



Department
for Education

Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils

Research report

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Executive summary

Introduction

This research, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), took place in the spring and summer terms of the 2017-18 academic year. It aimed to identify what secondary schools across England were doing to support attainment amongst the most able disadvantaged students from Key stage 2 to Key Stage 4. It had a particular focus on schools where these pupils were making better than average progress¹.

The policy context was a focus on closing the attainment gap in schools as part of wider efforts to increase social mobility. Previous research² had identified disadvantaged pupils who attained in the top 10% at the end of primary school as being much less likely than their more advantaged peers to achieve highly at the end of Key Stage 4.

The research reported here was largely qualitative in nature. It involved a scoping survey of over 400 secondary schools, followed by telephone interviews with 21 diverse schools with successful experience to share and further case study work in three schools with well-developed and effective support in place for their most able disadvantaged pupils.

Key findings

Note: The findings are based on data from a small scale qualitative study, so must be viewed as indicative only. Further research is required to validate these results.

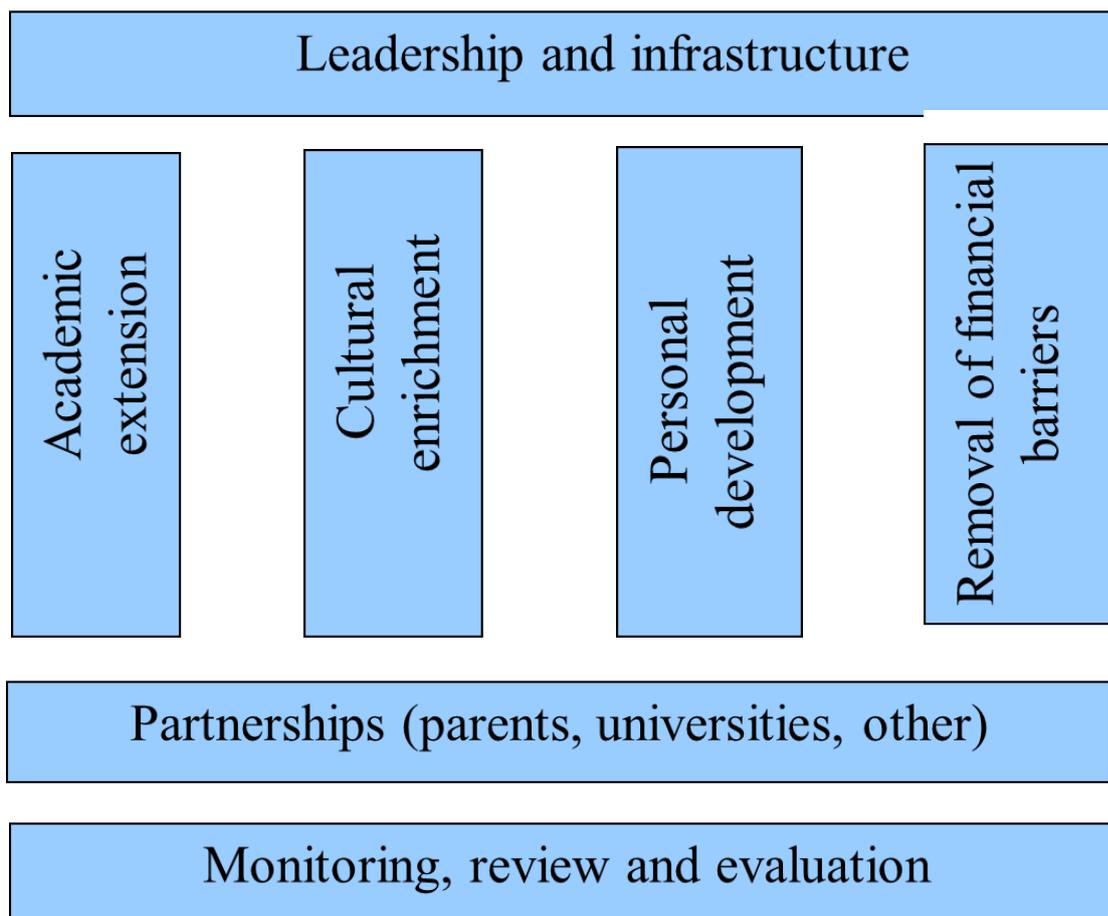
A key finding from the research was that successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils was not about a single intervention. Rather it was about a suite of activities that, individually and together, made a positive impact (Figure 1).

