoring, leadership and governance, and (lack of) engagement with parents. There are also a number of emerging issues concerning school context and related capacity. These findings are elucidated in the full report, with illustrations from the data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis in our report demonstrates:

1. The need to promote teacher and teaching quality in ‘Satisfactory’ schools (and the urgency of this necessity in terms of equality of opportunity for young people).
2. The need to acknowledge the impact of context on schools.
3. The need to support struggling schools.
4. The need for further research.

Given the scale of the issue and the implications for a) school improvement and b) social (in)equality, a new set of policy initiatives geared to improving ‘satisfactory’ schools are urgently required. But these must reflect a new approach of both challenging and supporting these schools. ‘Satisfactory’ schools must be accountable for improvement, and supported in doing so. It is also vital that any new policies work together, and build on past works and the evidence base.

Hence our recommendations relate to better support, and better accountability for ‘Satisfactory’ schools. We address support first. We recommend the following:

Mechanisms for support of struggling schools

It seems preposterous that we have such good inspectors, but no equivalent organised supply of expert advisors to support improvement. This absence is especially stark given the dismantling of prior initiatives intended to provide aspects of such supportⁱⁱⁱ. Hence we recommend:

- Drawing on the evaluations of the National Challenge to design a **new nationwide support system** to facilitate advice, support and collegiate school-to-school learning. This could be run out of an organisation such as Ofsted or NCSL. The role of such a provider would include gathering and sharing best practice in addressing contextual challenges. Support needs to be provided to ‘satisfactory’ schools, as well as those with Notice to Improve (NtI).
- Longer, more granular reports from Ofsted for schools ‘stuck’ at ‘Satisfactory’ (i.e those that have been graded as such at their last inspection, and are being categorised ‘Satisfactory’ a second time). These reports should elaborate not just what broad-sweep changes need to be effected, but also suggest how these might be accomplished, and provide milestones for doing so. The latter better allows progress to be checked by governors and other stakeholders. Such reports might be based on longer, more in-depth inspections where more time is spent on the school site.
- Government support for federations of schools, facilitating shared systems and collegiate, enquiring professionalism among practitioners.

More effective ways to hold schools to account for improvement

Systems of accountability can also be improved. Schools need to be better directed as to how to improve, and assessed accordingly. Hence we recommend:

- **The Ofsted category ‘Satisfactory’ be replaced by ‘Performing Inconsistently’.** This new title reflects: a) better accuracy of meaning — illustrating how

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g. the National Strategies, SIP advice through local authorities, and so on.

the main problem is that while good or better practices are present they are not consistent across the school; and b) that particular issues need to be addressed (via both challenge and support). As such it gives parents and governors more indication that aspects need to improve.

- Heads at schools currently rated as ‘Satisfactory’ be required to deliver a plan to Ofsted (or the new improvement support body) explaining how the areas of weakness in their school are being addressed. Plans which appear weak or undeveloped will need to be revised and resubmitted. Heads will also need to submit regular updates on progress.
- Stronger accountability driven through the incentives schemes below. The government might be more directive as to how resources are spent. Indeed there might be top up funding to boost ‘satisfactory’ schools in areas of social disadvantage that commit to improvement, but with a higher degree of accountability tied to such incentives.
- Any school which is rated ‘satisfactory’ (or ‘performing inconsistently’) more than twice in a row will be given a notice to improve and treated as if it was an inadequate school. This actually affects few schools, but would function as a strong incentive for ‘satisfactory’ schools to improve.

Promoting teacher and teaching quality in ‘satisfactory’ schools

We need to incentivise excellent teachers (including inspirational middle leaders) to work at ‘satisfactory’ schools. There have been past initiatives which have come and gone, but discussions on ‘golden handcuffs’ to tempt good teachers into weaker schools need to be urgently revitalised. We recommend:

- **Bursaries for First Class graduates to undertake Initial Teacher Education (ITE), for supply to struggling schools.** ITE is crucial in supplying high quality teachers. In a climate of austerity it may be especially productive to incentivise the best graduates to undertake ITE by subsidizing student fees^{iv}. Although possession of a first class honours degree does not necessarily guarantee a talented teacher, it indicates a range of skills (e.g. commitment, organisational skills, strong subject competence). The fees subsidy would need to be tied to NQT employment at a school graded lower than ‘Good’, in order to direct them to schools most in need.
- ‘Satisfactory’ schools need a prestigious **allocated places scheme** similar to ‘Future Leaders’ or ‘Teach First’ to direct the most talented and inspiring teachers into these schools. Such a scheme would simultaneously help ‘satisfactory’ schools, while advancing the careers of individual teachers.
- ‘**Golden achievers**’. A more expensive, but more controlled measure is to create a scheme wherein high quality teacher recruits to schools judged ‘satisfactory’ or below are paid more in exchange for greater accountability for pupil progress as part of their contract. Such a scheme could be funded by schools themselves via use of the pupil premium. (In which case it will further be important that staff concerned are set to teach young people whose need is greatest^v.)
- **Coordinated CPD offer.** The findings from this (and other) studies might be used to inform design and provision of relevant, targeted, accredited CPD designed for use by struggling schools, addressing issues such as teaching techniques, assessment practices and so on, to complement those on leadership offered by the NCSL. Courses might be offered by an HEI, Teaching School, the NCSL, or a combination; quality being key.
- **Cultures of collaborative professional enquiry encouraged within schools.**
- This recognises that it is not enough to parachute in excellent new staff, but the need to also support confidence, shared good practice, innovation and a culture of learning and research within existing teams.
- **Pupil Premium – for teaching and learning.** Clearly the findings in this study support the Pupil Premium, and reiterate the need for substantial allocation.

^{iv} As indeed the Government already intends to do for particular subject areas (see DfE, 2011).

In ‘satisfactory’ schools, the pupil premium ought to be spent on bolstering teacher quality. To date, the pupil premium has generally been seen as to be targeted on individual pupils. But we must ensure schools are working properly as institutions as well as supporting individual children and/or groups who are falling behind. The government may need to be more directive concerning schools’ use of Pupil Premium resources, and to hold schools to account in ensuring the resources are a) spent effectively, and b) used to support the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils (see note v).

Acknowledge the impact of context on schools

- We recommend the maintenance of a measure of pupil demographics (Contextual Value Added or a different measure) in judging progress.

Further research

Further research is needed to explore the individual contexts of ‘Satisfactory’ schools (including the characteristics of the local school ‘market’), and the perceptions and insights of key stakeholders, in order to shed further light on the contextual factors impacting potential school improvement. Additionally, research focusing on schools in socially-disadvantaged areas that have progressed from ‘Satisfactory’ to ‘Good’ (or better) is needed, to explore the various ways in which these schools managed to raise their game — whether this involves eradicating the poor and inconsistent practices identified in this report, and/or additional features.

This concerted effort is needed to establish a secondary school system that provides equality of opportunity to all young people, whatever their background, via provision of a high quality education that ensures their learning progression and educational enrichment.

v As there is evidence that working class young people and those from certain minority ethnic groups tend to be concentrated in lower streams, and that the most able teachers are often set to teach the top streams (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Dunne *et al*, 2007).

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

There has been much written in the school improvement literature on strategies and techniques by which to develop outstanding schools. Advice on how to take your school ‘from Good to Great’¹, and the strategies required to secure a judgement of ‘Outstanding’ from Ofsted, circulate in the literature and among education consultants. Headteachers of schools rated ‘Outstanding’ are in high demand, often accredited as National Leaders in Education, and consulted by local authorities, educational organisations, and other schools. At the other end of the spectrum, ‘failing schools’ – those in Special Measures or with Notice to Improve – have also been given significant attention. This may take the form of punitive measures (takeover, closure etc); but frequently such schools have been provided with significant practical, human and financial support². So schools at the top and bottom of the success spectrum continue to receive attention from policymakers. However, ‘middling’ schools – and especially those which might be considered ‘mediocre’ – are rarely given significant attention, despite the fact that they provide for a large proportion of pupils across the country.

Further, some research has indicated that poorer quality schools contain a disproportionate amount of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds³, generating the RSA’s interest from a social justice perspective.

Hence this report focuses on the location, demographic, and practices of ‘Satisfactory’ schools. It seeks to achieve three things:

- To provide a map of these schools in terms of their location, pupil demographic and the reasons they are categorised as ‘Satisfactory’ by Ofsted.
- To analyse any relationship between socio-economic background and attendance of a ‘Satisfactory’ school.
- To identify key issues arising and make recommendations for policy regarding ‘Satisfactory’ schools.

(UN)SATISFACTORY?

Educationalists frequently observe that the Ofsted category ‘Satisfactory’ is not really conceived as satisfactory at all⁴. This is often perceived as unfair — either a school *is* ‘Satisfactory’, or it isn’t. Ofsted’s definition of ‘Satisfactory’ (Grade 3 — out of 4, where 4 is ‘Inadequate’) is: “These features are of reasonable quality. A ‘satisfactory’ school is providing adequately for its pupils.” Perhaps ‘adequate’ would be a more accurate label. However, as we shall see, such terms do not capture the characteristics of ‘satisfactory’ schools in relation to school improvement agendas, and we make recommendations accordingly in the final section of this report.

It is also fair to acknowledge that all schools would like to provide the best for their pupils – as Ken Robinson (2010) observes, no one ever argued that standards should go down! Ofsted judgements and grade descriptors are based upon an analysis of the standards of the time, and therefore are periodically reviewed and amended, rather than remaining fixed. Proportionality of different judgements awarded at least to some extent reflects political demands further reflected in the framework applied (which has been subject to change, and is about to change again). This begs questions as to what we want *all* schools to look like, and whether this is possible? Can all schools be ‘good’, or do we need to keep raising the bar to ensure an improving system? Does this latter view implicitly recognise the relative nature of Ofsted categories?

1 E.g. Gray & Streshley (2008).

2 National Challenge provides an example here, as do the ‘Super Heads’ of the previous New Labour administration. Although there may be a question as to how such support will now be provided, given the diminished influence and capacity of Local Authorities.

3 See Lupton, R. (2010).

4 See e.g. then Chief Inspector of Ofsted Christine Gilbert quoted in *The Guardian* (2007) as saying it was no longer enough for schools to be ‘satisfactory’, they should all aspire to be better; and see also Laws (2011).

Nonetheless, the fact remains that some schools are better than others — not just at enabling their pupils to achieve highly in exams, but also at providing engaging pedagogy and curricula that instil a love of learning in their pupils and bring out the best in every child. And from the qualitative data reported below there is no doubt that ‘satisfactory’ schools face particular weaknesses (and often, particular challenges). What continues to confound claims to a socially just education system is the apparent concentration of children from lower socio-economic groups (broadly working class pupils, as well as those in poverty as indicated by Free School Meals), in ‘satisfactory’ (and ‘inadequate’) schools, while their more affluent middle class counterparts are disproportionately represented in ‘good’ schools (Lupton, 2010). If this is the case, those already socially advantaged in society are being further advantaged by their state schooling, where for the disadvantaged the opposite is true.

Hence our study comprised two elements. Firstly, a mapping of schools currently graded ‘Satisfactory’, drawing on Ofsted data to analyse their number, location, pupil demographics, and their progress at inspection. Secondly a qualitative analysis of inspection reports for a sample of schools that are ‘firmly’ ‘satisfactory’. We wanted to see what has held these schools back, what their characteristics are, and to use this analysis to make recommendations for policy and practice.

METHODS AND SAMPLE FOR THE STUDY OF ‘SATISFACTORY’ SCHOOLS

The study focused on state maintained secondary schools in England, including Academies but excluding Special Schools and PRUs⁵.

As noted in the acknowledgements, the work has been conducted with support from Ofsted. Ofsted have supplied data and information as requested, and taken up the focus on ‘satisfactory’ schools in their own work, running their own analysis focusing on what ‘satisfactory’ schools need to do to improve in tandem with the RSA study. Their methodology and focus has been slightly different (as explained further below), and hence on occasion the two reports make reference to each other’s findings.

The quantitative data informing the study are supplied and modelled by Ofsted, in response to requests for data on specific issues. Data addresses all schools judged ‘Satisfactory’ at the time of writing, unless otherwise stated. With respect to analysis concerning Index of Deprivation Affecting Children (IDACI) profiles, the IDACI values for the school is based on the mean IDACI of pupils attending the school.

