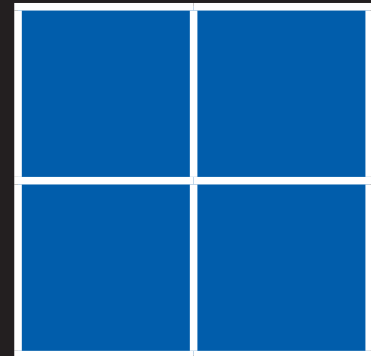


# (How) did New Labour narrow the achievement and participation gap?

Geoff Whitty and Jake Anders

LLAKES Research Paper 46



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# **(How) did New Labour narrow the achievement and participation gap?**

**Geoff Whitty and Jake Anders**

**Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies  
(LLAKES)**

**Institute of Education, University of London**

*Revision of a paper originally presented at a seminar of the Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES), Institute of Education, University of London, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012*

*Table of Contents*

Abstract..... 2  
Introduction..... 3  
The Preschool Attainment Gap in England ..... 6  
The Attainment Gap in English Schools..... 8  
What may have contributed to the narrowing of the gap? ..... 20  
Access to Higher Education..... 34  
Postscript: Policies and Prospects Post-2010..... 36  
Acknowledgements..... 43  
Contact details..... 43  
References..... 43

*List of Figures and Tables*

Figure 1: Attendance at different types of university by socio-economic group..... 5  
Figure 3: Percentage of Cohort Achieving 5+ A\*-C GCSEs by Parents' Social Class:  
1988-2003 (%) ..... 11  
Table 1: Change in percentage of pupils who..... 12  
Figure 4: Comparison of PISA test point difference between advantaged and  
disadvantaged children at different points of the attainment distribution..... 13  
Figure 5: Graph showing relation between household deprivation and relative  
performance in GCSE point score in core subjects ..... 15  
Figure 6: Graph showing strength of relationship between household deprivation  
and performance in GCSEs (including or excluding non-'core' subjects) ..... 16  
Figure 7: Five good examination passes including English and Maths:  
% point increase 2006-07 – 2010-11 by ethnic group ..... 17  
Figure 8: Gaps in educational performance have narrowed only slightly despite  
significant investment ..... 19  
Figure 9: Change in the percentage of children achieving five GCSEs at A\*-C including  
English and Maths between 2006-07 and 2011-12, by region..... 29  
Figure 10: FSM gaps across the Key Stages, 2012..... 41

## **Abstract**

*There have been various 'achievement gaps' in England over the years – significant differences in school attainment by students from different socio-economic classes, different genders and different ethnic groups. Although Basil Bernstein, a leading English sociologist of education, argued many years ago that 'education cannot compensate for society', policy makers continue to believe that education and other social policies can help to equalise school performance and life chances between different social groups. This paper describes what progress was made in narrowing the socio-economic achievement gap in England under its New Labour government between 1997 and 2010 and assesses the research evidence about which of a whole array of national, local, institutional and 'personalised' interventions seem to have made a difference. It also discusses future prospects for closing the gap under the Coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats that was elected in England in 2010.*

## **Introduction**

The Coalition Government that was elected in May 2010 set out to ‘close’ the achievement gap. That ambition went even beyond the previous New Labour Government’s ambition to ‘narrow’ that gap. Given that England does not score particularly well on ‘equity’ measures within international achievement surveys like PISA, even the lesser of these aspirations was ambitious, to say the least. Having identified what British politicians actually mean by the ‘achievement gap’, this paper explores the progress made by New Labour towards closing it, identifies some areas where its policies appear to have made a difference and, more briefly, assesses future prospects under the current Coalition of Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. Finally, it considers some of the reasons why progress has been so limited to date.

Many years ago, Bernstein (1970) pointed out that ‘education cannot compensate for society’, while an early critic of New Labour’s attainment targets argued that a serious programme to alleviate child poverty might do far more for boosting attainment and literacy than would any modest intervention in schooling (Robinson, 1997). Nevertheless, given that the achievement gap is narrower and social mobility greater in some countries that are socioeconomically and culturally similar to England (Sutton Trust, 2011), it is reasonable for politicians to believe that education and other social policies can make a difference in regard to the achievement gap - or rather the various achievement gaps that have existed over the years. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, OECD analysis of PISA data suggests that ‘cross-national differences in inequalities of performance are associated more closely with the characteristics of the education system than with underlying social inequalities or measures of economic development’ (OECD, 2010) and from this we might infer that education policy can make a difference to these inequalities (Green, 2011).

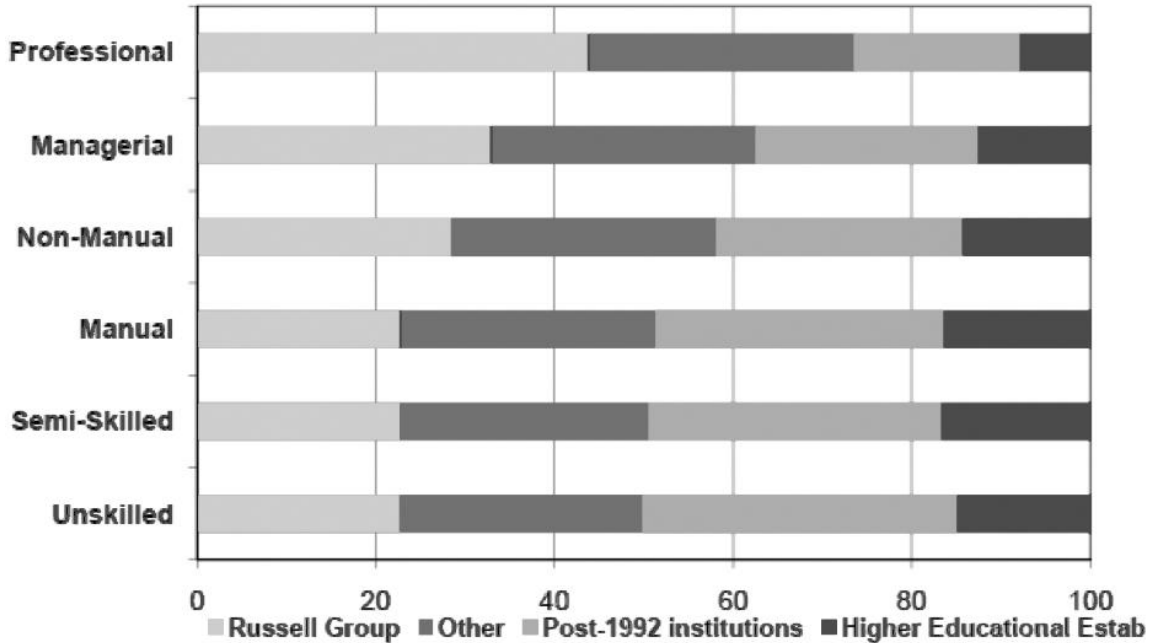
For many years in the last century there were major concerns about the underachievement of girls. That gender gap has been largely reversed, leading to something of a moral panic about the impact on boys (Ringrose, 2013). Yet it has still not been reversed in the hard

sciences or at the very highest levels in some other subjects, and it is therefore coming back onto the policy agenda (Garner, 2013). Minority ethnic achievement was often also a concern, although there were stark differences in the performance of different minority groups (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). However, the key focus in English work on the gap at present is ‘social class’ differences in educational achievement, even though that term itself is often expressed as ‘poverty’, ‘disadvantage’, ‘deprivation’ or ‘social exclusion’ and is usually measured in terms of socioeconomic status (SES) or eligibility for free school meals (FSM) (Whitty, 2001).

The emphasis in this paper on gaps between social groups as identified through cognitive measures and the achievement of academic qualifications is not intended to suggest that the only purpose of schooling is to achieve such qualifications or that those who fail to do so are deficient, either absolutely or relatively, in other important respects. Indeed, during the period under consideration here, there was, for example, considerable emphasis on the role of education in fostering ‘well-being’. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of evidence that life chances in English society are closely linked to school attainment in a myriad of ways and that personal fulfilment and social justice could both be enhanced by narrowing or closing longstanding academic achievement and participation gaps (Schuller *et al.*, 2004). We therefore agree with Kerr and West (2010) that ‘despite the dangers of narrowing our view of what education is about’, a focus on attainment is justifiable because ‘attainment undeniably has important consequences for life chances’ (p. 16).

One specific reason why it is important to address this attainment gap in schools is that it has implications for access to higher education. There has been a considerable and persistent gap in England in the rates of participation in higher education between those from higher and lower socioeconomic groups (Kelly and Cook, 2007). There has also been a strong and enduring tendency for students at the leading universities to be drawn from more affluent families and from those schools that cater mainly to such families (Boliver, 2011). The representation of different socio-economic groups at different types of universities is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Attendance at different types of university by socio-economic group**



Source: Machin *et al.* (2009) in Hills *et al.* (2010, p.363). Higher Educational Establishments refer to “non vocational intuitions that have yet to be awarded university status” (Machin *et al.*, 2009, p.6).

Although there are undoubtedly still financial and aspirational barriers to widening participation and ensuring fair access in higher education (Whitty, 2010a), it is now clear that the major impediment to students proceeding to higher education is low prior attainment. Research by the Institute of Education, the London School of Economics and the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that, although there is a considerable gap in higher education participation between those from different backgrounds, this gap is actually small once prior attainment has been fully taken into account (Chowdry *et al.*, 2010a; Vignoles and Crawford, 2010; Anders, 2012). It is worth noting, however, that work by Jackson *et al.* (2007) has argued that a significant proportion of the gaps in prior attainment may be due to non-academic ‘secondary effects’.

Prior attainment and choices made in terms of future study at ages 14 and 16 can then have huge consequences for future employment prospects. Low attainment and inappropriate subject choices can be particularly restrictive on opportunities for entry into the professions (Milburn, 2009) and STEM related employment (Coyne and Goodfellow, 2008).

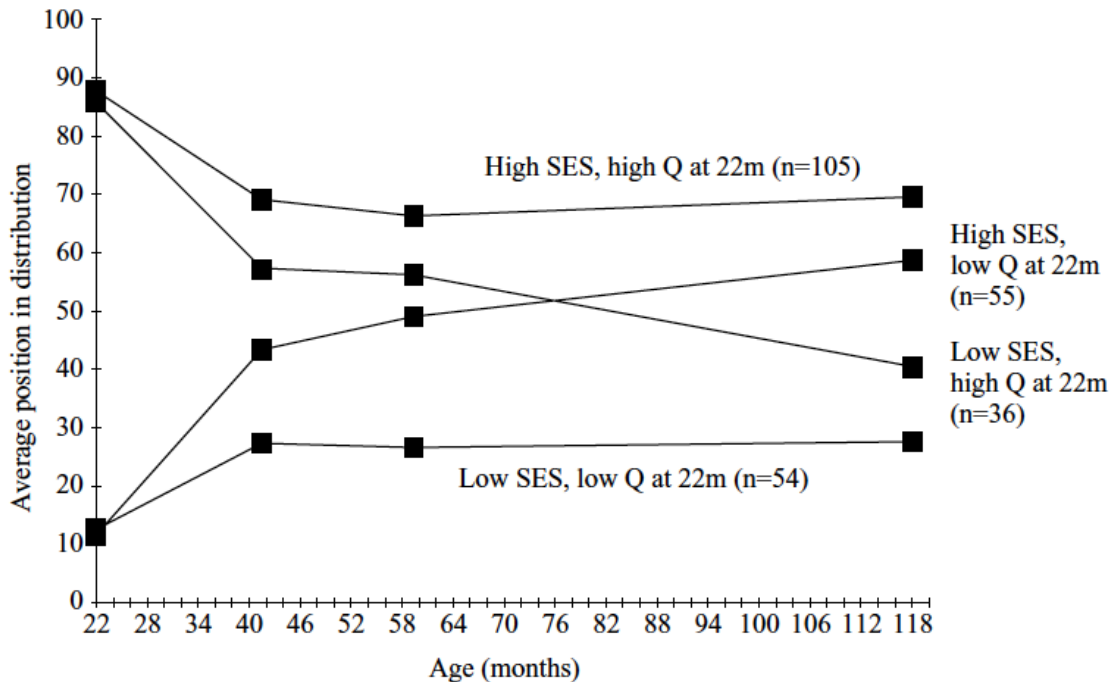


The remainder of this paper will focus largely, though not exclusively, on socioeconomic differences in educational attainment. It will begin by looking briefly at the evidence on the performance of different social groups in the preschool period and then concentrate on the compulsory phase of schooling before touching on differential levels of participation in higher education at the end of mainstream schooling. In so doing, it will demonstrate the potential impact of early failure on later achievement throughout the life course, as well as identifying the sorts of interventions that the evidence suggests might begin to break the enduring link between social background and educational achievement.