Strong leadership and strategic focus on this cohort was required. In addition, interventions across four areas were needed: academic extension; cultural enrichment; personal development; and removal of financial barriers to achievement. These intervention areas were supported by schools' partnership work with parents, universities, local businesses and others. Finally, monitoring, review and evaluation of outcomes enabled schools to focus their efforts on the most cost-effective activities.

¹ A list of such schools was created by the DfE purely for the purposes of this research.

² Sutton Trust (2015). [Research Brief: Missing Talent](#).

Figure 1 Model of successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils



All of the schools in our sample that had a clear strategic focus on the most able disadvantaged students were successful with that cohort, as evidenced by above national average progress scores.

Many of the activities described by schools focused on ‘disadvantaged pupils’ or ‘most able pupils’. ‘Most able disadvantaged’ pupils could, and reportedly did, benefit from these activities. It was much less common to hear of interventions either targeted at, or specifically designed to address risk factors and promote protective factors for, this cohort of pupils. In the report, we focus on these interventions as far as possible.

As well as describing successful practice to support the most able disadvantaged pupils, the report also provides a model of risk and protective factors, a theory of change and a logic model for schools to use in planning and evaluating their work with this cohort.

1. Background and introduction

1.1 The issue

1.1.1 Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential, and the Future Talent Fund

On 14 December, 2017, the then Secretary of State for Education announced the government's national plan to support children and young people to reach their full potential, regardless of their backgrounds. The plan – 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential' – had as its overarching goal the aim of improving social mobility through education, and delivering better educational and career outcomes more evenly across England. In order to achieve these goals, the plan envisages action to help remove obstacles to social mobility from the Early Years to post-16 education. One of the core areas relates to closing the attainment gap in school. The Secretary of State explained: 'The attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers is closing. But these pupils still remain behind their peers. We will build on recent reforms, and raise standards in the areas that need it most.' (Greening, 2017). Part of the action plan envisaged 'a new £23 million Future Talent Programme to trial approaches and present clear recommendations on 'what works' to support the most-able disadvantaged children' (Gov.uk, 2017).

This policy focus was, in part, a response to recommendations from the Sutton Trust, whose input the Secretary of State acknowledged in the announcement of the Future Talent Fund. In particular, the Sutton Trust, in its '2017 Mobility Manifesto', called for 'the government to develop an effective national programme for highly able state school pupils with ring-fenced funding to support evidence based activities and the tracking of pupils' progress' (Sutton Trust, 2017). Later research from the Trust (Montacute, 2018, p4) found that, 'There is currently little evidence on how best to support highly able students, and even less on how to support students who are capable of high attainment who are from disadvantaged backgrounds.' This finding, published during the present study, underlines the importance of our focus: understanding successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

In August 2018 the Secretary of State decided to cancel the Future Talent Fund. This research is therefore particularly important. It highlights how some secondary schools are already supporting their most able disadvantaged pupils to fulfil their potential, so that others can learn from their experience.

1.1.1.1 'Missing Talent'

The particular issue relating to outcomes for academically able disadvantaged pupils has been characterised as being that of 'Missing Talent' (Sutton Trust, 2015). According to the Trust, there are four key aspects of the 'Missing Talent' question (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Key aspects of the Missing Talent issue

- 15% of highly able pupils who score in the top 10% nationally at age 11 fail to achieve in the top 25% at GCSE.
- Boys, and particularly pupil premium³ [i.e. disadvantaged] boys, are most likely to be in this missing talent group.
- Highly able pupil premium pupils achieve half a grade less than other highly able pupils, on average, with a very long tail to underachievement.
- Highly able pupil premium pupils are less likely to be taking GCSEs in history, geography, triple sciences or a language.