In the qualitative element of the study, we sought to include schools that are ‘firmly’ ‘Satisfactory’ – apparently stuck at ‘satisfactory’. It is important to note a finding on seeking to identify this sample, of the tendency for fluctuation in and out of the ‘Satisfactory’ category: there are many schools in this middle or lower-middle tranche which fluctuate regularly between ‘Satisfactory’ to ‘Notice to Improve’ or to ‘Good’. For example, only 139 secondary schools in England have been graded ‘Satisfactory’ three inspections in a row (across the period 2000-8 April 2011). However, the much larger number of schools regularly fluctuating in and out of this category provide greater cause for concern, and also perhaps indicates the changing conditions (staff retention issues etc) to which many such schools may be especially subject (Lupton, 2010; Ainscow *et al*, 2010). Since 1 September 2005, 2996 open secondary schools (excluding PRUs and Special Schools) in England have received at least one Ofsted inspection. Of these, just under a third (967) were graded ‘Satisfactory’ at their last inspection; and 473 secondary schools have been judged ‘satisfactory’ at the last two inspections which were carried out under the section 5 school inspection framework that operated from 2005 to 2009.

5 The focus on secondary schools provides a manageable sample for this first study of ‘Satisfactory’ schools, although broadening and contrasting with an analysis of the primary sector comprises important further research. Special Schools and PRUs are excluded due to their distinct sizes and circumstances. Academies are included in the quantitative analysis, but most have not yet been through two inspections as Academies (as distinct from the predecessor school), and consequently only one met our criteria for inclusion in the qualitative sample.

Yet given the strong extent of fluctuation, we did not wish to include fluctuating schools which had only fallen to ‘Satisfactory’ momentarily. Our interest is in schools which have been ‘firmly satisfactory’. Therefore, the RSA worked with Ofsted to identify those schools which have been graded ‘Satisfactory’ at least twice in their last full inspections (hence spanning at least a three year period), and were also graded as having ‘satisfactory’ Capacity to Improve (CTI). Given our interest in ‘firmly satisfactory’ schools, we were interested in this CTI grade due to the indication that the school is likely to continue to remain at this level. A number of these schools had also received monitoring visits between their two inspections.

These criteria generated a sample of 66 secondary schools. A sub-sample of these was drawn which represented a range of area demographics, with a broad geographical spread across England, generating a sub-sample of 36 schools. Ofsted inspection reports for the 36 schools were then subjected to content analysis⁶. These reports were all produced within the 2010-2011 timescale, and related inspection framework (at the time of writing, the framework is due to change, in January 2012).

There is of course academic and policy debate concerning the inspection criteria and quality and value of judgements. Such debates and any conclusions are beyond the scope of this research, although it is important to say that the evidence reflected in reports, and quality of reporting, was generally very impressive⁷. What *is* important to acknowledge is the valid potential criticism that themes identified in the findings here simply reflect Ofsted concerns and criteria, given that inspectors gather data and write to a tight pre-ordained frame, with detailed advice on priorities in judgement in order to achieve consistency between inspections. This certainly does constrain the data and subsequent analysis: further research is needed to build on this study by interviewing stakeholders at ‘satisfactory’ schools (headteachers, teachers, students, parents and others) to access their perspectives and priorities. Nevertheless, the themes identified in this report do not simply map straightforwardly on to Ofsted inspection frameworks – clear trends and priorities emerge beyond the framework. It has also been productive to map the emerging sub-themes and trends within different topics of concern.

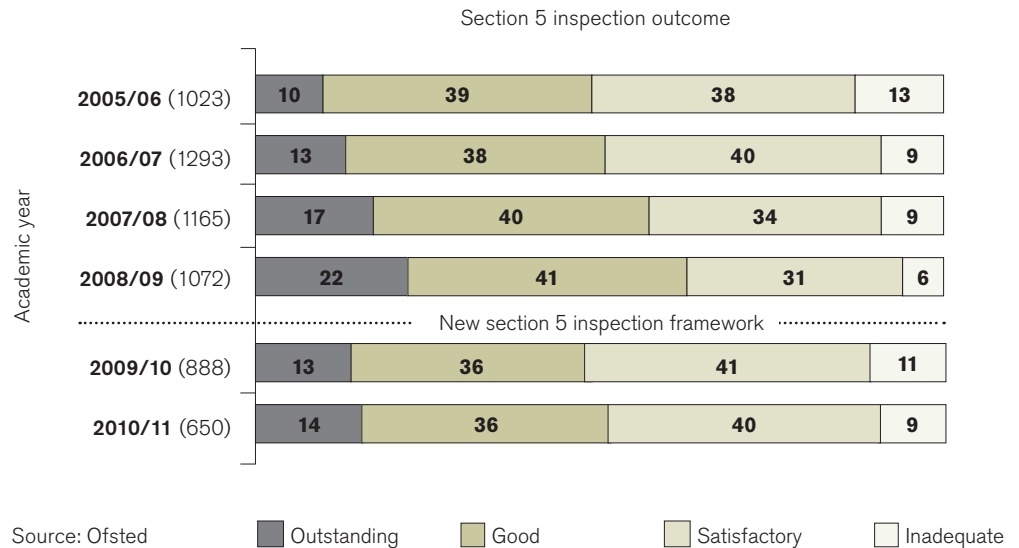
6 Ofsted inspection reports were analysed by two senior research staff, one at the RSA and one at Ofsted, and results compared, affirming the key trends identified. However, the focus and methodologies for the two studies are slightly different: the Ofsted analysis focuses on inspector recommendations to ‘Satisfactory’ schools, and drew on further data including the prior, and any interim, inspection (in addition to the most recent).

7 Judgements as to what constitutes quality pedagogy, and best practice, evidently shift over time. Some examples emerging for this analysis include: the assumption that pupils have different abilities which require a personalised approach; that a balanced curriculum offer that offers both academic and vocational qualifications is beneficial, and so on.

SECTION 2. MAPPING 'SATISFACTORY' SCHOOLS

The proportion of secondary schools inspected in 2010/11 that were graded 'Satisfactory' stood at 40%. Overall, 32% of secondary schools in England (not including Special Schools and PRUs) are graded 'Satisfactory' at their latest inspection.

Figure 1: School effectiveness judgements, by academic year

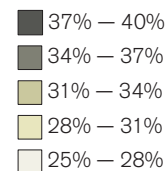


THE LOCATION OF SATISFACTORY SCHOOLS

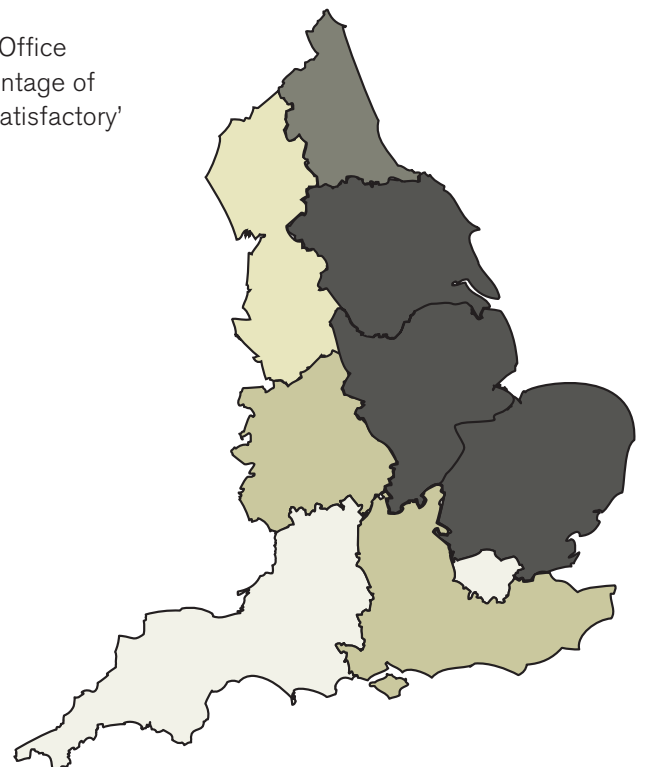
The likelihood of attending a 'satisfactory' school is affected by where you live. Certain parts of England have greater proportions of 'satisfactory' schools — Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands and the East of England regions have the highest proportion⁸. However, the figures also illustrate a relatively narrow band of difference — between 25-40%⁹ (see Appendix 1 for figures).

Figure 2: Map of all Government Office Regions in England and the percentage of secondary schools judged to be 'satisfactory' at latest inspection

Total % Satisfactory in each GOR



Source: Ofsted, ONS

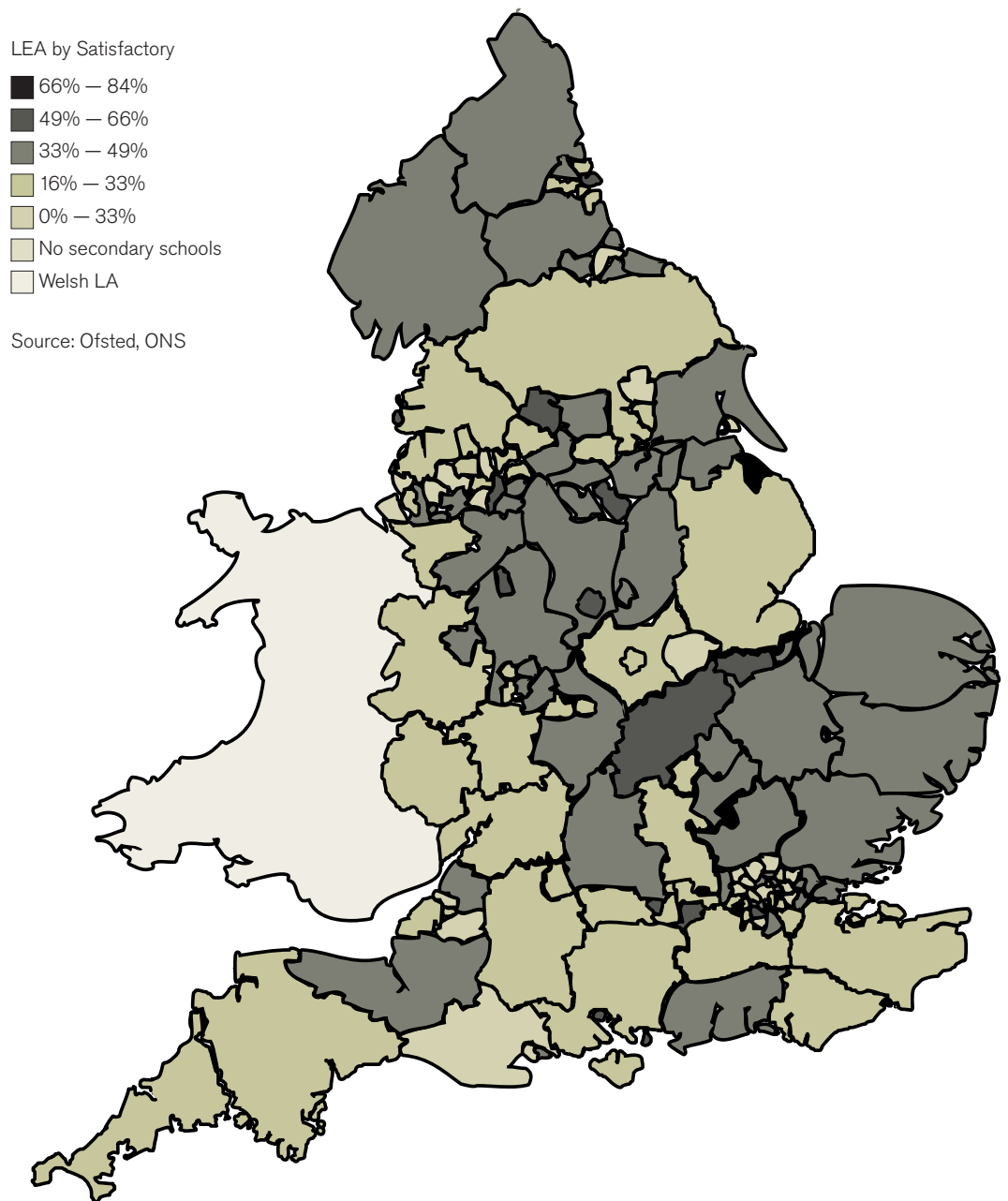


8 Schools judged 'satisfactory' at their last inspection.

9 This of course reflects the point that many of these schools have not yet been re-inspected since the changed inspection framework, the latter of which has designated a higher proportion of 'satisfactory' schools.