### The Preschool Attainment Gap in England

Politicians of all three major parties have made use of a graph produced by Feinstein (2003) that purports to show that, even before starting school, children with high cognitive test scores from disadvantaged backgrounds are falling behind less able children from more advantaged backgrounds. We reproduce this graph as Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Average rank of test scores at 22, 42, 60 and 120 months, by SES of parents and early rank position.**



Notes: The definition of categories with sample observations are as follows: high SES--father in professional/managerial occupation and mother similar or registered housewife (307 observations); low SES--father in semiskilled or unskilled manual occupation and mother similar or housewife (171 observations); medium SES--those omitted from the high- and low-SES categories (814 observations). Source: Feinstein (2003).

Although some doubt has been raised regarding this analysis on account of the potential for regression to the mean to exaggerate the phenomenon (Jerrim and Vignoles, 2011), it is highly unlikely that this would overturn the core finding that high SES, lower ability children catch up with their low-SES, higher-ability peers. In any case, these figures have undoubtedly informed the government policies we discuss below.

More recent analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) confirms the existence of socioeconomic differences in attainment by the age of three. These seem to reflect more than just differences in the distribution of underlying ability across the socioeconomic spectrum: the gaps widen between the ages of three and five with, for example, children in the top quintile of household income showing the fastest progress between these two ages (Goodman *et al.*, 2009). These results hold for other measures of status such as father's occupational class, mother's education and housing tenure. To put these into further context, the Sutton Trust (2011) compared measures of school readiness across different countries, finding that England had larger socioeconomic gradients than do most other Anglophone countries, even though the gaps were smaller than for the United States.

Sure Start was a multifaceted early-years intervention introduced by the New Labour government elected in 1997 and was designed to improve the life chances of those growing up in disadvantaged areas (NESS, 2010, 2011). Unlike more narrowly targeted interventions, it was introduced in areas of assessed need rather than targeted on specific individuals wherever they lived. Even though it was claimed that the policy was informed by what seemed to be robust research evidence, the evaluation failed to identify any positive impact of Sure Start on 'school readiness', as measured by a Foundation Stage Profile score. Given the background to this high profile policy, its lack of impact in this respect has been a source of great disappointment and puzzlement to researchers and policy makers alike. However, the evaluation did identify positive impacts on various aspects of parenting style and child's body mass index (BMI), and the initiative may still be shown to have longer-term effects on educational outcomes. It has been suggested that the lack of an identifiable impact on differences in school readiness is due

to ‘the introduction of universal free early education for all children whether in Sure Start areas or not’ (NESS, 2011, p. 12), so that any improvement amongst the targeted disadvantaged families was offset by an overall improvement across the piece – a classic illustration of the tension between universalism and targeting in social policy.

Whatever the explanation, there is evidence of a socioeconomic gradient in attainment as early as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS); that is, before the beginning of compulsory schooling at age 5. No individual-level data is available at this stage so ONS (2006) had to use an area-based proxy for low SES. As the original Sure Start centres were explicitly located in deprived areas, children in these areas were on average from families with lower SES. The analysis shows that the percentage of 5-year-olds achieving a ‘good’ level of development by the end of the EYFS was lower in schools in Sure Start areas than it was elsewhere. This held for personal, social and emotional development; communication; language; and literacy; but it was more marked in the latter.

How has this changed during the New Labour period? Stewart (2013) presents a partial picture by considering the percentages of children ‘working securely’ in each area of learning in the EYFS (and its predecessor) between 2006 and 2011 from the 30% most deprived areas and from all other areas. ‘Working securely’ means that an individual achieves 6 points or more on a 9 point scale in each of the 13 assessment scales that make up the Early Years Foundation Stage. The gap narrows from 17 percentage points in 2006 to 12 percentage points in 2011 (14 percentage points in 2010 when Labour left power), which Stewart interprets as “significant improvements in child development indicators from 2008 onwards, alongside significant narrowing of inequalities” (Stewart, 2013, pp.41-42). Stewart also comments that much of the improvement came towards the end of the period, perhaps reflecting time taken for the policy to bed in. This does suggest some positive outcomes from the Early Years policies implemented during this period.

### **The Attainment Gap in English Schools**

Most data seem to show that there is a continuing socioeconomic gradient in attainment throughout the English schooling system. Using data from attainment in 2005 (DfES, 2006), although there is always a gap between FSM-eligible and non-FSM eligible

students in terms of relative performance, this does not grow inexorably through the different stages of schooling up to KS3. At each stage, the performance of children eligible for FSM is always around 85–90% of that of the rest of the cohort. However, this widens at Key Stage 4 where FSM-eligible young people achieve roughly three quarters the average point score of the rest of the cohort (DfES, 2006).

Survey data analysed by Goodman *et al.* (2009) present a slightly different picture when using more detailed measures of SES, rather than simply FSM eligibility. These authors find a widening gap in attainment through children's educational careers up until Key Stage 3 (age 14), but find that it narrows somewhat for Key Stage 4 results. The difference between these two analyses is accounted for by the fact that FSM eligibility splits the population into a deprived group and the rest, whereas this analysis generally compares a broader (compared with FSM) lower group with a smaller (compared with non-FSM) higher group. Nevertheless, taken together, these studies do point to a widening of the socioeconomic gap during English children's educational careers.

Other changes in inequality through the educational career are also presented in these studies. For example, Goodman *et al.* (2009) show that, though in earlier years of education the gender gap in attainment comes and goes (but with girls always ahead where a gap is observed), it widens more consistently through the secondary school years (pp. 27-28). Perhaps more surprisingly, they also suggest that 'wide ethnic differences amongst young preschool children appear to narrow over time, and are quite small by the time young people reach GCSE' (p. 28). However, it is worth noting that some minority ethnic groups either have not followed this trend overall or have not done so in particular phases.

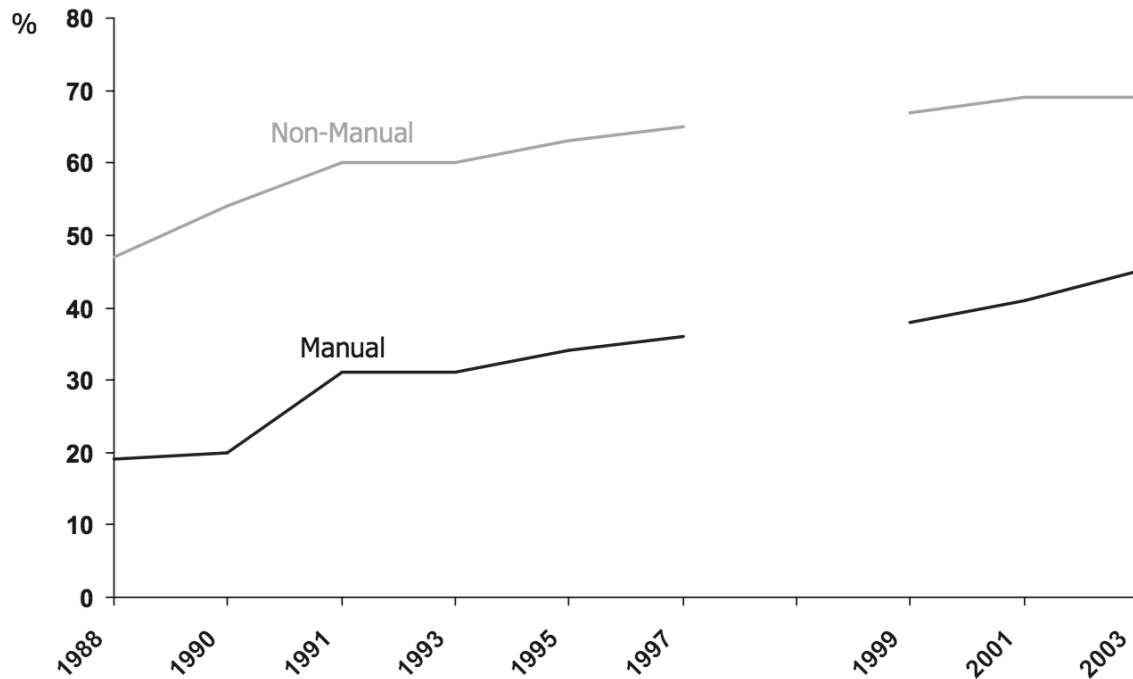
Even the evidence on a socioeconomic gradient itself is not without its dissenters, however. Saunders (2012) questions the basis of much of the evidence on social mobility of which the underperformance of children from poorer backgrounds is a major part. Whatever one's view of this critique, as with the concern we noted above regarding Feinstein (2003), there is little doubt that concerns surrounding social mobility impact government policy over this period.

As mentioned earlier, the New Labour government considered it a key part of its educational policy to narrow the attainment gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Given this goal, it is perhaps surprising that data on the trends for this gap are patchy. Although there are figures on the gap at particular points in time, they often use different measures of attainment and/or different comparator groups, making it difficult to assess the trends. Also, in the initial period of New Labour government, apart from Education Action Zones, an ill-fated area-based initiative, the major emphasis was on driving up standards overall. It was only the failure of this to impact social differences in attainment that led to specific policies after 2001 to address the attainment gap, with a thrust in this direction after 2005. Although there were increases in average levels of attainment in the first period of New Labour government, some have argued that even these increases were at least partly achieved through grade inflation (Tymms, 2004). This paper does not look into this matter in depth, except in so far as it affects our attempt to isolate the change in the socioeconomic attainment gap.

We might initially think that neither a general rise in standards, nor possible grade inflation, would impact the trends in attainment gaps as measured by, for example the proportion gaining 5 or more top (A\*–C) grades at GCSE. However there is no guarantee that this will be the case, and thus caution is urged in interpreting changes in gaps. This is because even if grades were to rise uniformly across the board, different numbers of individuals from different parts of the socioeconomic spectrum may be pushed across the threshold. The trends are nevertheless likely to be indicative of the direction of travel, but it may be important to check them against other research.

Figure 3 shows trends in the attainment gap up until 2003 and suggests a slight narrowing of the gap between students from manual and non-manual families.