Figure 3 illustrates concentrations of ‘satisfactory’ schools according to local authority.

Figure 3: Map of all LAs in England and the percentage of secondary schools judged to be ‘satisfactory’ at latest inspection



Certain Local Authorities have significantly higher proportions of ‘satisfactory’ schools than others (North East Lincolnshire standing out, with Blackpool, Merton, Peterborough, Kingston upon Hull and Bradford all standing at 60% and above). And here the range of difference is far broader than in the case of region (see Appendix 2).

Distributions of ‘satisfactory’ schools do not differ according to concentration of population – there is an even distribution across sparsely to heavily populated areas (rural – urban) (Ofsted data, 2011). ‘Satisfactory’ schools are, however, significantly smaller on average than are other schools. This may possibly reflect capacity concerning budget and limitations in terms of economies of scale (Braun *et al*, 2011). But the number on the school roll does not appear to have a strong bearing on progress or decline following a designation of ‘satisfactory’ (Ofsted data, 2011).

More disadvantaged pupils are consistently less likely to attend a 'good' or 'outstanding' school, and more likely to attend a 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate' school. Whereas for their more affluent counterparts (low IDACI) the reverse is true.

It would be pertinent to know whether there is any tendency for school rolls to *fall* following a designation of 'satisfactory', and indeed whether a falling roll impacts the likelihood of a further judgement of 'satisfactory'; however it was not possible to obtain and fully analyse this data within the timescale — this might comprise an important point for further research.

So who attends these schools? Does the latest data support previous findings that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in these schools (Lupton, 2010)?

In their data analysis Ofsted divides the schools into quintiles (5ths) based on their IDACI scores. IDACI represents a combined score for every local area, based on the proportion of children from low income families. Each child in a school is allocated the IDACI score for the area in which s/he lives. The average of the pupils' scores is then calculated to provide a school-level score. Table 1 shows the percentage of pupils in different IDACI quintiles at different categories of secondary school.

Table 1: Distribution of pupil level IDACI for schools inspected and yet to be inspected by Ofsted as at 8 April 2011

	Percentage of pupils				
	(Highly advantaged)	(Advantaged)		(Disadvantaged)	(Highly disadvantaged)
	Low	Below average	Average	Above average	Above average
Outstanding (670,896)	25	22	19	16	17
Good (1,273,423)	22	21	21	19	17
Satisfactory (903,104)	15	18	20	23	23
Inadequate (101,200)	14	16	22	25	23
Not inspected (85,319)	8	10	16	26	40

Source: Ofsted

Figures may not match publications due to differences in the range of schools used (inspections use Edubase as at 31 March 2011 while RAISEOnline data is correct as at January 2011).

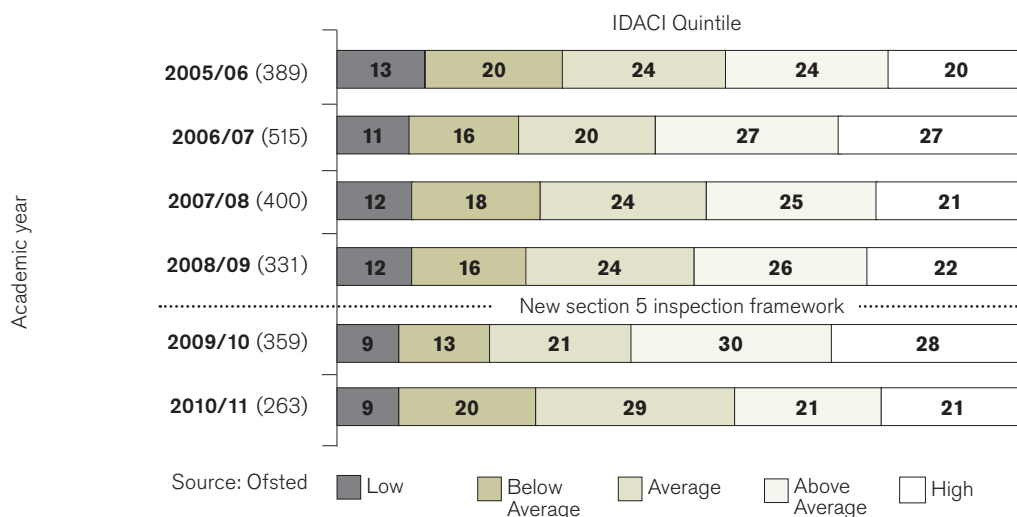
This table illustrates the trend for more affluent pupils to attend better schools. Those in the lower IDACI quintiles (more affluent) are significantly more likely to attend an 'Outstanding' school than those in the two highest quintiles. Likewise, those in the lowest quintile (most affluent) are most likely of all pupils to attend an 'outstanding' school, and least likely to attend a 'satisfactory' and/or 'inadequate' school. Those in the higher quintiles (more disadvantaged pupils) are consistently less likely to attend a 'good' or 'outstanding' school, and more likely to attend a 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate' school. Whereas for their more affluent counterparts (low IDACI) the reverse is true. Table 1 shows that for the more affluent groups there is a consistent pattern wherein the greater their affluence, the more likely are pupils to attend the best quality schools (and the less likely to attend poor ones). In contrast, however, Table 1 also demonstrates that over-representation in poorer quality schools is not just an issue for the *most* disadvantaged children (those from the highest IDACI quintile), but also for less advantaged (working class) pupils more broadly. Indeed, pupils from the 'above average' disadvantage (as opposed to 'high') IDACI quintile were marginally more likely than their highly disadvantaged counterparts to attend an 'inadequate' school, and marginally less likely to attend an 'outstanding' one¹⁰.

The very high concentration of highly disadvantaged pupils in the 'schools not yet inspected' group is explained by the fact these schools largely comprise academies (many of which are too new to have been inspected): 86 of 90 schools that fall into this category are sponsor-led academies. Clearly, their inspection outcomes will be fascinating, and likely have an impact on the overall identified trends.

10 This may reflect successful outcomes from the previous government's strategy of focusing on school improvement in the most deprived areas.

Figure 4 shows the demographic of ‘Satisfactory’ schools since 2005. In all years those schools representing higher IDACI quintiles (i.e. more disadvantaged) comprise significantly larger proportions than those schools representing more affluent counterparts (low IDACI). Across the period 2005/06-2010/11 around 50% of secondary schools found ‘satisfactory’ were in the top two quintiles for representation of disadvantaged pupils/area, meaning they are over-represented in the group of schools catering for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. (It is also worth noting that the most affluent pupils — low IDACI quintile — are especially under-represented in ‘satisfactory’ schools).

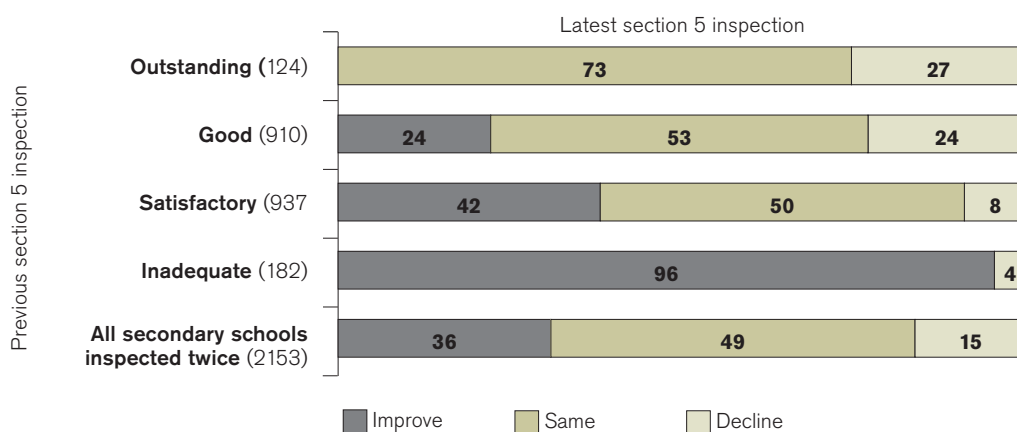
Figure 4: All ‘satisfactory’ secondary schools by their IDACI quintile and by academic year



So the data presented here demonstrates that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in ‘satisfactory’ (and ‘inadequate’) schools. Research shows that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently make the least progress in school (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Ainscow *et al*, 2010). Ainscow *et al* (2010) also report that the impact of schools on attainment can be as significant as social background, and the impact of schools is up to three times greater for disadvantaged pupils – hence school quality has especial impact on disadvantaged pupils. The findings presented in this report demonstrate the quality of their schooling contributes to the poor educational outcomes of these (particularly vulnerable) young people.

Having mapped the location and demographics of ‘satisfactory’ schools, we turn now to focus on the level of flux or otherwise in these schools’ performance in Ofsted inspections. We begin by looking at ‘satisfactory’ schools in relation to schools overall.

Figure 5: Did the school improve, remain or decline in inspection outcomes between previous and latest inspections?



If you send your child to a 'satisfactory' secondary school, they have a 58% chance of the school remaining 'satisfactory' (or worse) by the time they reach Year 11.

Figure 5 shows the trends for schools at all Ofsted categories. Of course, 'Outstanding' schools cannot do better in terms of their category, and for 'Inadequate schools' for the vast majority the only way is up. It is 'Satisfactory' schools that concern us, and it is interesting to see that of these, half remain at 'satisfactory' at their next inspection. 8% decline to 'inadequate'; and encouragingly, 42% are rated as 'Good' or above. This shows the capacity for many 'Satisfactory' schools to improve, confounding any hypotheses that such schools are destined to stagnate.

Table 2 specifically draws out the latest inspection outcomes for those schools previously judged 'Satisfactory':

Table 2: Latest inspection outcomes of schools that were previously 'satisfactory' or better under section 5 schools inspection framework

	Latest inspection outcome (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Outstanding or Good at previous (1,034)	29	49	19	2
Satisfactory at previous (937)	4	38	50	8

Source: Ofsted

As Table 2 reiterates, of those schools judged 'Satisfactory' at their previous inspection, just under half (42%) are judged to improve at their latest inspection. However, 58% did not improve (remained 'satisfactory' or fell to 'inadequate'). This is 37 percentage points higher than those secondary schools found to be 'satisfactory'/'inadequate' at their latest inspection having previously been found 'good' or better. It also illustrates that (given the 3 year inspection cycles for 'satisfactory' schools), if you send your child to a 'satisfactory' secondary school, they have a 58% chance of the school remaining 'satisfactory' (or worse) by the time they reach Year 11.

From the social justice perspective informing this study, it is important to ask *which* of these schools are improving, and which are not, and whether pupil intake has a bearing on this.

Figure 6a: Comparison of the previous and latest inspection of secondary schools that belonged IDACI Quintiles 4 & 5

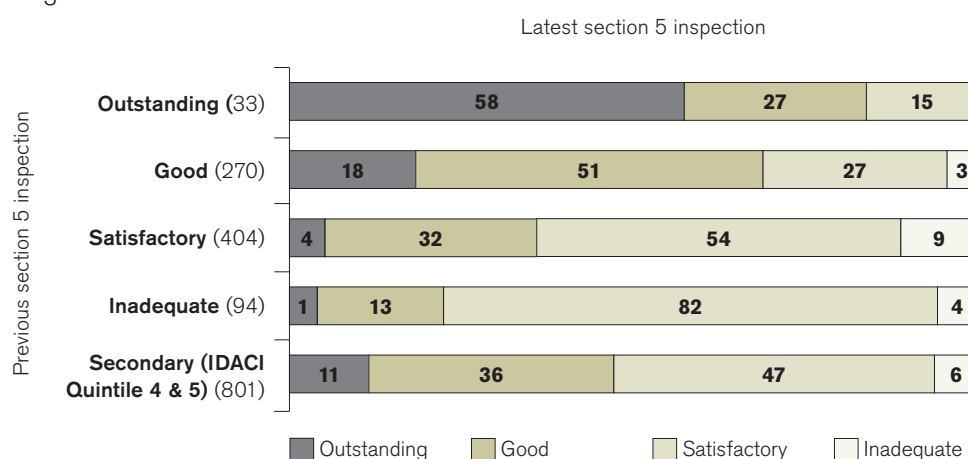
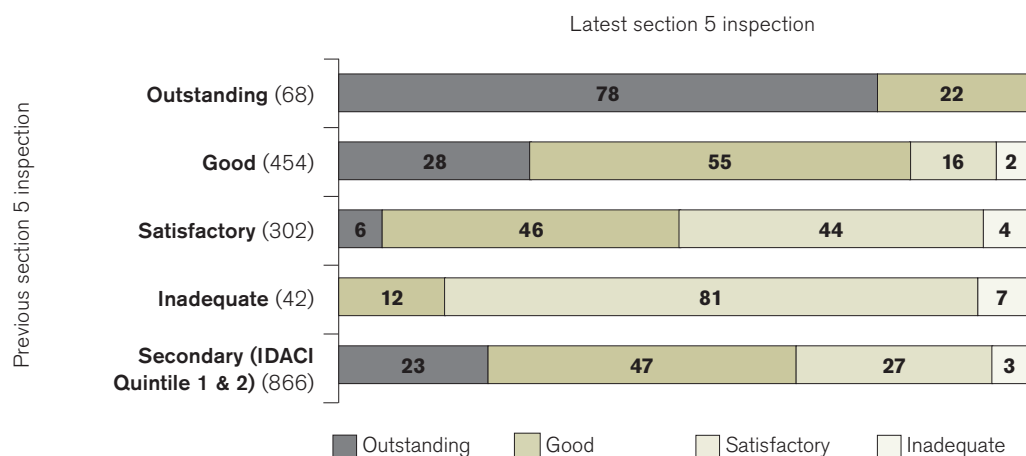


Figure 6b: Comparison of the previous and latest inspection of secondary schools that belonged IDACI Quintiles 1 & 2



Comparing the data from figures 6a and 6b, we can see that schools with IDACI belonging to the fourth and fifth quintiles (above average and highly deprived) are more likely than are those schools with IDACI in the first and second (affluent) quintiles to fall from ‘Outstanding’ to ‘Good’ and ‘Satisfactory’; From ‘Good’ to ‘Satisfactory’ (and less likely to improve to ‘Outstanding’); and more likely to ‘stick’ at ‘Satisfactory’ (and indeed to fall to ‘Inadequate’). Where 52% of ‘satisfactory’ schools belonging to IDACI quintiles 1&2 (affluent) improved, this was true for only 36% of their disadvantaged counterparts. In the specific case of those schools ‘sticking’ at ‘satisfactory’, schools with IDACI belonging to the fourth and fifth quintiles (above average and highly deprived) are significantly more likely to be judged ‘Satisfactory’ again (54%) than are those schools with IDACI in the first and second (affluent) quintiles (44%).

Hence figures 6a and 6b compound the over-all picture emerging from the data presented here, which comprises strong evidence that a) students from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented at ‘satisfactory’ (or worse) schools, and b) that school context/pupil demographic impacts school improvement outcomes.

Some [schools] were facing very sad circumstances. There were many ‘acting headteachers’, many reports of falling rolls, and some uncertain (or certain!) futures.

SECTION 3. WHY ARE THEY ‘SATISFACTORY’? THE PRACTICES OF ‘SATISFACTORY’ SCHOOLS

Several key findings emerged from the analysis of the inspection reports for the 36 schools. The strongest is the importance of teaching and learning. What came across overwhelmingly is the inconsistent quality of teaching and assessment practice within ‘satisfactory’ schools. However, there are specific trends in relation to this wide area that offer useful insight for schools wishing to improve, and for policymakers. Other key findings relate to systems and monitoring, leadership and governance, and (lack of) engagement with parents. There are also a number of emerging issues concerning school context and related capacity.

SCHOOL CONTEXT AND CAPACITY

Building on the quantitative analysis of ‘satisfactory’ school demographics and locations, it seems pertinent to draw out the issue of context first. We had deliberately sampled for diversity in our sub-sample of schools, ensuring representation across different areas of England, and schools with affluent pupil populations as well as those with disadvantaged populations. However, in many cases the inspection report indicates that contextual issues were negatively affecting the school’s capacity to improve.

While this was far from being representative of the majority of the schools, some were facing very sad circumstances. There were many ‘acting headteachers’, many reports of falling rolls, and some uncertain (or certain!) futures. The following is indicative of such reports:

The number of students on roll has fallen since the last inspection. At least 30% of students locally are selected to attend local grammar schools. ... The proportion of students identified by the school with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those with a statement of special educational needs are both well above average. Most of the students identified have moderate learning difficulties and/or behavioural, emotional or social difficulties. ...The school has experienced disruption to staffing at senior and middle leadership levels in recent years...Falling rolls and uncertainty about the school’s long-term future have contributed to a period of instability for students, staff and parents. (School 23, Lincolnshire)

And there were numerous more oblique references to challenging circumstances:

The school is subject to reorganisation proposals and an acting headteacher and deputy headteacher were appointed in January 2010. (School 25, Northumberland)

Leadership change, and challenges in recruiting and retaining staff are noted in many reports, and the Ofsted analysis of consecutive inspection reports highlights these tendencies (especially by the time of the second inspection) (Ofsted, 2011b).

Indeed, a few of the sub-sample schools were noted either as due to close and/or due to convert to academy status. It is important to recognise the impact of such contextual factors on schools’ quality of offer and capacity to improve. While the information in Table 2 above illustrates the extent of potential for ‘Satisfactory’ schools to improve to ‘Good’ and beyond, it is also evident that a cycle of challenging circumstances such as retention and recruitment problems, absence of leadership, and falling rolls (with budgetary implications) makes it more challenging for those schools concerned to improve (Ainscow *et al*, 2010; Braun *et al*, 2011). Implications of such circumstances are developed in the ‘Discussion’ section below.

CARING SCHOOLS?

Related to the issue of context are the various challenges that many schools face due to their specific student demographic. Pupil cohorts reflecting high levels of poverty bring a range of additional challenges and required services, let alone a lesser supply of PTA funds. Diverse cohorts and those with needs such as English as an Additional Language (EAL) generate particular challenges, as do mono-cultural populations. It was noticeable that many of the schools in our sample were rising to such complex challenges to provide good care and inclusivity for their student populations¹¹.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. They respond well to opportunities to reflect on achievements, natural wonders and predicaments affecting human society in different situations in other parts of the world and in this country. The great majority recognise the need to take responsibility for one's own actions. Multicultural awareness is developed well. Students visit Leicester to experience the broad ethnic mix of that community and the RE curriculum includes comparisons with other prominent religions. (School 32, Staffordshire)

Care, guidance and support are good. Potentially vulnerable students, including those in the Specialist Resource Provision for students with physical difficulties and disabilities, are well supported and integrated into the life of the school. The increasing numbers of students learning English for the first time receive good specialist support to help improve their skills. (School 3, Greater London)

However, it is noticeably the case that this admirable level of care is insufficient on its own to gain high grade at inspection. While the effectiveness of pastoral care, guidance and support provided to students was graded good and even outstanding/with outstanding aspects at such schools, the overall grade in the relevant section was always '3', due to lack of pupil progression (and indeed a frequent lack of the assessment and feedback provision deemed integral to 'Care, Guidance and Support' by Ofsted). Hence Ofsted's view is clear that it is not enough to provide a safe, inclusive and pleasant environment for young people (which is a minimum expectation); but that their progress must also be shown to be sufficient to constitute a good or outstanding education. This point is further developed in the 'Discussion' section.

THE CURRICULUM

This point concerning the over-all grade for different inspection sections extended across other categories within the '*Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy learning*' section. Sub-categories may even be graded 'outstanding', but if good or outstanding progress is not present it is very rare for the overall grade not to remain a '3'. This notably included the curriculum sub-category. School curricula were often noted strong, and sometimes graded 2 ('good'):

The curriculum is a strength of the school, particularly for those students who choose to take more vocational pathways in partnership with local training providers and colleges. The overwhelming majority of these students continue in education, employment or training when they leave school. (School 26, Lancashire)

However, in many of the schools it was noted that there were challenges in particular subject areas. A variety of subjects were mentioned, but most frequently English and maths. Indeed, inadequately embedded literacy and numeracy was a common theme. However, it was noticeable that maths teaching and attainment was the most frequently mentioned subject, providing some justification for current concerns about maths teacher supply, as well as maths

¹¹ Of course, this is also true of schools in other categories, especially those in similar locations.

education and qualifications (Vorderman, 2011; Norris, 2011). The following extract is typical:

... elements of provision and outcomes have improved, but there has been little sign of improvement in the quality of teaching and in achievement in mathematics. These are key aspects of the school's core purpose and, despite the good improvements elsewhere, the school's overall effectiveness remains satisfactory. (School 27, Nottinghamshire)

It may be fair to observe that comments reflected little *theory* of curriculum reflected in these judgements, possibly reflecting again the constraints of the Ofsted evaluation schedule. A successful curriculum sometimes appeared to be simply considered one that provides a range of options. For example:

The curriculum is good because it provides a broad range of academic and vocational courses to meet students' needs. (School 15, Cornwall)

This was particularly noticeable in relation to frequent advocacy for a spread of academic and vocational qualifications:

Nevertheless, the range of vocational pathways into training and employment is too narrow to meet the increasingly sophisticated aspirations of students. (School 16, Essex)

Until recently the school offered only a limited range of non-GCSE options in Key Stage 4, but steps have been taken to widen these, for example by suitably extending the vocational options. (School 35, Warwickshire)

It may be that such advice will now change, given the Government's prioritisation of a smaller range of academic subjects. However, with such agendas in mind it may also be important to attend the insightful comment of one inspector that, "The progress is undoubtedly better when activities are relevant to students' interests and aptitudes". (School 20, Derbyshire)

In spite of the limited conceptual engagement with the aims and potential of the curriculum, a number of inspectors do draw attention to a lack of embedding of particular features within the curriculum (e.g. ICT). An absence noted with relative frequency was some schools' lack of promotion of awareness of social and cultural diversity:

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The school has appropriate policies in place and monitors the performance of different groups of students, but inspectors saw few examples of diversity being actively promoted through the curriculum. (School 28, Oxfordshire)

Students demonstrate good spiritual, moral and social skills. Cultural development is evident in opportunities within the curriculum but engagement with different cultural groups is only available to a small proportion of the students. (School 31, Staffordshire)

Indeed, it is encouraging to see Ofsted sending a clear message that diversity and inclusion is not just an issue for schools with diverse catchments (Gain, 1995).

TEACHING QUALITY

Quality of teaching was directly mentioned as a limitation in at least some regard in almost all (all but one) of the 36 schools. This overwhelming finding supports

the raft of evidence showing teacher and pedagogic quality to be the key factor in educational outcomes¹², as recognised in the recent White Paper (2011).

What may reassure practitioners is that such judgements were applied consistently, and were directly related to students' progress, rather than to attainment (see the section on attainment, below). Noticeably, strong subject knowledge is not sufficient in its own right without attention to other aspects of pedagogic practice. For example, School 12 (Bedfordshire) has relatively high attainment:

Based on their previous Key Stage 1 assessments, pupils start with levels of attainment in the core subjects that are above the national average for their age and continue to work at a level higher than that expected nationally. This represents satisfactory progress.....Progress is no better than satisfactory because of limitations in the quality of teaching, the majority of which is satisfactory and only occasionally is good or outstanding. (School 12, Bedfordshire)

Some key concerns over teaching practice were recurrent through the data. These were:

- Inconsistent quality
- Lack of staff collaboration
- Inadequate assessment practice and use of assessment information
- Teacher-dominated pedagogy
- Low expectations
- Lack of extension

Each one will be dealt with in turn.

Inconsistent quality

Inconsistency of good practice was an extremely common feature. Inspectors frequently mention instances of good and sometimes even outstanding teaching and assessment, but observe that this is inconsistently practiced across the school, and/or that mixed (including inadequate) practice results in inconsistent progress for pupils.