**Figure 3: Percentage of Cohort Achieving 5+ A\*–C GCSEs by Parents’ Social Class: 1988-2003 (%)**



Note: Discontinuity exists between 1997 and 1999 because of a change in the classification of social class from SEG to NSSEC. Manual and non-manual categories have been constructed by grouping more detailed breakdown of social class groups. The ‘other’ group has been excluded from the analysis. Source: DfES (2006) analysis of Youth Cohort Study cohorts 4–12, sweep 1

ONS (2006) provides further data on a wide range of changes in attainment gaps, although individual-level data is provided only between 2002 and 2005. These figures show a reduction in the attainment gap between pupils eligible and those not eligible for FSM in terms of those obtaining no GCSEs (or equivalents) and the proportion obtaining 5 or more A\*–C GCSEs (or equivalents). However, there was a slight increase in the same gap where it was a requirement that the set of GCSEs included English and math. These figures show a stronger trend toward narrowing when IDACI (an area-based indicator of deprivation) is used instead of FSM eligibility. This is because this measure compares the most deprived with the least deprived, rather than the most deprived with the rest, and there is evidence of generalised catching up between the bottom three deprivation quartiles and the top. In the FSM measures this catching up by pupils in the middle reduced the relative gains of the bottom compared with the top.

This is brought more up to date and over a longer period by more recent data of Hansard (2012), which is summarised in Table 1. These show a mixed picture, but there is a broad

trend toward small reductions in attainment gaps in the official figures. The exception below is the measure that excludes GCSE equivalents (such as vocational qualifications). This would seem to reflect the trend toward use of such alternative qualification by schools for lower-performing pupils. Over this period the equivalence between these qualifications was favourable toward the alternative qualifications and did not necessarily reflect their value to the individual in the labour market or in seeking to continue their studies. Totally excluding equivalents probably goes too far the other way, as it seems unlikely that these qualifications had no value. However, it indicates one of the routes through which the recorded attainment gap was narrowed and indicates that this may not have reflected a genuine reduction in inequality (de Waal, 2008).

**Table 1: Change in percentage of pupils who have achieved various attainment benchmarks between 2005/06 and 2010/11, by free school meal (FSM) eligibility.**

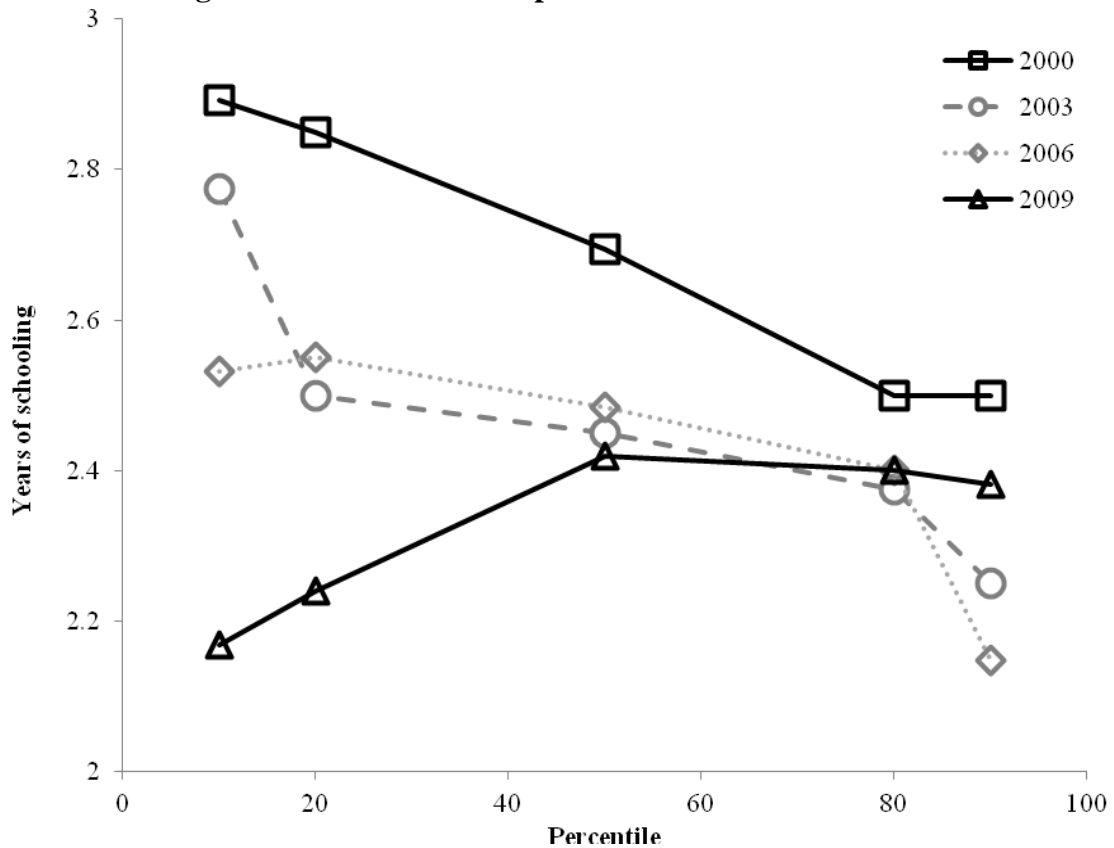
	<b>FSM</b>	<b>All others</b>	<b>Gap</b>
<b>Percentage not achieving a GCSE or equivalent</b>	-2.8	-1.1	-1.7
<b>Percentage achieving 5 A*–C grades at GCSE (including English and Math), including equivalents</b>	15	14.3	-0.7
<b>Percentage achieving 5 A*–C grades at GCSE (including English and Math), excluding equivalents</b>	8.9	9.9	1

*Notes:* In some cases, our data include only pupils who have achieved vocational qualifications rather than those entered for the qualification. For GCSEs, all pupils who are entered are included. Figures for 2005/06 to 2010/11 are based on final data. Figures for 2010/11 include AS levels, full and short GCSEs, double-award GCSEs, applied GCSEs and the accredited iGCSEs and their legacy qualifications. Figures for 2005/06 to 2009/10 include only full GCSEs, double awards and accredited iGCSEs and their legacy qualifications. Source: Our calculations based on Hansard (2012), in turn based on National Pupil Database.

Other research has attempted to get around the problems of changing standards in a variety of ways. Jerrim (2012) uses data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a study of 15-year-olds' achievement conducted across the OECD nations every three years, as part of a cross-national comparison. The analysis primarily focuses on reading skills because of the data available from PISA. It should, however, be noted that there are caveats associated with the comparability of PISA data from different years and Jerrim (2011) advises caution in the interpretation of his results. Outcomes are based on PISA test scores (where 40 points are roughly comparable to a year of schooling), whereas SES is measured using quintile groups derived from occupational status.

Jerrim’s analysis suggests an overall reduction from 2000 to 2009 in the attainment gap between those in the top and bottom quintile groups of 15 points (roughly equivalent to catching up by a term of schooling). However, this result sits on the edge of statistical significance. He also considers the changes taking place at different points of the attainment distribution. This analysis suggests that just looking at the average hides a more complex story. Figure 4, reproduced from Jerrim (2012), shows these changes in attainment gap over time at different levels of attainment. At the top end of the attainment distribution there is barely any change (shown by the difference between the lines towards the right of Figure 4), whereas at the bottom (towards the left of the figure), a larger and statistically significant reduction in attainment gap of 25 points (roughly equivalent to two terms of schooling) is observed.

**Figure 4: Comparison of PISA test point difference between advantaged and disadvantaged children at different points of the attainment distribution**



Notes: Running along the horizontal axis are the percentiles of the national PISA reading test distribution. Figures on the vertical axis refer to the estimated difference in test scores between children from the most advantaged (top national HISEI quintile) and children from the least advantaged (bottom national HISEI quintile) backgrounds. Source: Jerrim (2012) predictions from quantile regression estimates based upon the PISA data sets.

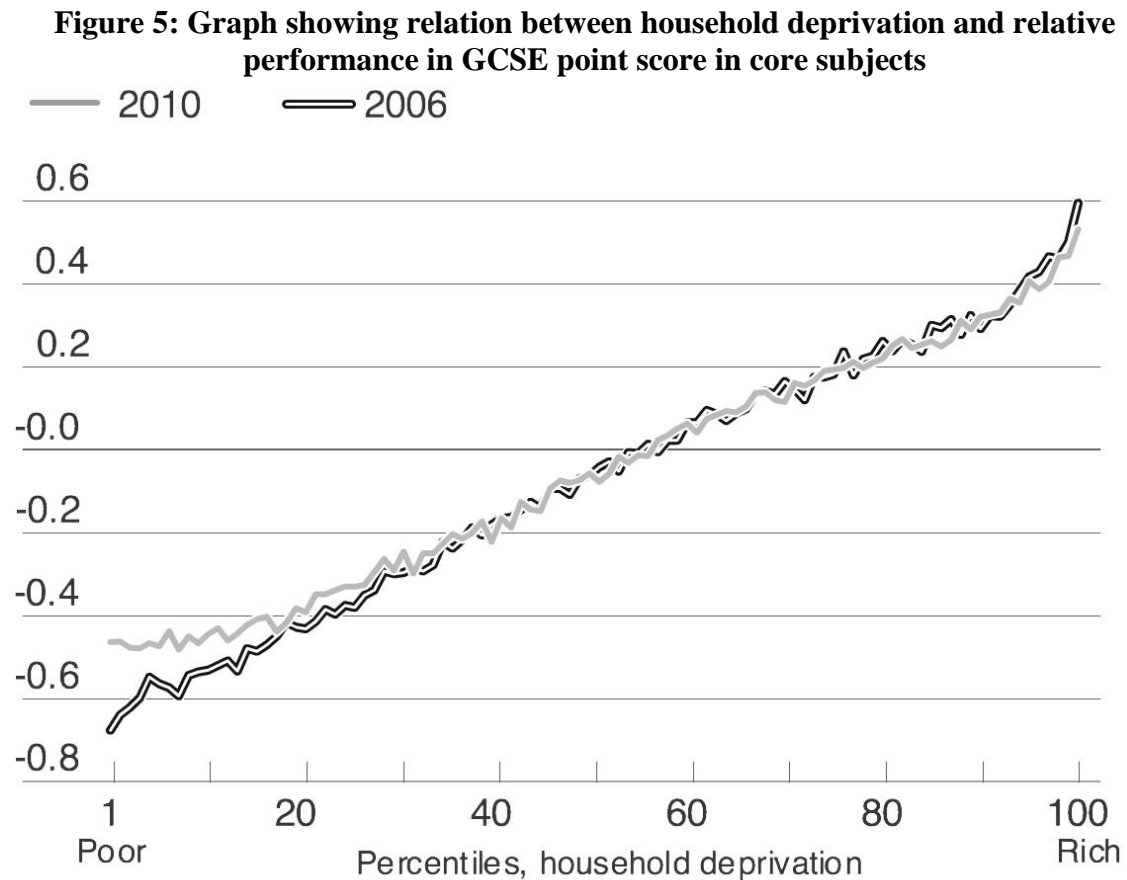


Jerrim discusses the potential policies such changes could be associated with. ‘Anecdotally, much of the investment made in disadvantaged children in England is designed to help this group reach a basic level of skill (i.e. to push up the lower tail). Indeed, academics, policymakers and the media frequently discuss England’s “long tail of low achievement” and the need to increase the proportion of disadvantaged children (for example, those receiving free school meals) reaching a certain floor target (for example, five GCSEs at grades A\*–C). Although this is clearly important, much less attention seems to be paid to helping disadvantaged children who are already doing reasonably well to push on and reach the top grades’ (Jerrim, 2012, p. 176). As has become something of a recurring theme, while the characterization of the problem as a “long tail of low achievement” is sometimes disputed, there is less doubt that its discussion in the media has led to policies aimed at the perceived problem.

Sullivan *et al.* (2011) take an alternative approach to dealing with the potential problem of rising attainment overall. They treat educational qualifications as a positional good. As such, the absolute level of attainment is not regarded as important. However, the paper points out that their ‘relative measure deals with overall credential expansion/inflation, but cannot deal with differential credential inflation, whereby credentials which are designed for lower achieving students are given a disproportionately high face-value in relation to their actual intellectual, educational and labour-market value’ (Sullivan *et al.*, 2011, p. 221). This is important in that it implies that some of the apparent increase in attainment at the lower end may be illusory or of little value in the employment market.