However, teaching remains inconsistent across and, to a lesser extent, within subjects, with weak and occasionally inadequate teaching in a small proportion of lessons. (School 3, Greater London)

...an insufficient proportion of good teaching to ensure all students' learn well and make at least the progress expected of them relative to their starting points and capabilities. (School 8, Yorkshire)

Clearly a challenge remains for these schools to ensure best teaching and assessment practice across the board, whether due to a lack of sufficient modelling and peer-review, or due to staff recruitment and retention issues. Certainly, the lack of a systematised approach to identifying, sharing, and rolling out best practice was observed in some cases:

There are missed opportunities for teachers to share good practice more widely across departments and subjects. (School 1, London)

Lack of staff collaboration

This inconsistency sometimes appeared related to lack of collaboration. It was often observed that where there might be examples of good practice in teaching and learning, these were not integrated across the school due to a lack of communication and collaboration. A lack of whole-school approaches and application of good practice in monitoring and assessing achievement were

12 For evidence on the importance of teacher quality as the lead factor in facilitating pupil progress and attainment, see e.g. Thrupp, 1995; Leithwood *et al*, 2006; McKinsey & Company, 2011; Ainscow *et al*, 2010; Sutton Trust, 2011.

The charge of inconsistency was also levelled at assessment as a facet of pedagogy.

frequent features of the ‘satisfactory’ schools, as is elaborated in more detail below. However, it was also specifically noted on some occasions that lack of collaboration between staff – even within single classrooms – was impeding good practice:

On other occasion[s], teachers and teaching assistants do not work closely enough to ensure that students develop the skills necessary to work independently. (School 23, Lincolnshire)

The school does not, as yet, provide sufficient opportunities to share existing good practice in order to improve the overall quality of provision. (School 21, Lancashire)

This lack of collaborative sharing and development may be seen to be an issue for management and leadership of teaching and learning, but also responsibility extends beyond this to all staff regarding professionalism, continued learning, and good practice. It may be a particular issue for middle-leaders, given the point that for many secondary teachers their department is their cultural reference point (Braun *et al*, 2011).

Inadequate assessment practice and use of assessment information

The charge of inconsistency was also levelled at assessment as a facet of pedagogy. In fact, assessment practice was referred to so frequently in the reports, both as a facet of teaching practice and in its own right, that a separate section is devoted to assessment later in this report. However, it is important to flag it up here, as a frequently-referred-to inadequacy in relation to pedagogy. The following remarks are indicative:

Teachers are not identifying precisely enough what students know and can do and where there are gaps in their learning. (School 19, Hull)

Teachers’ planning lacks sufficient detail and focuses more on what the teacher will do, rather than what the students will learn. In these lessons, teachers do not use the assessment data available effectively to plan for the needs of different groups, resulting in lessons that lack sufficient challenge or pace. As a consequence, students are less motivated to learn. (School 1, London)

These extracts reflect a range of concerns, 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. Other comments more specifically focused on assessment practice related to inadequate feedback, and the mechanisms for assessment and feedback, and these are elaborated in the separate section below.

In addition to inconsistency in application of high quality pedagogy, the specific shape of this teaching practice also came in for frequent criticism. Within this, the most commonly mentioned limitation indicative of lessons ‘satisfactory’ or below was the preponderance of ‘teacher dominated’/didactic approaches.

Teacher dominated pedagogy

This tendency for teachers to lecture pupils and dominate inputs in ‘top-down’ approaches was identified time and again:

Sometimes, however, lessons are repetitive and mundane. Teachers sometimes give overly long explanations and work harder than the students. (School 7, Yorkshire)

Teachers often dominate the lessons; they talk knowledgeably and kindly but without expecting the students to contribute or think sufficiently for themselves. (School 4, London)

Indeed, there were so many criticisms of this tendency in teaching practice across the ‘satisfactory’ schools, that sub-themes concerning the negative outcomes of such practice could be discerned, as follows:

- Constraints on pupils’ independent learning

Some satisfactory lessons lack challenge and there is too much teacher talk and direction, restricting students’ opportunities to share ideas, challenge their own thinking or develop independent learning skills. (School 9, Tyne-and-Wear)

- Lack of extension/reinforcement of learning

At times, teachers spend too long on one task and the lesson is dominated by the teacher talking, so that students lack opportunities to articulate what they have learnt. (School 36, West Sussex)

- Negative impact on classroom behaviour

There was overt recognition that such teacher-led approaches led to boring, monotonous lessons, and a resulting disengagement by pupils:

In weaker lessons, teachers tend to lecture the class and pupils become less engaged. (School 4, London)

Further, that such disengagement frequently led to disruption in class which impeded the learning of the majority:

Less successful lessons tend to be teacher directed, with few opportunities to apply independent skills, and this slows the pace of learning. In a few lessons that do not engage them, some students become involved in low-level disruption. (School 15, Cornwall)

Some lessons are dull and low-level disruption on the part of some students impairs their learning and that of others. (School 21, Lancashire)

This tendency could be addressed by school leaders via CPD and via the modelling of best practice in the use of a variety of teaching and formative assessment methods. However, it may be that such ‘top down’ pedagogic approaches also reflect teacher anxiety about the need to ensure and drill content coverage, and/or a distrust of the ability of their students to work adequately independently or in groups. There may also be a dual relationship with practice around behaviour: because the teachers are not confident about student behaviour, they revert to traditional approaches to ‘control’ (including teacher-led pedagogies), which of course entrenches problems (see e.g. Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, forthcoming; Bloom, 2011). Indeed, these latter possibilities appeared to be indicated in a few inspector observations concerning the low expectations some teachers held of their pupils.

Low expectations

Very occasionally, lessons are inadequate because they are pitched at the wrong level. For example, a few teachers’ expectations of what students can achieve are too low. Lessons that are no better than satisfactory suffer from being too teacher led with tasks not adapted for the range of abilities in the classroom. (School 3, Greater London)

...the expectations for the lowest-attaining students have been too low. (School 5, Merseyside)

Clearly, there is a difficult balance, especially in schools where pupils are from disadvantaged social backgrounds and achievement has been low, between ensuring that pupils have a secure foundation of knowledge and skills to

However, it remains vital that a practitioner culture of low-expectations does not develop in schools as applied to ‘our pupils’ and/or specific groups of pupils.

enable exam success, and in supporting them to become independent, creative learners. Again, it would be wrong to suggest that context has no bearing on the possibilities of pedagogy and curriculum. However, it remains vital that a practitioner culture of low-expectations does not develop in schools as applied to ‘our pupils’ and/or specific groups of pupils (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Braun *et al*, 2011). Such attitudes can lead to an ‘excuses’ culture that is defied by the success of other schools in even the most disadvantaged areas. Specifically, it can reflect negative stereotyping (e.g of White working class and/or African Caribbean heritage pupils) that manifests in a lack of equal opportunities for such groups.

Lack of extension

A consequence of both teacher-led approaches and low expectations was a lack of extension for students’ learning, in terms of being able to explore and build on their learning, or extend their skills.

... teaching is not always sufficiently challenging, there is too much teacher talk and this limits students’ opportunities to take responsibility for their learning or develop collaborative or independence skills. (School 14, Middlesbrough)

Lesson plans are often no more than a list of activities, and do not identify well-structured opportunities to develop students’ knowledge, understanding and skills. (School 28, Oxfordshire)

Such limitations have implications for student engagement and independent learning.

ASSESSMENT

Although an integral aspect of teaching and learning, limitations in assessment practice were noted so extensively that they are therefore attended in an individual section here. Concerns over various aspects of assessment practice were specifically articulated by inspectors in nearly all the schools (see also Ofsted, 2010). These concerns related both to practice in assessment of learning (i.e. in the classroom with direct feedback to teaching), and to target setting, tracking, and intervention. A lack of consistency was, again, a repetitive theme. In many schools it was observed that pockets of good practice exist, but that this is not consistent across the school concerned. Inspectors frequently referred to several different limitations within single schools. The following example is indicative:

In some lessons, however, teachers’ learning objectives did not sufficiently assess and take into account the full range of students’ prior attainment, and teachers did not check the knowledge and skills students were acquiring before moving on to the next activity. There are a few good examples of assessment and marking but, across the curriculum, the quality of oral and written feedback on students’ work, including marking, is inadequate. (School 34, Surrey)

These criticisms fell into several different discernable categories, as follows:

- Inconsistency in application of assessment data in planning
- Inconsistency in feedback
- Inconsistency in checking progress/following up
- Quality of feedback
- Imprecise targets
- Limited methods

Inconsistency in use of assessment data in lesson planning

It was frequently noted that in some schools, the assessment data available was not used (or used consistently) by teachers to inform the design of lesson plans and/or work with individual students.

There is too much inconsistency in the way that teachers use assessment and school-held data to inform lesson planning. (School 19, Yorkshire)

This also related to a specific concern at imprecision in target-setting:

Imprecise targets

There are pockets of good practice in assessment but teachers do not always ... provide specific targets to help students, particularly the more able, to make consistently good progress and raise attainment. (School 16, Essex)

Inconsistency in feedback

A further recurrent concern was about inconsistent feedback to students (both in terms of written and oral feedback):

There is some inconsistency in the extent to which staff apply agreed protocols for marking and feedback. These inconsistencies are reinforcing some students' slow progress. (School 8, Yorkshire)

This of course also relates to *quality* of feedback.

Quality of feedback

The following extracts rather speak for themselves:

Some marking is sharp, giving students precise information on how to improve, but sometimes marking lacks detail and guidance on how students should improve or there is no marking at all. (School 7, Yorkshire)

Students usually know their targets but not necessarily how to reach them. Inspectors saw few examples of marking which provided helpful and explicit guidance on how to improve. (School 28, Oxfordshire)

Also variable is the quality of marking...Some staff make comments which are not followed up. In a few cases very little marking was evident. (School 6, Merseyside)

What is noticeable here is not just the striking inadequacy in some cases, but also the relative ease by which the situation might be remedied.

Inconsistency in checking progress/following up

A further point noted in just a few instances related to a lack of 'follow-through' on assessment.

Likewise, while there is exemplary practice in marking, too often students do not respond to guidance given, either because it is unspecific or because it is not followed up. (School 35, Warwickshire)

Limited methods

The final aspect was a lack of variety of methods in assessment practice.

There are a few examples of pupils assessing their own and others' learning but this is limited. Marking in books is too inconsistent and does not sufficiently inform pupils how well they are doing and how they can improve. (School 12, Bedfordshire)

However, this lack of variety and inclusion of peer/self assessment methods was noted — perhaps surprisingly — infrequently. Indeed, given the common references to inadequacies in other aspects of assessment (such as application in lesson planning, and feedback), and the recognised importance of assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al* 2003), it would be interesting to know whether this lack of comment reflected (adequate) practice in the schools or a lack of focus on this aspect in Ofsted criteria/guidance.

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

There were negative allusions to pupils' behaviour from inspectors in around half the sub-sample of 'satisfactory' schools (I am differentiating here inspector observations from the reported concerns of parents sometimes mentioned, which were not always substantiated by observations). We have already seen the relatively-common references to poor classroom behaviour linked to poor quality teaching. However, there were further observations relating to general trends, or particular issues such as behaviour in school corridors. Indicative examples include:

There is a lack of self-discipline and independence demonstrated by some students both in and out of lessons. A minority of students also commented negatively on the behaviour of others... [in some lessons] students become distracted resulting in behaviour which disrupts both their own and others learning. (School 18, Hull)

In some lessons, however, their behaviour was not good and disrupted learning for others. (School 6, Merseyside)

It was notable that in some schools discipline in classroom transfer and punctuality was inadequate.

[Behaviour] can be variable. Some students are slow in settling down, are inattentive and prone to chatter. (School 2, London)

Congestion in the corridors at lesson changeover leads to occasional incidents of over-boisterous behaviour. Punctuality of a minority is poor both at lesson changeover and at the start of the school day. (School 3, Greater London)

This is an important aspect of whole-school systems and management, as it has a detrimental impact on the amount of lesson time devoted to teaching and learning, which if added up over a school year can amount to a significant proportion of learning lost for students (Francis *et al*, 2011)¹³.

Within class, there were concerns about inadequate behaviour management on the part of some teachers:

In addition, a very small number of staff do not always tackle unacceptable behaviour effectively. (School 11, Bristol)

But students express clear dissatisfaction about the disruption caused by the poor behaviour in lessons of a small minority. Many feel that behaviour is not managed consistently well by all teachers and that the quality of teaching varies between and within subjects. Most students say they feel safe in school and know to whom to go if they have any concerns about safety or bullying. However, students who spoke to inspectors said they were aware of incidents of bullying taking place. (School 28, Oxfordshire)

13 Besides enculturating bad practice concerning punctuality and preparedness that may impact on young people beyond schooling.

Although there were no high grades for teaching and learning where attainment was poor, there were cases where aspects of teaching and learning were noted and graded as limited, even where attainment was good — the focus is not simply on attainment outcomes.

While these observed problems obviously ranged from the minor to the more significant, it was notable that a) teaching quality and classroom behaviour were often seen to be linked, and b) problems were sometimes indicative of a lack of effectively applied school systems with regard to behaviour:

In a few lessons that do not engage them, some students become involved in low-level disruption. There are clear procedures for managing behaviour, but they are not applied consistently. Consequently, behaviour overall is satisfactory rather than good. (School 15, Cornwall)

ATTAINMENT

As we have seen, Ofsted concern and commentary tends to be directed more at pupil progress than attainment. Although there were no high grades for teaching and learning where attainment was *poor*, there were cases where aspects of teaching and learning were noted and graded as limited, even where attainment was good — the focus is not simply on attainment outcomes. This finding is supported by quantitative data provided by Ofsted, which shows that of those that had improved from ‘satisfactory’ to ‘good’ (and above) at their latest inspection, 54% had below average attainment. Meanwhile, the ‘learning and progress’ of schools found to be ‘satisfactory’ at their latest and previous inspections were largely ‘satisfactory’ (95%), whereas those that have improved from ‘satisfactory’ were usually judged to have good (or better) learning and progress (94%. Source: Ofsted, 2011b).

Reflecting the greater attention to the issue of progress, comments on actual attainment were relatively infrequent in the sub-sample inspection reports. However, it was mentioned in a few cases, e.g:

Despite these improvements, standards, including the proportion of students who gain five or more GCSEs at grades A to C, remain low. (School 6, Merseyside)*

Standards over time for Year 8 pupils have been broadly average but attainment for those in Year 6 has been weaker and in mathematics significantly below average. (School 30, Somerset)

As this latter quote indicates, concerns around attainment tended to be specifically related to key subjects (maths and English – and especially maths). Indeed a predominant concern relating to achievement more broadly related to ‘the basics’ of numeracy and literacy.

Basics not in place

A concern at inadequacies in relation to numeracy and literacy was articulated in over a third of cases. For example:

The curriculum’s successes are hindered from being outstanding by the underdeveloped nature of literacy and numeracy in some other subjects. (School 11, Bristol)

The school does not have a literacy strategy that effectively addresses common weaknesses in spelling, grammar and punctuation, across all subjects and year groups, including in the sixth form. Owing to weak written and oral skills, a number of students do not demonstrate the necessary skills for the world of work. (School 34, Surrey)

In such cases, it was often observed that there was a lack of embedding of such key skills across the curriculum.

On occasion there was clear indication that these limitations had been exacerbated by contextual issues impacting on school and staff capacity:

This example yet again highlights the impact of capacity and staffing issues on 'satisfactory' outcomes.

However, progress in securing all the improvements needed in English and mathematics has been slow and the changes to the middle-management structure, having been delayed by a now resolved senior manager's absence, are not yet embedded. (School 29, Shropshire)

Attainment in English and mathematics has been poor, largely owing to staffing difficulties. (School 21, Lancashire)

QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT/GOVERNANCE

Just over two-thirds of the reports included reference to weaknesses in an aspect (or aspects) of leadership or governance. Just occasionally such criticism extended to all aspects of leadership:

...there are still some inconsistencies in the quality of leadership and management, at all levels, resulting in variation in the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning, and in the implementation and monitoring of planned improvements. (School 31, Staffordshire)

But far more often concern was directed at particular staff groups, as follows:

- Headteachers (or their absence)
- The Senior Leadership Team
- Governors
- Middle management/subject leaders

Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team

Headteachers were almost never singled out directly (again reflecting Ofsted policy, as direct criticism of leadership as a whole could trigger Notice to Improve [if the education being provided was at least satisfactory] or Special Measures [if it were not]). The only instance of the headteacher's role being directly mentioned was in reference to the *lack* of a head:

...the pace of improvement is constrained because there is no substantive headteacher and this contributes to capacity to improve being only satisfactory. (School 25, Northumberland)

This example yet again highlights the impact of capacity and staffing issues on 'satisfactory' outcomes. Indeed, Ofsted's longitudinal analysis sheds further light, showing that a characteristic of 'satisfactory' schools with weaker leadership is that they do not seem able to sustain progress across the board: while certain areas previously identified as weak may have been addressed by the following inspection, they have often then fallen back in other areas (Ofsted, 2011b).

More usually, 'leaders' are referred to in the plural, suggesting reference to the headteacher and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) (and potentially beyond). These references frequently referred to whole-school approaches (or the lack of them) – for example, *lack of whole school monitoring and analysis* or *lack of whole school systems to model best practice*:

...a lack of a whole-school improvement strategy and rigour in leaders' action planning. Whole-school development plans are not sharp enough and do not have measurable success criteria which can be used at regular intervals to check on how well improvements are progressing. (School 5, Merseyside)

...there is still some variation in the quality of leadership and management at all levels, resulting in a lack of consistency in the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning, and in the implementation and monitoring of planned procedures and policies. (School 13, Bedfordshire)

Such limitations were noted to impede accurate information and assessment, and hence to impede the ability of leaders to identify and remedy practice which requires improvement. These criticisms concerning systems implementation and resulting evaluation were occasionally specifically levelled at the SLT, especially with regard to their management of staff:

The senior leadership team holds a broadly accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses within the school. However, self-evaluation is not consistently rigorous enough, nor are staff held sufficiently to account to secure rapid improvement in outcomes for all students. (School 26, Lancashire)

This reflects a further finding of the Ofsted analysis, that leadership of teaching appeared a consistent weakness in non-improving schools (Ofsted, 2011b), with evidence that some SLTs were not contributing to modelling and leading best practice. Certainly, given the findings concerning inconsistent quality in teaching and learning, it appears vital that senior leaders are leading teaching, and nurturing professionalism in terms of sharing good practice and reflective development, throughout the team.

Governors

The governing body came in for relatively frequent criticism within the sub-sample schools. The different concerns are listed here, with an example from the data to illustrate each.

Lack of strategic direction:

The effectiveness of the governing body is satisfactory...the strategic direction they give is too weak in some aspects of the school's performance, including their monitoring of action plans. (School 2, London)

Lack of challenge:

The governing body ... are not fully aware of the areas for improvement needed by the school and do not take a lead role in holding the school to account for its actions and outcomes. (School 13, Bedfordshire)

Insufficient rigour/lack of awareness:

Governance is satisfactory. The governing body is supportive but is not fully involved in school improvement planning and school self-evaluation. Therefore, whilst there are many examples of it challenging the school and holding it to account, the monitoring by the governing body of the school's progress lacks rigour. (School 26, Lancashire)

Inward facing:

The governing body meets its statutory responsibilities and is supportive but has not systematically sought the views of stakeholders. (School 16, Essex)

Lack of capacity:

Governors bring many strengths to the school but their workload has increased because there are currently too many vacancies on the governing body.

Schools and their governing bodies need to invest energy in securing committed and appropriately expert governors, and encouraging CPD for governing bodies and individual members.

Governors regularly receive detailed and accurate reports and updates from the Headteacher and other staff. However, they are too dependent on them which means that they are rarely able to challenge or make comparisons with local or national statistics. Whilst suitable targets and action plans are agreed, the systematic monitoring of progress towards them by governors is underdeveloped. (School 33, Suffolk)

Additional, specific issues (nb/ safeguarding arose especially frequently):

Support provided by the governors is satisfactory, but the governing body has not challenged the school sufficiently about its policies and monitoring procedures regarding safeguarding and behaviour issues. Safeguarding procedures are sufficient to ensure students' safety; there are minor administrative lapses in risk assessments, detailed recording and follow-through of procedures. (School 34, Surrey)

This does suggest that governance remains an issue for many 'Satisfactory' schools. Clearly, such findings suggest that schools and their governing bodies need to invest energy in securing committed and appropriately expert governors, and encouraging CPD for governing bodies and individual members. However, again, the capacity issues alluded to in the inspection commentaries suggest that some schools will find such remedy easier than others.

Middle management/subject leaders

Criticism of middle management was relatively frequent, and tended to reflect inconsistent management, as well as explanations for the above noted inconsistencies in teaching and learning. *Lack of systematisation and modelling* again arose frequently, e.g.

As yet, the heads of department do not ensure that all staff are using assessment information about students' progress to inform their individual learning needs in lessons. (School 14, Middlesbrough)

Such limitations sometimes resulted in *over-optimistic conclusions in self-evaluation* and/or concerning pupil progress.

The quality of middle management is variable and this can be seen in the contribution made by middle managers to the school's self-evaluation. (School 2, London)

Again, *inconsistent quality* was frequently noted:

However the quality of subject leadership is variable and some subject leaders are not yet contributing fully to the school's drive for improvement. (School 10, Bristol)

And *weak management* was also identified:

As yet heads of departments do not hold their teams fully to account for the use of assessment information to inform learning. (School 9, Tyne-and-Wear)

Indeed, some would see such weakness reflected in lack of consistent good quality in teaching and learning. A further interesting finding concerned *capacity for change*. It appeared that in some cases 'root and branch' changes – while necessary – were being implemented at a rate that was unsustainable and lowering staff morale and capacity as a result:

Some staff have not had sufficient time and training to help them adapt to, and feel confident in, their new roles and responsibilities, and in implementing

A striking finding from the sub-sample inspection reports was a tendency for scant parent engagement.

revised working practices. Recent changes in the school represent a significant and rapid change of culture for many staff, students and parents and carers, which has led to a sense of uncertainty and anxiety for many, reflected in their responses to the inspection questionnaires. (School 28, Oxfordshire)

Relatedly, in some cases it seemed that there was insufficient existing capacity to successfully enable the necessary changes:

A range of strategies, guidance and training to help teachers improve have been deployed, but this has been overwhelming for some teachers and there is a lack of clarity about exactly what is expected. Although subject leaders are involved in new initiatives and various working groups, they do not have a lead role in quality assuring the work of their own teams and are not sufficiently able to model good practice and to tackle any underperformance. (School 27, Loughborough)

These findings raise an important point for senior leaders seeking to implement school improvement. Although there may be clear whole school changes that need to be made, and which build directly from research evidence, there needs to be a capacity audit and resulting measures to address weaknesses before/simultaneous to the introduction of these whole school approaches. School improvement needs to be both staggered and resourced.

However, the most frequently-mentioned aspect relating to all levels of management was that of monitoring and systems.

Monitoring/systems

Inadequacies in monitoring systems were mentioned directly in two-thirds of the sub-sample inspection reports. There were several different concerns, as follows:

- Lack of systems
- Lack of whole school analysis
- Lack of consistency in systems and their application
- Insufficient information with which to hold staff to account
- Over optimism

As these themes repeat many of those already highlighted, they are not elaborated substantially here. Suffice to say that at some schools there was a noted absence of effective and systematic approaches to monitoring pupil progress and attainment, lack of use of existing data (such as RaiseOnline), and lack of analysis to inform whole-school or subject-level approaches. Also mentioned was lack of systemisation concerning the monitoring of teaching quality to ensure best practice, inform CPD and so on. At other schools such systems were in place, but inconsistently used and applied. The resulting lack of accuracy in monitoring progress (or lack of progress) potentially led to: a) over-optimistic assessments, and b) a lack of attention to particular areas of weakness, or to the needs of particular student groups. As we have seen, such weaknesses also sometimes led to a lack of application of assessment data ‘at the chalk face’ by teachers, concerning lesson planning, and their feedback to students.

(LACK OF) PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Finally, a striking finding from the sub-sample inspection reports was a tendency for scant parent engagement, as indicated by questionnaire returns, along with some trends emerging from these questionnaires in parental concerns about their children’s schooling.