Nevertheless, the paper finds broadly similar results to those above, suggesting ‘social class inequalities persist...they tend to be greater at higher levels of attainment [and]...class inequalities at all levels have been declining’ (Sullivan *et al.*, 2011, pp. 234–235). They argue these results are robust and that their use of a positional measure of attainment still shows ‘clear, albeit much more modest, trends towards class equalisation’ (p. 235).

Cook (2011) also presents evidence of a reduction in the attainment gap between 2006 and 2010. It uses performance relative to the mean in sciences, modern languages, math, English, history and geography, generally regarded as the core subjects. As can be seen from Figure 5, in this case the size of the reduction looks relatively modest and concentrated among those in the bottom fifth of households ranked by deprivation.

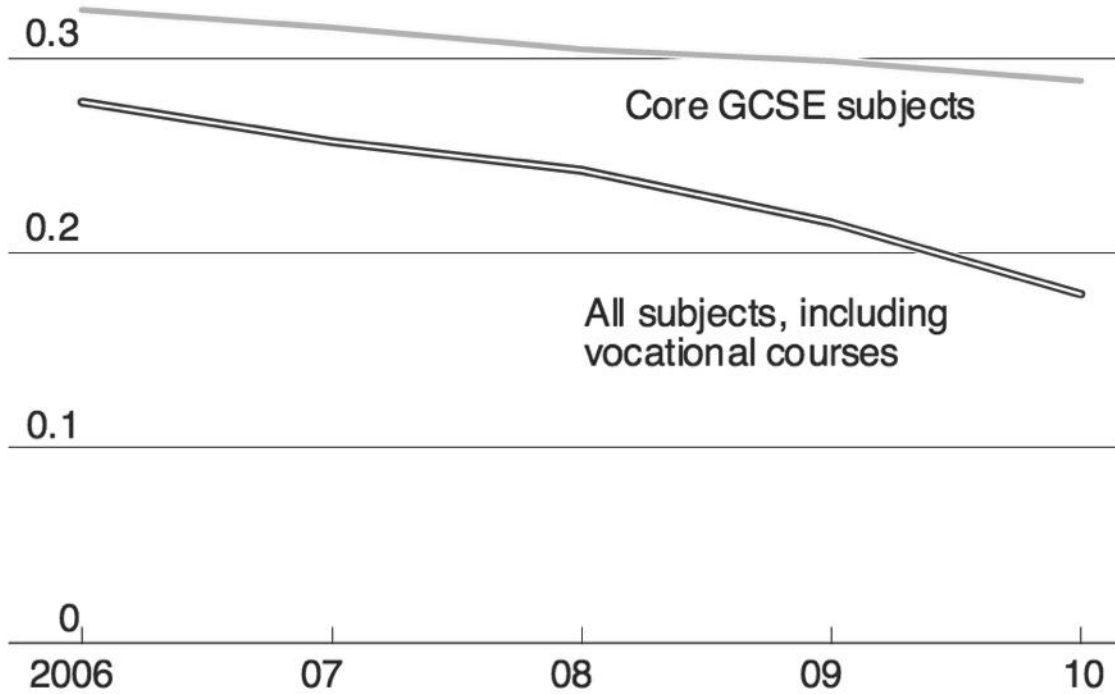


Notes: Vertical axis shows standard deviation from mean GCSE point score performance in the core subjects of sciences, modern languages, math, English, history and geography. Percentiles of household deprivation derived using Index Deprivation Affective Children and Infants (IDACI). Source: Cook (2011) analysis of National Pupil Database.

The analysis also shows a steady weakening of the overall correlation between household deprivation and educational performance in the years between 2006 and 2010. Interestingly, this is the case particularly for KS4 attainment overall, where performance on some vocational courses is included, as we can see in Figure 6. Again, it could be argued that this lends support to the charge that part of the decline in the socioeconomic attainment gap is due to individuals switching to alternative courses. However, as the core measure still shows a decline, not all of the reduction in the gap can be dismissed as

illusory, even if one were to accept the argument that the alternative courses are somehow less rigorous or marketable.

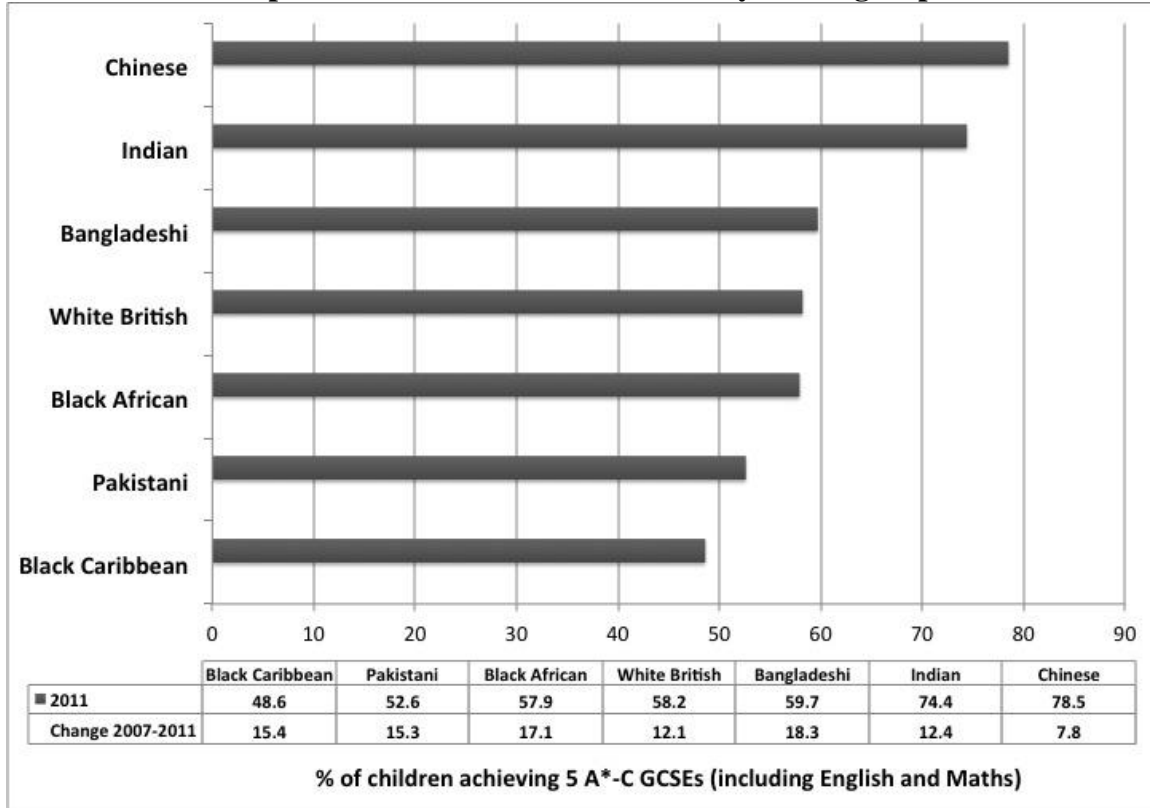
**Figure 6: Graph showing strength of relationship between household deprivation and performance in GCSEs (including or excluding non-‘core’ subjects)**



Notes: Vertical axis shows correlation between household deprivation percentile (derived using Index Deprivation Affective Children and Infants (IDACI)) and performance in GCSEs. Source: Cook (2011) analysis of National Pupil Database.

Government data also provide evidence of the narrowing of gaps in terms of other student characteristics. ONS (2006) indicate that, using top (5+ A\*–C) GCSE scores, the main low-performing minority ethnic groups all closed the attainment gap relative to White pupils. For example, in 2003, 52.4% of White students achieved 5+ A\*–C scores, increasing to 55.9% in 2005, whereas the figure for Black Caribbean students increased from 33.9% to 42.0%. At KS2, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils narrowed the gap compared with White pupils, although the gap between White and Black African pupils widened slightly (ONS, 2006, p. 6).

**Figure 7: Five good examination passes including English and Maths:  
% point increase 2006-07 – 2010-11 by ethnic group**



Source: Department for Education (2011a). Ethnic groups are based on those recorded in the National Pupil Database. This version is based on a graph that appeared in *The Economist* (2012) and, following their example, does not include mixed ethnicity categories.

Figure 7 shows that, by 2011, some previously disadvantaged groups were catching up with or even overtaking White British students. The heading of “White slide” given to a graph showing these figures in *The Economist* (2012) suggests something of a moral panic about the position of white British students, rather akin to the reaction when girls began to perform better than boys.

The relative performance of Looked After Children (those in local authority or foster care) paints a less positive picture (DfE, 2011b). Whereas at KS2 the attainment gap (measured by the difference in proportion of children achieving high scores – at least Level 4 – in both English and math) has reduced from 35 percentage points to 31 percentage points, the movement at KS4 is in the opposite direction. The gap between Looked After Children achieving top grades in both English and math at GCSE has increased from around 37 percentage points to almost 45 percentage points. The positive

news here is that the proportion achieving the benchmark did rise for Looked After Children, but the improvement was faster among the rest of the cohort.

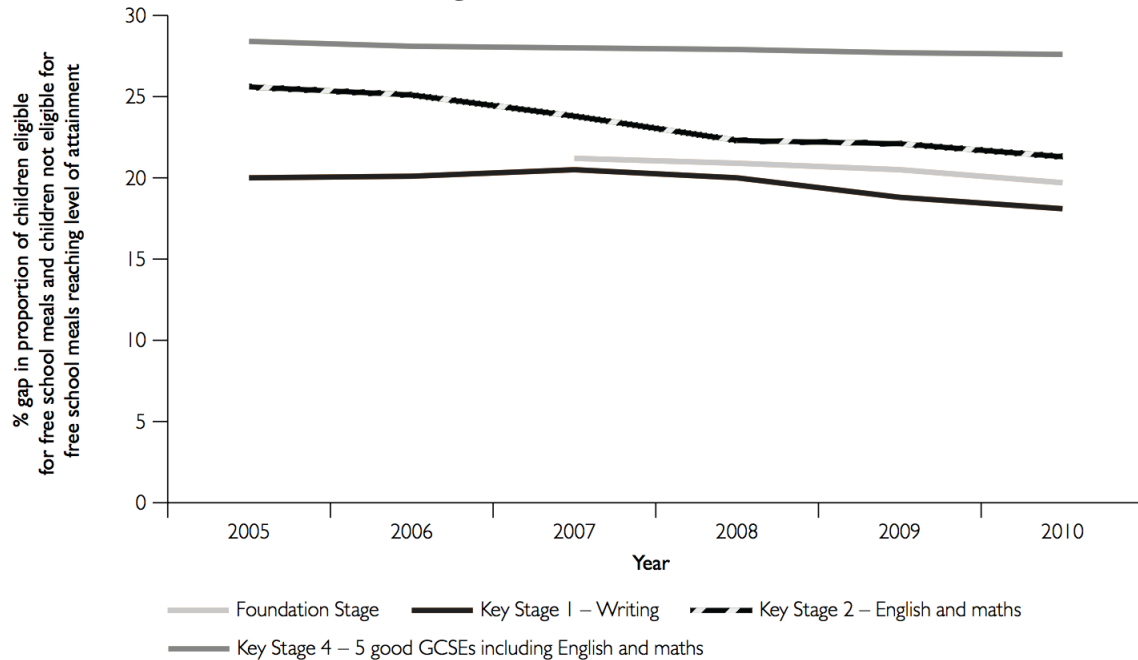
While comprehensive figures on STEM attainment gaps do not appear readily available, some evidence is provided by Gorard and See (2009). They suggest that gaps in science attainment at KS4 are driven by similar factors to those for other subjects. They also use what data is available, though not directly comparable, to suggest that the attainment gap is relatively stable over time (2002 to 2006, so not the whole period this paper has considered), with an achievement gap between FSM students and the rest of 17%. This suggests that reforms have not managed to achieve the same reduction as in the overall gaps.