For a start, there was a trend towards very low response rates in the parent forms returned to inspectors at the ‘satisfactory’ schools, as part of the inspection process. The returns were frequently noted by inspectors as ‘low’ or ‘extremely low’. This was not always the case, and in any case Ofsted find that the return rate for these forms in secondary schools tends to be low. However, especially remarkable cases among the 36 sample schools included:

- School 1, London: 21 questionnaires returned, 931 pupils at the school
- School 7, Yorkshire: 14 questionnaires returned, 943 pupils at the school (“Only 1.5% of parents and carers responded to the questionnaire.”)

Of those questionnaires returned, especially noteworthy was the high number of cases where concern was expressed by parents about engagement. For example, of concerns expressed by over 10% of respondents in individual school cases, the most frequent indicated disagreement was with the Ofsted questionnaire statement “the school helps me to support my child’s learning”. Only slightly less frequently represented was a negative response to the return “the school takes account of my suggestions/concerns”. There were several other areas of frequent anxiety, notably including behaviour (the second most frequently articulated concern by parents across schools); but also including for example their child’s progress, healthy eating, teaching/management quality and so on. But the extent of concern at lack of engagement — reflected in schools’ listening to parents and/or providing information to facilitate parents to support their children’s learning — was striking. Many teachers and senior leaders will complain in response that they go to great lengths to engage parents, and indeed to inform them as to how to support their offspring’s learning. Nevertheless, this finding is a timely reminder that not all parents feel this is happening.

WHAT DOES THE SCHOOL NEED TO DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

Of course, each inspector’s report contains a list of recommendations that the school needs to address to secure improvement. Given the extent of analysis above concerning the various key issues for which ‘Satisfactory’ schools were criticised, a full elaboration is not undertaken here (especially given the inspector recommendations tend to directly reflect the criticisms made in each case). Moreover, the inspector recommendations are the subject of close analysis in the report Ofsted have produced from the study data (Ofsted, 2011b). However, there are some points worth making briefly here.

One is, that teaching and learning was mentioned as an aspect to address in the recommendations of almost all of the reports. This again reiterates the importance of this issue, and its centrality to both quality of offer, and school improvement. Recommendations to secure improved teaching and learning constructively represented the various critical themes identified above. This was similarly the case concerning leadership and management, mentioned in almost two-thirds of the inspection report recommendation sections.

What is also noticeable is that the recommendations are usually quite generic, rather than giving specific suggestions about how the recommended action might be achieved. Indeed many reflected specific ‘Ofsted phraseology’. Indicative examples include:

“Ensure that teaching is good in all lessons so that:

- *activities enable students to develop and use independent learning skills through paired and small group work*
- *work is always matched to the prior learning of different groups of students*
- *students have regular verbal and written feedback so that they know what they can do and how to improve.”* (School 13, Bedfordshire)

The future of the school is crucial in relation to securing standards, and good outcomes for young people; begging the question that if this is not the responsibility of Ofsted, what other agency is responsible?

“Ensuring that teaching is good in all lessons so that:

- *students have regular verbal and written feedback so that they know what they can do and how to improve during lessons*
- *work is always matched to the prior learning of different groups of students*
- *activities enable students to take more responsibility for their learning by developing and using independent learning skills.”* (School 31, Staffordshire)

In other cases recommendations were a little more elaborated, but in all cases are restricted to a brief bullet point list. The focus is on what to do, rather than how to do it. Likewise, there is no scope in the recommendations section format for allusion to the context of the schools and the specific challenges faced, which were sometimes articulated in the overall report. (Although it may be that such recognition underpins the particular recommendations.) This does beg a question concerning the onus on critique in inspections rather than support for improvement. Clearly a key purpose of Ofsted inspections is to secure quality via benchmarking, and rigorously holding underperforming schools to account. It may be argued that their responsibility is for accurate assessment, rather than for the future of the school concerned — and indeed Ofsted is only resourced to this end. However, the future of the school is crucial in relation to securing standards, and good outcomes for young people; begging the question that if this is not the responsibility of Ofsted, what other agency is responsible? Local Authorities have powers for school intervention, and schools have budgets for professional development; however mechanisms for engineering improvement are often not applied. The analysis in this report highlights this point, and the urgent need for ‘Satisfactory’ schools to be supported to improve.

These findings comprise an indictment regarding (lack of) equality of opportunity, and contribute to the explanation as to why Britain has one of the poorest records for social mobility in the developed world.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION

The main findings of this mapping and analysis of ‘Satisfactory’ schools in relation to social inequality are threefold.

1. That children from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely to be found in ‘Satisfactory’ schools than those from more affluent backgrounds.
2. That over half schools judged ‘Satisfactory’ have not improved at their next inspection, and that disadvantaged pupils are more concentrated in those schools that do not improve.
3. That insufficient good practice in teaching and learning remains the key reason that schools are judged ‘Satisfactory’.

‘Satisfactory’ schools, then, comprise an issue for social justice and social mobility. Pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be receiving a mediocre education, raising questions around (lack of) equality of opportunity. But further, given this, far from being compensated for their backgrounds by schooling, many of these young people are also being further disadvantaged in the consequent educational outcomes resulting from their (poorer quality) schooling, reducing their chance of access to elite post-16 routes that secure social mobility. These findings comprise an indictment regarding (lack of) equality of opportunity, and contribute to the explanation as to why Britain has one of the poorest records for social mobility in the developed world (OECD, 2010).

The findings presented illuminate what ‘Satisfactory’ schools need to do better, and their distinction from ‘Outstanding’ and ‘Good’ schools in their lack of consistent excellence (especially in teaching and learning). The findings concerning the relationship between school quality and pupil social background reiterate the urgency for schools to be securing good progress for their pupils *beyond* providing a safe and pleasant environment for young people, as a fundamental matter of equality of opportunity. However, the quantitative data from Ofsted, and comments in the inspection reports, illuminate the point that contexts are not equal, and the bearing this has¹⁴. This point is essential to recognise. As Braun *et al* (2011) remind us, ‘context’ includes multi-faceted but crucial elements including: situated (locale, intakes, history etc), professional (culture and values of the school), material (budget, staffing, infrastructure) and external (audits and perceptions of performance, etc). Moreover, in a highly sensitive, performative market environment, evidence suggests that even ‘blips’ can affect school reputations and precipitate consequences for capacity, including in terms of recruitment and retention, and pupil rolls and demographics (Braun *et al*, 2011). Although models of outstanding schooling and correspondingly high attainment in areas of social disadvantage are held up as exemplars, demonstrating the potential achievability of excellent schooling and outcomes irrespective of context, there is no doubt that schools in areas of social disadvantage face a range of challenges that mean they have to work harder to secure these outcomes.

Occasionally, this point that circumstances of schools impact on outcome was directly acknowledged by inspectors, e.g:

The school works in a very demanding environment with high student mobility, exceptionally low student skills on entry and increasing numbers of students who are at the early stages of acquiring English. This challenging context has been exacerbated by some instability in staffing caused by the long-term absence of several teachers. In the face of these additional pressures the school is coping admirably and on balance, provides students with a satisfactory quality of education and delivers satisfactory value for money. (School 8, Yorkshire)

¹⁴ See e.g. Ainscow & West, 2007; Ainscow *et al*, 2010; Lupton, 2003; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen (forthcoming), for discussion.

However, this research suggests that some schools may be too stretched to meet the diverse range of challenges demanded. And this is especially true for those schools — whether in disadvantaged areas or otherwise — that have been locked in a cycle of challenging circumstances.

It may be that an Ofsted judgement of ‘Satisfactory’ actually increases the likelihood of individual schools succumbing to such a cycle (see Gorard *et al*, 2002; Matthews & Sammons, 2005). Indeed, this would be a logical outcome of the ‘choice agenda’. Both teachers and parents that have choices are likely to select ‘better quality’ schools at which to work or send their children, and hence these schools are likely to attract those teachers and families that have little choice¹⁵. Retention (and recruitment) of quality staff is especially key, given the importance of teaching and learning on progress outcomes (indeed, the Ofsted analysis highlights the numbers of references to staffing issues within the sub-sample inspection reports and evidence; Ofsted 2011). Hence the cycle of challenging circumstances may potentially lead in turn to a cycle of decline: falling school rolls, Notice to Improve, then closure.

Clearly, the majority of these schools avoid such fates. However, it is arguable that rather than pretend all schools exist on a level playing field, the system needs to retain an acknowledgement of the additional lengths to which schools in diverse/ challenging areas are going in provision for young people, with ensuing capacity issues. This recognition does not necessitate lower expectations. Indeed, if we are concerned to narrow the existing socio-economic gap for achievement it is absolutely right that schools are assessed for pupil progress in addition to care and inclusion. However: a) acknowledgement of context needs to be retained in analysis of progress (Sammons *et al*, 1997), and b) the additional capacity required to level the playing field for outcomes needs to be properly factored into models of resource distribution.

Finally, especially given the cycles of challenge which some of the sub-sample schools were facing, it appears socially responsible to have a facility for support, as well as one for holding schools to account. This might be arguable in any case, but is accentuated by the point that working class young people are disproportionately represented in these schools. If we are to move to a school system which is good (and better) across the board, schools identified by Ofsted as below that expectation must be supported to improve. The instigation and practice of the National Challenge somewhat reflected this logic, albeit the application to ‘Satisfactory’ schools would broaden such an approach considerably.

So recommendations for policy to improve ‘satisfactory’ schools need to: a) provide a supportive structure that incentivises good teaching; and simultaneously b) better hold these schools to account for improvement.

Our recommendations attending to both aspects are presented in the next section. But in terms of the former, the above discussion begs the question as to what such a support facility might look like? It seems unlikely that Ofsted could provide this as an aspect of its existing remit: its focus is on identifying different standards of practice, and on doing so in a rigorous and consistent manner. Hence while Ofsted inspectors identify what a ‘satisfactory’ school needs to do to improve, it is beyond their current remit to provide details (let alone resources of support) on how to achieve this. This being said, the ‘recommendations for improvement’ section of inspection reports, while remaining relatively generalised, is more detailed since the introduction of the 2009 Inspection Framework. Moreover, Ofsted are already involved in more detailed action planning for improvement in schools under Special Measures. A move to Ofsted becoming an improvement agency (in addition to its current role as ‘an agent for improvement’) is not, then, untenable; funding permitting¹⁶.

15 For example, families who do not have the financial resources to move to the catchment of a better school, or do not have the information to discriminate. In terms of recruitment, such schools may struggle to attract high quality applicants, and to retain staff. Likewise, schools with falling rolls are forced to take any applicants – for example migrant children with EAL, and pupils excluded from other schools, which may exacerbate existing challenges (Ainscow *et al*, 2010).

16 Given that conversely, Ofsted’s budget is actually being reduced by 30% in real terms over the four years of the current spending review period.

It is vital to facilitate enjoyment and passion in teacher professionalism and development, rather than simply focusing on summative performance measures which can lower morale and hence impede progress.

Clearly, there has been previous circularity of initiatives to lend support to schools with capacity difficulties and indeed to address specific challenges in leadership of teaching and learning (Burstow, 2011). Any new ones need to learn from previous experiences, and to link with existing initiatives, to avoid the reinvention of wheels. However, the need for such support is evident, and this at a time when a series of previous initiatives and quangos that operated in this area have been cut. Moreover, a further set of policies (e.g. on floor targets, qualification equivalences and so on) mean that schools with particular challenges are set to struggle further to meet national expectations. The current 'loose' policy approach in encouraging good schools to work with struggling schools seems too much left to chance, given the scale of the problem identified, and the especial impact on disadvantaged young people.

We suggest that any unit to support school improvement should be distinctive, but lodged either with Ofsted or with the NCSL. Such a unit could provide high quality, experienced staff to work with a 'satisfactory' (or below) school's SLT over a sustained period to support improvement. This 'external but embedded' support would mitigate risks in previous initiatives of a reliance on single appointees and their retention, and ensure a whole-school, developmental approach. Such an approach would require, for example, acknowledgement that methods for school improvement will depend on specific school contexts, and the need for buy-in across the school rather than simple top-down or externally-mandated approaches (see Reynolds *et al*, 1996; Ainscow & West, 2007). And also ensure buy-in from teachers and staff at all levels, to facilitate the development of reflective professional culture and consequent capacity.

This 'buy-in' and developmental culture among existing teaching teams within 'satisfactory' schools is as important as it is to incentivize excellent teachers to work in these schools. As Ball *et al* (2011) highlight, it is vital to facilitate enjoyment and passion in teacher professionalism and development, rather than simply focusing on summative performance measures which can lower morale and hence impede progress. The findings highlighted in this report concerning quality of teaching and learning demonstrate the need to ensure CPD for teachers that retains and develops creativity and innovation, rather than encouraging 'tick-box' approaches mandating 'attributes of a good lesson' (Dillon & Maguire, 2011). But also, we need to recognise the reality that teachers are not a highly mobile workforce: those (especially older teachers) able to move location to follow career incentives may be limited. Therefore simultaneous investment attention has to go on helping ordinary professionals to develop and remain motivated. Such holistic, professional approaches have been shown to be a beneficial feature of school federations¹⁷, suggesting that this mechanism for school-to-school sharing of good practice and support should be actively encouraged.

Such holistic, developmental approaches also encourage distributed leadership and excellence, mitigating risks around retaining key staff (Storey, 2004; Leiberan *et al*, 2005). This embedded, sustained approach to support, which facilitates bottom up as well as top down improvement, is important to parallel additional targeted initiatives aimed at incentivizing excellent teachers to work in struggling schools. Both approaches are necessary to provide the boost urgently needed to support and improve 'satisfactory' schools. The current 'laissez faire' approach to resourcing and support appears insufficient to address the scale of the challenge in 'satisfactory' (and below) schools, where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated. As Lupton (2010) points out, "Unless the school quality gap can be closed, the achievement gap will not be."

17 See e.g. Chapman *et al*, 2009; Ofsted, 2011c. Chapman *et al* found that 'Performance Federations' had the strongest impact on improvement; and Ofsted found that key areas of improvement shown in federations included teaching and learning.

SECTION 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis demonstrates:

1. The need to promote teacher and teaching quality in ‘Satisfactory’ schools (and the urgency of this necessity in terms of equality of opportunity for young people).
2. The need to acknowledge the impact of context on schools.
3. The need to support struggling schools.
4. The need for further research.

Given the scale of the issue and the implications for a) school improvement and b) social (in)equality, the government must address the challenge of ‘satisfactory’ schools. A new set of policy initiatives geared to improving ‘satisfactory’ schools are urgently required. But these must reflect a new approach of both challenging *and* supporting these schools. ‘Satisfactory’ schools must be accountable for improvement, and supported in doing so. It is also vital that any new policies work together, and build on past works and the evidence base.

Hence our recommendations relate to better support, and better accountability for ‘Satisfactory’ schools. We address **support** first. We recommend the following:

Mechanisms for support of struggling schools

It seems preposterous that we have such good inspectors, but no equivalent organised supply of expert advisors to support improvement. This absence is especially stark given the dismantling of prior initiatives intended to provide aspects of such support¹⁸. Hence we recommend:

- Drawing on the evaluations of National Challenge to design a **new nationwide support system** to facilitate advice, support and collegiate school-to-school learning. This could be run out of an organisation such as Ofsted or NCSL. The role of such a provider would include gathering and sharing best practice in addressing contextual challenges. Support needs to be provided to ‘satisfactory’ schools, as well as those with NtI.
- Longer, more granular reports from Ofsted for schools ‘stuck’ at ‘Satisfactory’ (i.e. those that have been graded as such at their last inspection, and are being categorised ‘Satisfactory’ a second time). These reports should elaborate not just what broad-sweep changes need to be effected, but also suggest how these might be accomplished, and provide milestones for doing so. The latter better allows progress to be checked by governors and other stakeholders. Such reports might be based on longer, more in-depth inspections where more time is spent on the school site.
- Government support for federations of schools, facilitating shared systems and collegiate, enquiring professionalism among practitioners.

Promoting teacher and teaching quality in ‘satisfactory’ schools

We need to incentivise excellent teachers (including inspirational middle leaders) to work at ‘Satisfactory’ schools. Clearly there have been past initiatives which have come and gone. However, discussions on ‘golden handcuffs’ to tempt good teachers into weaker schools need to be urgently revitalised. We recommend:

- **Bursaries for First Class graduates to undertake Initial Teacher Education (ITE), for supply to struggling schools.** ITE is crucial in supplying high quality teachers¹⁹. In a climate of austerity it may be especially productive to incentive the best graduates to undertake ITE by subsidizing student fees. Although

¹⁸ E.g. the National Strategies, SIP advice through local authorities, and so on.

¹⁹ The government has recently incentivised ITE for specific subject areas, including Physics and Maths and Modern Languages, with a gradient for grade of first degree (DfE, 2011). But our recommendation is focused on incentivising talented graduates to work at poorer quality schools.

possession of a first class honours degree does not necessarily guarantee a talented teacher, it indicates a range of skills (e.g. commitment, organisational skills, strong subject competence). The fees subsidy would need to be tied to NQT employment at a school graded lower than ‘Good’, in order to direct them to schools most in need.

- ‘Satisfactory’ schools need a prestigious **allocated places scheme** similar to ‘Future Leaders’ or ‘Teach First’ to direct the most talented and inspiring teachers into these schools. Such a scheme would simultaneously help ‘satisfactory’ schools, while advancing the careers of individual teachers. This could be a relatively low-cost way to incentivise excellent teachers to apply to work at ‘satisfactory’ schools. However, for the scheme to be effective the bar for excellence would need to be set high, in order for this ‘badge’ to have genuine career currency and hence work as a sufficient incentive²⁰.
- **‘Golden achievers’**. A more expensive, but more controlled measure is to create a scheme wherein high quality teacher recruits to schools judged ‘Satisfactory’ or below are paid more, in exchange for greater accountability for pupil progress as part of their contract. Such a scheme could be funded by schools themselves via use of the pupil premium. (In which case it will further be important that staff concerned are set to teach young people whose need is greatest²¹.)
- **Coordinated CPD offer**. The findings in this (and other) studies might be used to inform design and provision of relevant, targeted, accredited CPD designed for use by struggling schools, addressing issues such as teaching techniques, assessment practices and so on, to complement those on leadership offered by the NCSL. Courses might be offered by an HEI, Teaching School, the NCL, or a combination; quality being key.
- **Cultures of collaborative professional enquiry encouraged within schools** This recognises that it is not enough to parachute in excellent new staff, but the need to also support confidence, shared good practice, innovation and a culture of learning and research within existing teams. This also recognises the point that effective management and teaching may look different depending on context (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).
- **Pupil Premium – for teaching and learning**. Clearly the findings in this study support the Pupil Premium, and reiterate the need for substantial allocation. In ‘Satisfactory’ schools, the pupil premium ought to be spent on bolstering teacher quality. To date, the pupil premium has generally been seen as to be targeted on individual pupils. But we must ensure schools are working properly as institutions as well as supporting individual children and/or groups who are falling behind. The government may need to be more directive concerning schools’ use of Pupil Premium resources, and to hold schools to account in ensuring the resources are a) spent effectively, and b) used to support the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils (see note 21).

20 This approach arguably needs to extend to middle leaders, a need somewhat addressed by the NCSLs ‘Future Leaders’ scheme. Quality and rigour will be at the heart of any such scheme to ensure that these opportunities – and outcomes – are meaningful.

21 As there is evidence that working class young people and those from certain minority ethnic groups tend to be concentrated in lower streams, and that the most able teachers are often set to teach the top streams (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Dunne *et al*, 2007).

Acknowledge the impact of context on schools

- We recommend the maintenance of a measure of pupil demographics (Contextual Value Added or a different measure) in judging progress.

More effective ways to hold schools to account for improvement

The above recommendations suggest significant support and resourcing for these schools. However, systems of accountability can also be improved. Schools need to be better directed as to how to improve, and assessed accordingly. Hence we recommend:

- **The Ofsted category ‘Satisfactory’ be replaced by ‘Performing Inconsistently’**. This new title is more transparent to stakeholders, and more obviously connected to the school improvement agenda. It reflects: a) better accuracy of meaning — illustrating how the main problem is that while good or better

Any school which is rated ‘Satisfactory’ (or ‘performing inconsistently’) more than twice in a row will be given a notice to improve and treated as if it was an ‘Inadequate’ school.

practices are present they are not consistent across the school; and b) that particular issues need to be addressed (via both challenge and support).

- Heads at schools currently rated as ‘Satisfactory’ be required to deliver a plan to Ofsted (or the new improvement support body) explaining how the areas of weakness in their school are being addressed. Plans which appear weak or undeveloped will need to be revised and resubmitted. Heads will also need to submit regular updates on progress.
- Stronger accountability driven through incentives schemes above, e.g. ‘Golden Achievers’ and the Pupil Premium. The government might be more directive as to how resources are spent. Indeed there might be top up funding to boost ‘satisfactory’ schools in areas of social disadvantage that commit to improvement, but with a higher degree of accountability tied to such incentives.
- Any school which is rated ‘Satisfactory’ (or ‘performing inconsistently’) more than twice in a row will be given a notice to improve and treated as if it was an ‘Inadequate’ school. This actually affects few schools, but would function as a strong incentive for ‘satisfactory’ schools to improve.

Further Research

Further research is needed to explore the individual contexts of ‘Satisfactory’ schools (including the characteristics of the local school ‘market’), and the perceptions and insights of key stakeholders, in order to shed further light on the contextual factors impacting potential school improvement. Additionally, research focusing on schools in socially-disadvantaged areas that have progressed from ‘Satisfactory’ to ‘Good’ (or better) is needed, to explore the various ways in which these schools managed to raise their game — whether this involves eradicating the poor and inconsistent practices identified in this report, and/or additional features.

This concerted effort is needed to establish a secondary school system that provides equality of opportunity to all young people, whatever their background, via provision of a high quality education that ensures their learning progression and educational enrichment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1, Table i:

Government Office Region	Total number of secondary schools inspected	No. of secondary schools found satisfactory at latest inspection	% of secondary schools satisfactory
Yorkshire and The Humber	290	115	40%
East Midlands	264	100	38%
East of England	380	144	38%
North East	179	63	35%
West Midlands	363	119	33%
South East	440	137	31%
North West	406	115	28%
South West	283	75	27%
London	391	99	25%
England	2996	967	32%

Source: Ofsted

Appendix 2, Table ii: 20 local authorities with the highest proportion of secondary schools judged to be satisfactory

Local Authority	Government Office Region	Total number of secondary schools inspected	Number of secondary schools found satisfactory at latest inspection	% of secondary schools satisfactory
North East Lincolnshire	Yorkshire and The Humber	6	5	83%
Blackpool	North West	8	5	63%
Merton	London	8	5	63%
Peterborough	East Of England	8	5	63%
Kingston upon Hull City of	Yorkshire and The Humber	13	8	62%
Bradford	Yorkshire and The Humber	25	15	60%
Portsmouth	South East	9	5	56%
Rotherham	Yorkshire and The Humber	13	7	54%
Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	13	7	54%
Manchester	North West	19	10	53%
Northamptonshire	East Midlands	35	18	51%
Bracknell Forest	South East	6	3	50%
Bristol City of	South West	18	9	50%
Derby	East Midlands	12	6	50%
Reading	South East	4	2	50%
South Tyneside	North East	8	4	50%
Southampton	South East	12	6	50%
Central Bedfordshire	East of England	32	15	47%
Tower Hamlets	London	15	7	47%
Derbyshire	East Midlands	43	20	47%

Source: Ofsted

Table iii: Comparison of the previous and latest inspection of high/above avg. IDACI secondary schools inspected more than once

		Latest Inspection			
		Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Previous inspection	Outstanding (33)	58	27	15	0
	Good (270)	18	51	27	3
	Satisfactory (404)	4	32	54	9
	Inadequate (94)	1	13	82	4
	Secondary (IDACI Quintile 4 & 5) (801)	11	36	47	6

Source: Ofsted

Table iv: Comparison of the previous and latest inspection of low/below avg. IDACI secondary schools inspected more than once

		Latest Inspection			
		Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Previous inspection	Outstanding (68)	78	22	0	0
	Good (454)	28	55	16	2
	Satisfactory (302)	6	46	44	4
	Inadequate (42)	0	12	81	7
	Secondary (IDACI Quintile 1 & 2) (866)	23	47	27	3

Source: Ofsted