In terms of STEM, more concern is usually expressed about differential rates of take-up beyond compulsory education. Gorard and See (2009) report the proportion of those taking at least one Maths or Science subject beyond compulsory education in England in 2005/6 by various different characteristics. Of particular note are the gaps between FSM students (14% take at least one of these subjects) and non-FSM students (21%), and between males (24% take at least one Maths or Science subject) and females (18%). This latter comparison is particularly striking because on average females appear to outperform males at the end of KS4 even in science subjects, although the differences are small (Mujtaba and Reiss, 2012, p.2) and smaller than in other subjects (Wynarczyk and Hale, 2009, p.12) perhaps partially explaining a decision to specialise. Figures on changes over time are not included in Gorard and See, making it hard to assess whether policies to combat these gaps are having any effect.

Thus, although by most measures there was a small reduction in the attainment gap under the New Labour government of 1997-2010, it must be regarded as a disappointing achievement when compared with the aspirations of successive Prime Ministers and Secretaries of State for Education. Not surprisingly, the Coalition government has tended to dismiss even the limited narrowing of the gap that was achieved under New Labour, regarding it as a poor return on the public resources invested. This picture is summarised

and restated in the Coalition government’s Social Mobility Strategy (HM Government, 2010b) and is presented graphically in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Gaps in educational performance have narrowed only slightly despite significant investment**



*Notes:* Source: HM Government (2010b, p.20) drawing on data from the following sources: Department for Education, various Statistical First Releases: Foundation Stage Profile Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England 2009/10 (2011) (gap in % reaching a good level of development); Key Stage 1 Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England 2009/10 (2011) (gap in % reaching expected level in reading); Key Stage 2 Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England 2009/10 (provisional) (2011) (gap in % reaching expected level in English and math); GCSE and Equivalent Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England 2009/10 (2010) (gap in % achieving 5 GCSEs A\*-C including English and math); and Level 2 and 3 Attainment by Young People in England Measured Using Matched Administrative Data: Attainment by Age 19 in 2009 (provisional) (2010) (gap in % achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 19).

A further question is the extent to which the observed narrowing was due to government policy. A review of Labour’s overall record in Education by Heath *et al* (2013) seems sceptical on this point, concluding: ‘it is not clear how much credit New Labour can take for this equalization, or whether it was due to wider social changes, perhaps arising from the changing labour-market situation facing young people’ (Heath *et al.*, 2013, p.242). Lupton and Obolenskaya have a more optimistic take, arguing that while ‘it is impossible to say with certainty that the government’s policies caused the changes in outcomes, the indicators point in that direction. The changes in policy and spending were associated with a break in pre-existing trends at secondary level’ (Lupton and Obolenskaya, 2013, p.47). We remain, to an extent, agnostic on this issue as we turn to examine some of the key policies individually.

### **What may have contributed to the narrowing of the gap?**

‘High quality education for the many rather than excellence for the few’ was New Labour’s slogan immediately following the 1997 election. This was symbolized in the first instance by the abolition of the Thatcher government’s Assisted Places Scheme, which provided publicly-funded means-tested scholarships to enable academically-able children from poor families to attend elite private schools. Though ostensibly targeted at working class children ill-served by failing inner-city comprehensive schools, early take-up of the scheme was actually dominated by middle-class families who otherwise might have sent their children to good suburban schools, but whose income was low enough to qualify for the scheme (Edwards *et al.*, 1989). The resources freed by the abolition of this scheme were diverted to the state sector to reduce class sizes in infant schools. This was presented as a socially redistributive measure, but it did not actually have that effect. Most large classes were in marginal suburban electoral districts, not in disadvantaged areas, suggesting that the policy was driven at least in part by the findings of election opinion polling rather than educational research (Whitty, 2006). Furthermore, the value for money of this intervention has been questioned, since while most evaluations suggest it does have a positive impact (although even then not until class size drops below about 20) this must be set against the relatively large cost, which could be used to implement alternative policies (EEF, 2012). On the specific question of narrowing the gap, a DfE research report described the evidence of a specific impact on pupils from deprived backgrounds as ‘mixed’ (DfE, 2011d, p52-53).

There were considerable numbers of educational initiatives during the period of New Labour government, reflecting a variety of different understandings about how best to close the gap. They ranged from area-based interventions like Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities and the London Challenge, through National Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy, remodelling the school workforce including the use of more teaching assistants, improving school leadership training, enhancing teacher quality, creating a network of specialist schools, and founding academy schools outside the local authority system, to the ‘personalisation’ of education through individually targeted interventions

such as Reading Recovery. In addition, there was Every Child Matters, a multiagency policy that addressed a wider ‘children’s agenda’.

Oddly, New Labour seemed to recognize the importance of wider structural and cultural influences in its broader policies, especially in the Sure Start initiative and around the wider children’s agenda, but it did not always apply such insights to its understanding of differential performance in schools. Instead, many of New Labour’s key school policies seemed to be founded ‘on the belief that quality differences between schools are primarily the responsibility of schools themselves and can therefore be tackled by initiatives at the school level’ (Thrupp and Lupton, 2006, p. 315). This was unfortunate in that it sometimes led to a failure to ‘join up’ policies.

Furthermore, the vast numbers of education policies introduced by New Labour led to charges of ‘initiative-itis’, while the tendency to alter them even before they had been properly evaluated has meant that it is virtually impossible to determine across the system as whole which policies were effective in narrowing the gap. This despite the fact that New Labour politicians avowedly adopted an ‘evidence-based’ approach to policy and employed the rhetoric of ‘what works’ with the same enthusiasm as their North American peers (see Ofsted, 2010b; Whitty, 2012).

For some policies, the evidence on reducing the attainment gap is equivocal or suggests little or even negative impact. In addition to class size reduction, this applies to Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, and the employment of teaching assistants (Power *et al.*, 2004; Machin *et al.*, 2007; Blatchford *et al.*, 2012). We shall therefore focus here on some of the policies for which there does seem to be credible evidence that they did make an impact on the attainment gap.

### *The National Strategies*

The National Strategies for Literacy (from September 1998) and Numeracy (from September 1999) were a key early policy enacted by Labour to attempt to raise standards overall. An evaluation of a major plank of the National Strategy for Literacy, namely the ‘Literacy Hour’, was conducted by Machin and McNally at the London School of



Economics. This identified a significant impact of the Literacy Hour in its piloted form as part of the earlier National Literacy Programme (NLP). It found that ‘reading and English Key Stage 2 levels rose by more in NLP schools between 1996 and 1998’ than it did in the comparator schools, which had not yet introduced the policy (Machin and McNally, 2004, p. 27).

A more critical view has been taken by a series of reports by Tymms and colleagues (Tymms, 2004; Tymms *et al.*, 2005; Tymms and Merrell, 2007). These question the extent to which standards have truly increased by using secondary data on pupil performance that are argued to be more comparable over time. Although it does seem likely that some of the increase in apparent performance has been due to grade inflation it should not detract from quasi-experimental evidence, such as that used by Machin and McNally, because there is no particular reason to think inflation would affect the pilot schools more than comparator schools.

However, the results found by Machin and McNally relate to early impacts of the intervention. It seems plausible that part of these effects are simply due to the increased focus generated by the introduction of these strategies. Indeed, the evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies commissioned by the DfES suggests that ‘the initial gains in the 1999 national tests were likely due largely to higher motivation on the part of teachers and others at the local level’ (Earl *et al.*, 2001, p. 5). This would also explain the tailing off in improvements observed in general performance over the period.

More generally, Earl *et al.* (2001) were positive about the impact the Strategies were having in terms of implementation, suggesting that they brought about large shifts in priorities within almost all schools in the country. They describe the Strategies as ‘successful’ at more than one point in their report. However, in a critique similar to that later developed by Tymms, Goldstein (2002) suggests the report relied too much on test performance at KS2 to justify extrapolating from successful implementation to success in raising standards.

While identifying limited overall gains for the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, Machin and McNally (2004) noted particularly strong effects at lower levels of attainment (but still positive effects for those already achieving above the target level) and an increased impact for boys (who were otherwise lagging) compared to girls. The results on differential impacts at varying levels of ability, fit well with the suggestion by Jerrim (2012) of a reduction in the attainment gap at the bottom of the ability distribution, and suggests that the Strategies may have been more effective, at least in this respect, than their critics often claim.

Evaluation of the National Strategies is a difficult task for several reasons. Elements such as the Literacy and Numeracy strategies were rolled out rapidly and comprehensively, quickly becoming a pervasive part of the education system. The Strategies also had many elements reaching across EYFS, primary, secondary, behaviour and attendance, and school improvement programmes. Many evaluations point only to overall improvements in attainment over the period (DfE, 2011c), implicitly treating almost all New Labour education policies as part of the National Strategies. They also tend to provide only descriptive evidence, and we have no indication of what would have happened in the presence of different or unchanged policies. Indeed, the schools' inspectorate (Ofsted) has pointed to the failure to evaluate which elements of the National Strategies were successful as a serious shortcoming, partly stemming from the sheer number of initiatives introduced in a relatively short period of time. Its report does, however, praise the impact the National Strategies have had on increased debate around pedagogy, suggesting almost all schools feel they have led to an improvement in teaching and learning and the use of assessment (Ofsted, 2010b, p.5).

Specific evaluation of the Narrowing the Gaps element of the National Strategies was carried out by York Consulting (Starks, 2011). This evaluation focused on support and resources for both children eligible for FSM and Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) children. It reports finding evidence of increased use of the practices that appear effective in improving pupil attendance, motivation, confidence and attainment. These included capacity building by local authorities to support schools in achieving goals, improved engagement with parents, and intelligent tracking of pupil attainment. For the reasons

referred to above, there is little specific quantitative evidence of how this feeds through into outcomes beyond the national trends in attainment gaps identified earlier. The limited case study evidence on the reduction of gaps is not particularly encouraging, with only three out of the eight case study schools reducing the attainment gap. However, it is not clear how representative these case studies were, and the conclusion appears to relate to a limited time frame, although it is not entirely clear exactly what this is. The report suggests that the Strategies were anyway not fully implemented by the end of the period, and it argues that with continued support we may see further positive results.

Ultimately, the National Strategies seem to have had some impact on the attainment gap, although their overall impact certainly plateaued in later years. By then, and well before it lost the 2010 election, the New Labour government had decided that such large-scale national initiatives were no longer appropriate. Its Children's Plan envisaged much greater local and professional autonomy in driving improvement in the future (DCSF, 2007). This was consistent with a wider trend toward handing more responsibility to schools and federations of schools, including autonomous academies and chains of such academies (Curtis, 2009).

### *Academies*

Under New Labour, academies were based on an expectation that giving greater autonomy to schools with dynamic leadership teams and private (not-for-profit) sponsorship would improve their performance. Some of these academies were new schools in disadvantaged areas, whereas others were existing schools deemed to be failing under local authority supervision and which had not responded to earlier 'turnaround' initiatives such as Fresh Start. An official evaluation conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the DfES (PWC, 2008) notes an increased level of performance in these schools relative to the national average. However, this methodology has been criticised (Machin and Vernoit, 2011) on two main counts. Firstly, new academies during the period of evaluation had a more disadvantaged intake than the national average, questioning the validity of this as a control group. Secondly, changes in the socioeconomic status of the intake frequently accompanied the opening of an

academy, and these have the potential to further undermine the validity of the comparison.

An evaluation by the National Audit Office (NAO) used a more select group of comparator schools, based on the intake and performance of the academies prior to conversion. This found increases in performance beyond those seen in the comparator group, but the analysis suggests this was largely driven by the ‘substantial improvements by the less disadvantaged pupils’ (NAO, 2007, p. 27). Although improvements are of course to be welcomed, this does not seem particularly promising for reducing attainment gaps between students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds unless there are substantial peer effects. On the other hand, as Maden (2002) once put it, successful schools tend to have ‘a “critical n” of more engaged, broadly “pro-school” children to start with’ (p. 336), so a longer-term perspective may be helpful here.

In their own study, Machin and Vernoit (2011) went further to try and overcome the potential for selection bias in the choice of comparator schools. They used maintained schools that went on to become academies after their data collection period. Their analysis yielded preliminary results suggesting that in the academies an extra three percentage points of pupils achieved top grades (5 A\*-C) at GCSE (or equivalents) compared to the improvement seen by those yet to convert. However, they only identified this effect in academies that had been open for more than two years at the time of their evaluation. Interestingly, their results suggested that despite the same increase in the socioeconomic status of the school’s intake noted above (and the consequent reduction for neighbouring schools) there were also increases in performance in those neighbouring schools, perhaps due to increased competition. This finding runs counter to the claims made by most critics of academies, who regard their success as coming at the expense of other local schools.

Further work by Machin and colleagues delved into the ways in which academies achieved improvements in their own outcomes. Their findings are not encouraging for proponents of the policy as a way of closing gaps in performance: they suggest that in general academies which converted between 2002 and 2007 improved their results by

‘further raising the attainments of students in the top half of the ability distribution, and in particular pupils in the top 20% tail’ and not by improving the results of those in the bottom tail. In addition, they find no evidence of improvements among the academies converting in 2008 and 2009 (Machin and Silva, 2013). Perhaps this suggests that conversion to academies is only a useful policy in certain circumstances. Unfortunately, the incoming Coalition government cancelled an evaluation of academies commissioned by the previous government, which might have shed further light on these issues.

There is no doubt that some of the academies founded under New Labour proved successful in improving the attainment of disadvantaged students. However, not all academies have performed so well in this and indeed other respects. As might be expected from a policy that grants significant autonomy to schools and their leaders, there is evidence of polarisation in their performance. Curtis *et al.* (2008a) have argued that ‘Academies are in danger of being regarded by politicians as a panacea for a broad range of education problems’, pointing out that, given the variable performance of academies to date, ‘conversion to an Academy may not always be the best route to improvement’ and that care needed to be taken ‘to ensure they are the “best fit” solution to the problem at hand’ (p. 10).

### *The London Challenge*

There are also other New Labour programmes and initiatives that have been evaluated in sufficient depth to give an indication of the sort of interventions that can be effective in narrowing the gap. The transformation of schooling in London in this period is worthy of particular attention. Wyness (2011) notes that, although the demographic character of London would lead one to expect that educational outcomes in London would be inferior to those in the rest of the country, London students actually perform better than those from the rest of the country at most ages and levels of attainment. Performing as well as the rest of the country at KS1, London students ‘pull away from their non-London counterparts at Key Stage 2, with the gap remaining constant, or increasing at Key Stage 4’ (Wyness, 2011, p. 47). It has even been claimed that London is the only capital city in

the developed world whose schools perform better than those in the rest of their nations (Stewart, 2011).

One of the possible explanations Wyness offers for this is the London Challenge, a policy introduced in 2003 at a time when there was something of a ‘moral panic’ about the performance of London’s schools. Its overall brief was ambitious and extensive (DfES, 2005). Although it included market-based elements, others seemed to respond to the potentially negative effects of such policies. It was consistent with the New Labour emphasis on standards, and recognised the importance of concerted collective efforts to raise achievement among those schools and children who had been languishing under existing policies. The first Commissioner for London Schools, Tim Brighouse, describes London as trying to be the first place to show that schools could contribute to ‘cracking the cycle of disadvantage’ (Brighouse, 2007, p. 79).

The London Challenge was initially a five-year partnership between central government, schools and boroughs to raise standards in London’s secondary school system. Provision included transforming failing schools into academies, pan-London resources and programmes available to all schools, individualized support for the most disadvantaged students and intensive work with 5 of the 33 London boroughs and more particularly with ‘Keys to Success’ schools within them. These schools were those in London facing the biggest challenges and in greatest need of additional support. Each school received bespoke solutions through diagnostic work and ongoing support (Brighouse, 2007). Schools were also provided with and encouraged to make use of data on the performance of similar schools, grouped together in so-called ‘Families of Schools’. The Challenge was extended in 2006 to include work with primary schools and in relation to students’ progression to further and higher education. There has been additional continuing professional development for teachers through the Chartered London Teacher scheme and for head teachers through the London Leadership Strategy.

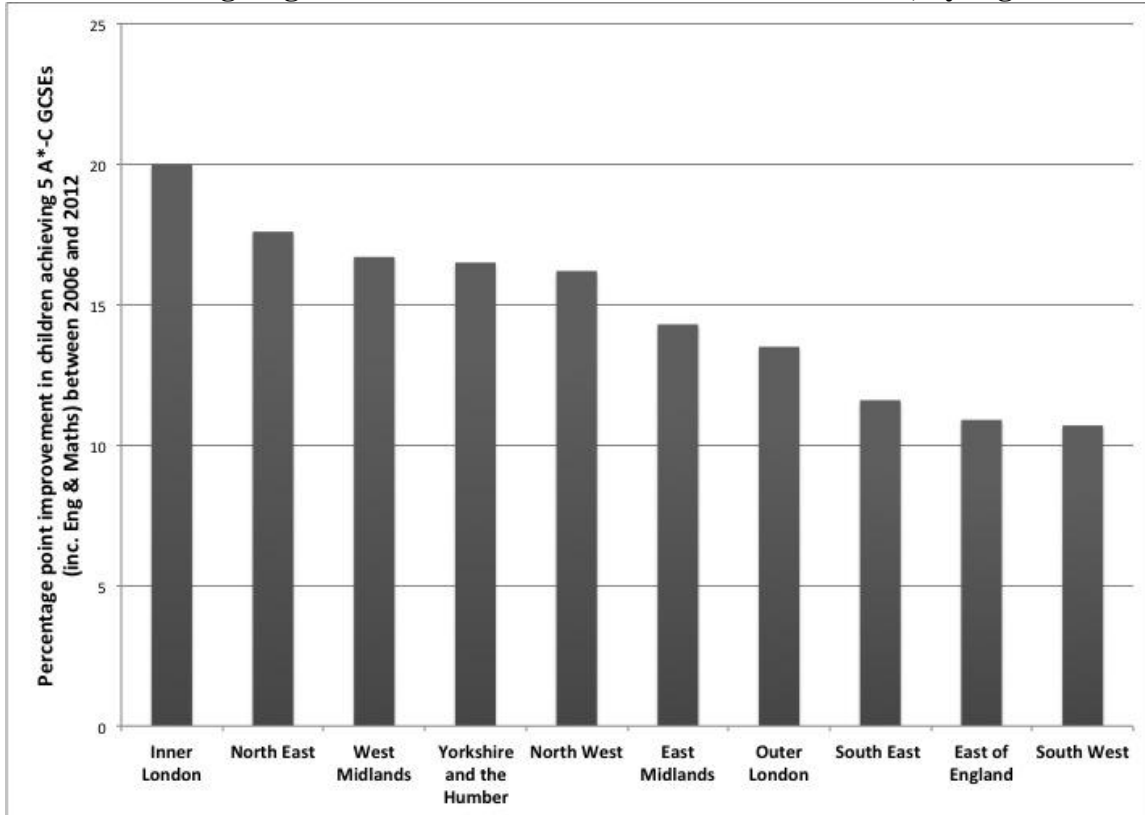
Some politicians have privileged particular policies in their accounts of the success of the London Challenge. For example, the present Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, recently claimed that the three most important elements were sponsored

academies, the use of outstanding schools to mentor others and a focus on improving the quality of teaching--especially through Teach First (Gove, 2012). This emphasis is perhaps not surprising given the centrality of these particular policies to his own party's preferred reforms, which are discussed briefly later in this paper.

Even so, there is certainly evidence that each of these particular policies had a positive impact on schools in their own right (Machin and Vernoit, 2011; Earley and Weindling, 2006; Muijs *et al.*, 2010). However, we are not aware of any research that shows that they were necessarily the most important elements in the success of the London Challenge or in narrowing the attainment gap in London. In reality, New Labour's London Challenge programme whose success Gove was praising was a multifaceted policy, and it included elements that seem to be out of step with the present government's approach. It involved a range of interventions at the level of 'the London teacher, the London leader, the London school and the London student' (Brighouse, 2007, p. 80ff).

This means that unfortunately, as with national policies, it is difficult to identify which parts of the intervention had the positive effect. Nevertheless, the overall approach of London Challenge does seem to have had a tangible impact, although there may have been other factors at work in London at that time (Wyness, 2011; Allen, 2012). National performance data show that between 2003 and 2006, the national rate of improvement in the number of students achieving 5 or more GCSE passes with grades A\*-C at age 16 was 6.7%, whereas in London it was 8.4%, and in the 'Keys to Success' schools in London it was 12.9% (DfES, 2007a). Figure 9 shows the faster rate of improvement in the proportion achieving 5 A\*-C GCSEs including English and Maths, relative to other regions.

**Figure 9: Change in the percentage of children achieving five GCSEs at A\*-C including English and Maths between 2006-07 and 2011-12, by region**



Source: Department for Education (2011a). Regions are defined using the nine English Government Office Regions, additionally splitting London into Inner and Outer London.

Toward the end of its existence, the London Challenge was extended to other English cities as the City Challenge (DfES, 2007b). Hutchings *et al.* (2012) present evidence that these programmes had impacts on reducing the number of underperforming schools and increasing the performance of those eligible for FSM faster than the national average. However, only in London (and in Greater Manchester in the primary phase) has this been translated into a closing of the attainment gap over the period 2008-2011.

Even in London, it was initially suggested that the improvement in the overall performance of London schools noted above derived largely from an increase in attainment among the more advantaged students in the schools that were receiving the most intensive interventions. However, subsequently it was found that not only were the ‘Keys to Success’ schools improving at a faster rate than the norm, the attainment gap for disadvantaged children in London was itself narrowing faster than elsewhere and



narrowing fastest in these particular schools. Using FSM entitlement as a proxy for economic disadvantage, data provided to us by the DfES showed that attainment at age 16 for this group of pupils within 'Keys to Success' schools rose by a larger amount than for the non-FSM pupils (13.1 points compared to 12.3 points for the latter between 2003 and 2006). Michael Gove drew attention to this particular success for poorer children in London when he noted that whereas in England more generally '35 per cent of children on free school meals achieve five good GCSEs with English and Maths ... in inner-London 52 per cent meet [this benchmark]' (Gove, 2012). He also noted that this is not far off the national average for pupils, regardless of their background.

An Ofsted report on the impact of London Challenge described continuing positive impacts beyond the initial period. It noted that the primary schools that joined the London Challenge 'are improving faster than those in the rest of England', partly attributing this to schools continuing to participate in development programmes for teachers after the support given as part of London Challenge had ended (Ofsted, 2010a). The report was positive about the possibilities for maintaining the gains from London Challenge due to changes it has engendered in practices (such as increased use of performance data to track progress) and ethos (such as motivating staff to share good practice with other schools). Such collaboration may have countered the more negative effects of school choice mechanisms, so it will be important to monitor what happens in London now that the initiative as a whole has finally come to an end but market-oriented policies remain in place. On this issue, Hutchings *et al.* (2012) found encouraging evidence that schools that were part of the initial London Challenge scheme, but no longer funded as Keys to Success schools after 2008, continued to improve at a faster rate than did the national average despite the extra support ending.

But there are also those who say that even the limited progress made under New Labour, particularly in London, was more to do with their tenure of office coinciding with a period of sustained economic boom than any of these education policies. Again the question is not perhaps how did New Labour narrow the achievement gap, but whether they do so in any meaningful way. This is particularly interesting in that Diane Ravitch (2010) has come to the conclusion that the much-vaunted improvements in New York's

School District 2 in the 1990s can be put down to economic and demographic changes in the area rather than education policy interventions. The relative importance of these two factors is critical to whether the growing consensus that programmes such as the London Challenge hold the clue to wider improvement is justified. If it really was ‘the economy stupid’, then Basil Bernstein was perhaps right after all.

The ongoing relevance of this question is demonstrated by Ofsted’s (2013b) recent proposal for a series of ‘sub-regional challenges’ for other poorly performing areas. Whatever the explanation, it will be important that the different contextual factors in each area are fully taken into account in the design of any such interventions.

### *Extended Schools*

There were also other promising developments in London and elsewhere in England. Extended schools and full service extended schools (similar to full service schools or ‘wrap-around schooling’ in the United States) were introduced to provide an extended day and/or additional services on school sites. The evaluation of New Labour’s pilot programme of full service extended schools found that the number of students reaching the national benchmark at age 16 (five good GCSEs) in such schools rose faster than the national average and that it brought particularly positive outcomes for poorer families by providing stability and improving their children’s engagement in learning. Encouragingly in terms of the concerns of this paper, the final report indicated that the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, based on FSM eligibility, had narrowed in these schools (Cummings *et al.*, 2007, p.126).

### *Reading Recovery*

Support for Reading Recovery was an example of a policy targeted directly at individuals rather than at schools or areas and was part of a broader personalisation agenda that developed in the later years of the New Labour administration. Reading Recovery originated in New Zealand but was introduced in England by the Institute of Education and was given government funding, and it eventually became a key component of the national Every Child a Reader programme. It aims to provide one-on-one support to

children falling behind their peers in the first few years of school. As such, it aims to break the cycle of low self-esteem and lack of confidence resulting from falling behind, itself hampering further progress. A Reading Recovery evaluation (NatCen, 2011) saw improvements in reading ability and reading-related attitudes and behaviours for children receiving help from the programme. It is worth noting, however, that this is a purely descriptive analysis. No comparator group can be identified because pupils eligible for Reading Recovery are only identified in schools where it is being implemented; no group is picked out who are eligible but do not go on to receive the intervention. As such, we cannot say what progress Reading Recover participants would have made in the absence of the programme. It could be the case that some would have caught up by themselves or through pre-existing support mechanism, or alternatively that they would have fallen further behind. There is also the potential for regression to the mean among these pupils: one element of the underperformance of these students would be due purely to chance, meaning that in the absence of any further information we would expect these children's performance to have "improved" on being re-assessed. The same evaluation also used a quasi-experimental method to estimate a wider impact of Every Child a Reader. This found an encouraging impact on school-level reading and writing attainment of between two and six percentage points in the later years of the intervention.

### *Teach First*

There has been an increasing recognition that 'that getting the right people to become teachers is critical to high performance' (Barber and Mourshed, 2007, p. 16). Teach First, like Teach for America, was an initiative to recruit highly-qualified graduates into teaching in particularly disadvantaged schools. It began work in London in 2002.

An evaluation by Muijs *et al.* (2010) found that schools with Teach First teachers achieve higher attainment for their students than do comparable schools (as matched by type of school, gender intake, performance levels, student intake characteristics, location and school size). As with any quasi-experimental method, we cannot be sure the results are causal, because the matching will not ensure that the schools are truly comparable. Indeed, because schools can choose to partner with Teach First, there seems considerable

scope for those with more proactive leadership or more capacity to benefit from Teach First teachers to be driving these results.

The evaluation attempts to assess this possibility by also comparing Ofsted evaluations of Teach First and comparator schools, finding little significant difference. It also finds evidence of a mild, but significant, correlation between the number of Teach First teachers in a school and its student outcomes, a pattern we would expect where such teachers are making a real difference to the pupils' attainment. A similar finding is reported by Allen and Allnutt (2013), who found that a GCSE student taking eight subjects benefited by around one grade overall if there were Teach First recruits working in his or her school, compared to schools without such teachers. Although this does not give us specific evidence on closing the attainment gap, because all Teach First schools have disadvantaged intakes, it seems plausible that this initiative can help to reduce between-school attainment gaps.

Finally, it is worth remembering that over the period studied Teach First was a relatively small programme (although it has increased in size since), meaning it is unlikely to have had a noticeable impact on national attainment gaps. There are also significant challenges associated with expanding its reach, since this could dilute Teach First's search for highly qualified and skilled graduates (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012, pp.28-29).

### *Beyond competition*

Apart from the case of Academies, these gains have been derived from initiatives that, to some extent at least, run counter to the central thrust of recent policies in England and elsewhere that see school improvement as coming through market competition and choice between autonomous schools. London Challenge recognized the particular challenges facing schools in the capital and the need for them to work together, while one of the key features of extended schools was multi-agency co-operation and schools providing services for local communities. Reading Recovery required substantial resources to be devoted to the needs of a small number of disadvantaged children, arguably at the expense of investment in the needs of more affluent students whose parents are often seen

as calling the tune in our current education system (Ball, 2003). Teach First teachers made a collective contribution to improvement across the system as a whole, as well as serving in the individual schools to which they were allocated. Even Academies were increasingly encouraged and incentivized by government to collaborate, although not all chose to do so.

Thus, in their different ways, these initiatives have in practice recognized the importance of working together to counter wider influences on educational performance to a rather greater extent than is evident in the dominant market rhetoric adopted by recent governments (Whitty, 2008). Taken together, they also provide support for the warning made by Ravitch (2010) in the United States ‘that, in education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets’ (p. 3).

Another recent review of the evidence on whether schools can narrow the gap, carried out at the University of Manchester, suggests that, though the ability of schooling to lessen the impact of deprivation on children’s progress is limited by factors beyond the control of the school system, ‘carefully designed school improvement interventions...can help schools to narrow the gap in attainment’ (Kerr and West, 2010, pp. 8-9). However, the authors also argue that ‘[n]either general nor targeted interventions have, thus far, demonstrated substantial sustained improvements that can be spread widely’ (p. 37). They conclude that structural and ‘beyond-the-school strategies’ are necessary, arguing that twenty years of competition between schools has done little to improve the lot of disadvantaged students but that ‘collaboration between schools has shown some promising results’. They also advocate an overhaul of school governance and management structures and suggest that ‘radical changes across children’s services [will be] needed to support sustained improvements in children’s outcomes’ (Kerr and West, 2010, p. 45).

### **Access to Higher Education**

The New Labour government introduced a series of policies designed to narrow the participation gap between traditional and non-traditional entrants to higher education, the latter meaning those from lower socioeconomic groups and some particular ethnic

minorities. These policies included new student financing arrangements to offset increased fees, the establishment of an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to ensure that universities took their responsibilities in this area seriously, and AimHigher, an outreach initiative that helped universities to work closely with schools to increase aspiration, achievement and enrolments.

In relation to the concerns of this paper, it is important to note that much of the university participation gap is influenced not so much by bias in selection by universities, but through a lack of qualified applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, Anders (2012) finds little evidence of different success rates among university applicants with similar attainment at the end of KS2 (age 11). As such, most of the overall participation gap is driven at or before the decision to apply to university, with factors such as lower prior attainment or lower educational expectations by young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds potentially meaning that they do not apply in the first place (see also Sutton Trust, 2004).

A report from OFFA (Harris, 2010) found that, though these widening participation efforts had had a positive impact overall, the picture was different if the group of what the report calls ‘highly selective’ institutions was considered separately. These institutions included Oxford, Cambridge, and other research-intensive universities. Although the overall higher education participation rate of the least-advantaged 40% of students had increased since the mid-1990s, the participation rate of the same group at the most selective third of universities had stayed constant. Furthermore, the gap between the most and least advantaged had actually increased in these universities as those from the most advantaged backgrounds (the top 20%) were now more likely to attend these institutions than they were in the mid-1990s. In this same vein, Boliver (2013) argues that Russell Group applicants from state schools are much less likely to receive offers of admission from Russell Group universities in comparison with their equivalently qualified peers from private schools.

For those who do apply, the pattern of subjects they study is also socially skewed (Whitty, 2010a). For students wanting to study STEM subjects, it is not just attainment

that counts but specifically attainment in the right subjects. Even having the potential to study STEM subjects at university requires decisions to be taken relatively early in a student's school career, as STEM subjects usually have more specific requirements with regard to entry qualifications than with regard to many other subjects (Coyne and Goodfellow, 2008). Harris (2010) observed that one has only to recognise that 'the range of sciences offered in independent and selective schools is often wider (than in non-selective state schools), and that science-based subjects such as medicine are disproportionately offered by selective universities and at least some of the reasons for a skewed application pool are immediately very clear' (p. 73). Thus, although the main imperative in terms of further widening of participation and fair access must be to enhance attainment in school, improved information, advice and guidance is also important--particularly for some STEM subjects, such as engineering and medicine, where the combination of prior qualifications needed is especially tightly specified.

Toward the end of the New Labour government, a study by the Institute of Education identified a need to develop the AimHigher initiative through more work with younger children, involving parents where possible, more sustained interventions engaging all students and not just a select group, as well as doing more work on subject-specific issues (Tough *et al.*, 2008). Another project recommended that schools should ensure that students know about the full spectrum of universities, that school staff should be open with students regarding the nature and standing of different universities, and that there should be a change in the university recruitment timetable to benefit 'first generation' applicants who generally have lower predicted test scores and are also likely to apply to the more selective universities only if predicted high scores in their A-level examinations (Curtis *et al.*, 2008b).

### **Postscript: Policies and Prospects Post-2010**

As indicated at the start of this paper, the Conservative-led Coalition government that was elected to replace New Labour in May 2010 has made a commitment to 'closing' the achievement gap as part of a wider commitment to increasing social mobility, which it claims had stalled under New Labour (HM Government, 2010a). The general thrust of

current policies is to continue and accelerate the emphasis on seeking improvement through school autonomy, competition and choice that was pioneered by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government but continued by New Labour under Tony Blair, along with a reassertion of traditional approaches to schooling (Whitty, 1989, 2008).

Whereas the academies policy of the Blair government discussed above sought to use academy status mainly to prioritise the replacement or improvement of failing schools in disadvantaged areas, the Conservative-led Coalition has potentially extended this status to virtually all schools. Schools highly rated by Ofsted, a disproportionate number of which are in more affluent areas, can be granted academy status automatically if they so desire. Meanwhile, parents, teachers and others are being encouraged to open publicly-funded 'free schools', which, like academies, are outside the jurisdiction of local authority. Although some of these schools are in disadvantaged areas or where there is a shortage of school places, others are in middle class areas and where there is already a surplus of places. It therefore remains an open question whether a policy with such unpredictable outcomes will help to 'close' the gap or effectively 'open' it up again.

However, the nature of the new government's education policy is to some extent influenced by the social justice agenda of the Liberal Democrat party, whose votes give the Coalition its majority in parliament. Among the policies that are directly linked to the commitment to close the attainment gap is a 'pupil premium' to be paid on top of the normal grant for every school-age student in receipt of free school meals in state schools. This is consistent with the earlier trend of linking resources to individuals in need regardless of the neighbourhood in which they are receiving their schooling. Unfortunately, welcome as this payment is, the level of it is below that envisaged by the Liberal Democrats prior to the election, and it replaces other targeted benefits that were paid under New Labour. Most seriously, the fact that it is being introduced at a time of major expenditure cuts in other areas means that some schools will barely notice its impact. Furthermore, the money is not ring-fenced or mandated for particular purposes, and retrospective monitoring of its use by Ofsted will be the main mechanism for ensuring that it is actually used to benefit the education of the disadvantaged.



An early survey of teachers for the Sutton Trust (2012) was not encouraging. It suggested that little of the £1.25bn allocated through the pupil premium for disadvantaged children in 2012–13 would be spent on activities that are known to boost attainment. Less downbeat, an Ofsted survey of Pupil Premium usage stated that schools tended to use the funds in multiple ways (rather than pursuing a single strategy) with ‘[t]he most common use of the Pupil Premium reported by school leaders [being] to fund existing or new staff, who were often involved in a range of one-to-one or small-group tuition provision’ (Ofsted, 2012, p.10). However, they identified the most common staffing usage as being on Teaching Assistants and did not regard this as necessarily the best use of funds in many contexts. In further support of the policy Ofsted (2013a) gave some guidance on what it did see as effective practice and identified examples of particularly strong practice by schools in an attempt to spread this across the country.

Another initiative, designed to help in this respect, was the creation by the government of an Education Endowment Foundation, a grant-making charity dedicated to raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in English primary and secondary schools by challenging educational disadvantage, sharing evidence and finding out what works. One of the ways in which it does this is by providing independent and accessible information through a Learning and Teaching Toolkit (EEF 2012), which provides guidance to schools on how best to use the pupil premium to improve the attainment of their pupils by summarising educational research from the United Kingdom and elsewhere. This has so far identified effective feedback, metacognition and peer tutoring as three strategies that have been shown to have high impact at low cost, on the basis of strong evidence. In the case of peer tutoring, it suggests that children from disadvantaged background may derive particularly large benefits from this strategy. It also identifies the high impact of early years intervention, but notes the high costs involved in this.

There is currently considerable controversy about whether the government’s curriculum policies will help to close the gap. There is, for example, a commendable emphasis on early literacy. However, Ministers have shown what many see as an undue commitment to ‘synthetic phonics’ as the only way to teach reading. This is despite evidence that, although it can indeed be an effective strategy with disadvantaged children, it is not a

panacea and children need to be taught by a variety of methods if they are to become fully capable and enthusiastic readers (Wyse and Parker, 2012).

Another policy announced by Michael Gove was the 'English Baccalaureate', an award to students but also effectively a new performance measure for secondary schools based on the percentage of students achieving high grades in specified subjects, i.e. English, math, science, history or geography and a foreign language. This may initially affect disadvantaged students adversely, as they are more likely to have been exposed to alternative curricula than are more advantaged students on a university entrance track.

A linked policy has been to reduce the number of 'equivalent' qualifications that are permitted to be used in school performance tables as alternatives to the GCSE qualifications at age 16. More generally, in response to the Wolf Report (HM Government, 2011), the government has sought to distinguish between high and low quality vocational provision in schools. This is likely to have an impact of the number of vocational qualifications taught in schools and place a further emphasis on a return to conventional academic qualifications. Ironically, in view of the Coalition government's enthusiastic embrace of the academies programme, some of the New Labour academies that moved sharply up the performance tables in recent years did so partly by introducing alternative qualifications (de Waal, 2009).

The government's response to concerns about its traditionalist curriculum policy has been that social justice requires equal access to high-status knowledge and that there is little point in students succeeding in courses that are deemed to have little value by universities, employers and the wider society. However, though there may well be a good argument for ensuring that all students should have the opportunity to gain access to 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2010), if indeed that is what is the traditional curriculum provides, the government will need to give more attention than it has done hitherto to reforming the pedagogy through which those subjects are taught (Whitty, 2010b). Exley and Ball (2011) argue that some current policies involve a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that we need to remember that few disadvantaged children and families benefited from the type of schooling that predominated in those days. So the jury remains out on how far

current policies will contribute positively to continuing narrowing the gap in school attainment--let alone closing it.

A further issue is the Coalition government's policies for further and higher education. They have removed Education Maintenance Allowances that supported disadvantaged students to stay in full-time education beyond age 16 and replaced it with a much less expensive and extensive scheme. In universities, they have introduced higher fees alongside income-contingent loans to be repaid by graduates while earning. Although this means that no families will have to pay the fees upfront, there is a concern that some students will be unwilling to take on the levels of debt envisaged. The early evidence gives limited credence to those who anticipated a reduction in the rate of applications when the increase was introduced. However, this decline has been fairly even across socioeconomic status, but has been particularly evident among older students (UCAS 2012). It will be years before we know the extent and nature of the changes' impact on patterns of recruitment to higher education and the professions.

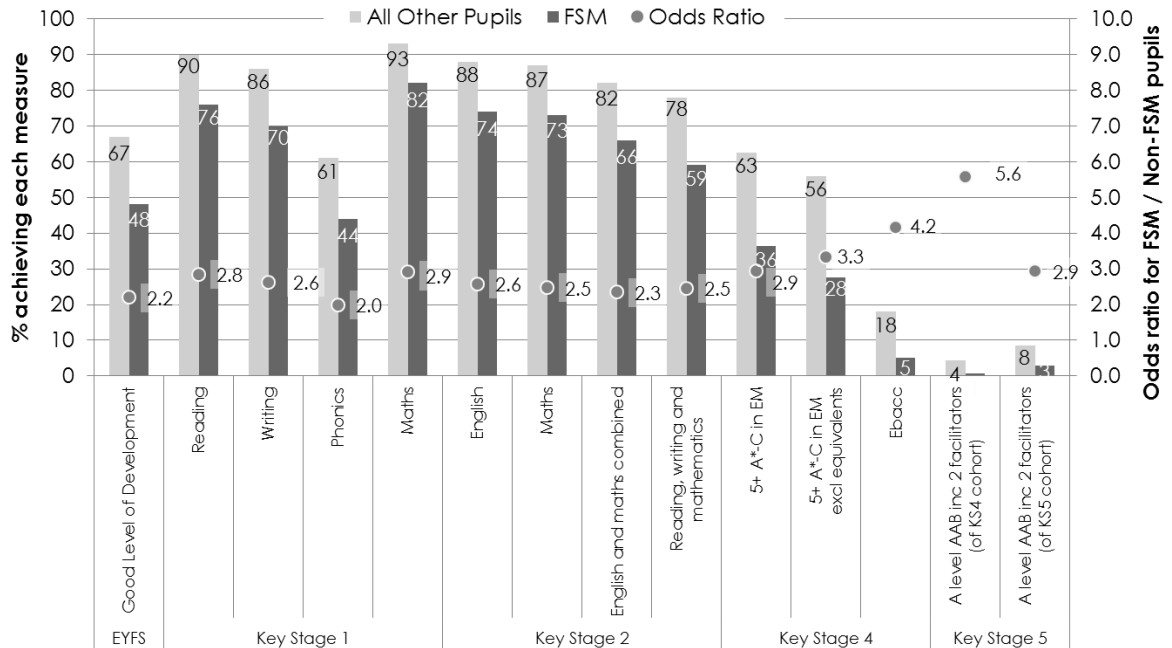
A decision to bring to an end the work of AimHigher has led to controversy, but the government is pledged to secure a strengthening of universities' widening participation strategies and to hold universities to account for them, primarily through their agreements with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) without which they are not permitted to charge tuition fees of above £6,000 per year.

The Government has also called for better information, advice and guidance in schools. However, the transfer of responsibility for careers advice to individual schools has been controversial. The House of Commons Education Committee expressed concerns over "the consistency, quality, independence and impartiality of careers guidance now being offered to young people" and described the transfer as "regrettable" (HoC, 2013, p.3). Its introduction of destinations data, including entry to elite universities, as a new performance indicator for secondary schools (DfE, 2013) has also caused controversy.

Meanwhile, the scale of the continuing challenge can be seen in the following figures provided by the DfE recently and reproduced as Figure 10. For each measure, the height of the red dot shows the relative odds of a non-FSM pupil achieving the measure, relative

to an FSM pupil. These show that, as with the difference in the participation gap in higher education generally and at elite universities (and related to that gap of course), even though the attainment gap in schools has narrowed overall, it is largest for the elite measures, Levels 5 & 6 at KS2, 5A\*-C at KS4 and AAB at A-level (even after drop-out).

**Figure 10: FSM gaps across the Key Stages, 2012**



Source: Department for Education (2013)

With a view to longer-term strategies for tackling such continuing inequalities, the Coalition government commissioned two important reports. Both these reports were written by Labour Members of Parliament, demonstrating that closing the gap is a key cross-party priority. The first of these, the Field report (Field, 2010), was the product of a review of the evidence on poverty and life chances. Although part of its remit was to consider how to reduce poverty across the life cycle, it developed a particular focus on the importance of children’s development in their first five years to their future life chances. It recommended a much greater focus on the EYFS, with some of the funding from other phases of education gradually being shifted to these early years. However, it also recommended spending this reallocated funding in much more targeted ways, through programmes such as support for parenting skills. Particularly importantly for the concerns of this paper, it recommended that schools be held accountable through the

inspection system for reducing attainment gaps, not just increasing attainment (Field, 2010, p. 64). This recommendation has effectively been implemented through the latest school inspection framework and through an addition to the annual school performance tables that will show how effective they are in achieving progress with students at three different levels of ability.

Two other recommendations that received considerable attention were to introduce new 'life chance indicators' to supplement financial indicators of poverty and to divert future increases in child-related social benefits to increase early-years provision. Taken together, these represent a shift in focus away from poverty as a lack of money and toward non-monetary 'factors in young children which we know to be predictive of children's future outcomes' (Field, 2010, p. 9). This has the potential to be highly significant for the future direction of policy aimed at reducing achievement gaps, although it could be counter-productive if it leads to a neglect of policies to tackle material poverty.

The Allen report (Allen, 2011) specifically considered how the government should take forward its early intervention strategy. It surveyed literature on the particularly rapid pace of cognitive development before the age of three, concluding that if the child does not get the best start in life, it can seriously hamper their social and economic outcomes later in life. It painted a positive picture of the potential for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, when it stated that 'what parents do is more important than who they are' (Allen, 2011, p. 23). In particular, it recommended targeting school readiness during the EYFS, attempting to ensure that socioeconomic gaps between children entering school described earlier in this paper are closed. Again, there are clear implications here for future policy directions. For example, it seems likely that, following these two reports, we will see an increased focus on developing parenting skills.

If the present government did move decisively in that direction, it would signal an acceptance of the conclusion of Kerr and West (2010) that 'efforts to improve schools must be accompanied by efforts to support disadvantaged families' (p. 41). As Mortimore and Whitty (1997) argued under a previous government, 'society needs to be

clearer about what schools can and cannot be expected to do' (p. 12). This does not mean that schools cannot make a difference, or that they do not have a particularly important role in helping to narrow the attainment gap and thereby enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged children. It does mean that they cannot do it alone.

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## **Contact details**

Geoff Whitty is Director Emeritus at the Institute of Education, University of London, UK and a Visiting Professor at the Universities of Bath and Birmingham, UK. Email: [g.whitty@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:g.whitty@ioe.ac.uk)

Jake Anders works in the Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education, University of London, UK. Email: [jake@jakeanders.co.uk](mailto:jake@jakeanders.co.uk)

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For more information, please contact  
[llakescentre@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:llakescentre@ioe.ac.uk)  
LLAKES Centre  
Institute of Education  
20 Bedford Way  
WC1H 0AL  
London  
UK





UNIVERSITY OF  
**Southampton**  
School of Education