Source: Sutton Trust, June 2015

The later *Potential for Success* Sutton Trust report (Montacute, 2018) provided further evidence about the attainment gap by Key Stage 4 between the most able disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Defining 'high attainment' as being, 'in the top 10% for attainment in English and maths at the end of primary school' (p3), the report found that:

'[...] disadvantaged pupils who do perform strongly in primary school [...] are much more likely to fall behind at secondary school, compared to other high attaining students, across a range of measures. While high attainers overall make about an average level of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 (a Progress 8 score⁴ of 0.02, where the national average is zero), those from disadvantaged backgrounds fall substantially behind, with a negative Progress 8 score of -0.32. [...] If high attaining disadvantaged students performed as well as high achieving students overall an additional 1,000 disadvantaged students would achieve at least 5 A* - A [equivalent to grades 9-7⁵] at GCSE each year.' (Montacute, 2018, p3)

³ The government pays schools a pupil premium grant to support the raising of attainment of disadvantaged pupils and to support children with parents in the regular armed forces ([Conditions of grant, 2018-19](#))

⁴ Progress 8 score is a value added measure that captures pupil progress from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school. (DfE, 2016, p5).

⁵Equivalence of the previous and revised grading system at GCSE is set out [here](#):

Although the pattern of underachievement for disadvantaged pupils at GCSE level, and the impact of that underachievement on subsequent education choices and opportunities, is clear, the causes are less so. For example, academically able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to 'elite' universities than their peers from more affluent backgrounds, but the exact causes of this are unclear (Crawford et al, June 2014). Similarly, 'elite', research-led universities recognise that too many young people are unable to apply for places at such universities as they have not studied the GCSE and A-level subjects necessary for courses they are interested in (Russell Group, 2016/17). However, the causes of that gap could be the result of a lack of confidence at the level of individual pupils, poor guidance by schools, inadequate mentoring for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, or attendance at one of the 20% of maintained schools which do not offer a wide enough curriculum (Sutton Trust, 2015, p2). Some, or all, of these factors could be in play between Key Stage 2 and 4, thereby limiting achievement at GCSE level, and options and outcomes at Key Stage 5 and beyond.

The challenge inherent in the 'Missing Talent' model focuses on the period between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, inclusive of post-GCSE advice and support. That challenge is 'to ensure that higher-achieving pupils from poor backgrounds remain on a high achievement trajectory' (Crawford et al, 2014, p.9). The current research project was focused on identifying, through high-quality, qualitative research, existing good practice for supporting the Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 4 cohort. The research to identify existing good practice to support disadvantaged high attaining pupils also focused on the relative effectiveness of different strategies, and understanding the barriers faced by schools in attempting to support this cohort.

1.2 The research

1.2.1 The research aims

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned a team from the University of Warwick to undertake research to understand how secondary schools support most able disadvantaged pupils to fulfil their potential. The original purpose of the research was:

- To identify current school practice in relation to support for disadvantaged high attaining pupils from Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 4. In particular, to identify and explore good practice within schools where these pupils have made better than average progress.
- To understand how effective schools feel that strategies they use to support the cohort are, and if any particular strategies stand out above others.
- To understand the practical implications of implementing these strategies.
- To find out what, if any, strategies schools have tried but have felt to be unsuccessful or impractical.

- To understand what barriers schools face while trying to support this cohort.
- To provide research findings which could be easily translated into interventions for trialling.

1.2.2 The research design

The overall research design involved a three stage process of data collection, with progress from one stage to the next being dependent on findings. The stages of data collection were:

1. Phase 1 Scoping survey

The purposes of the scoping survey were to identify current school practice in relation to support for disadvantaged high attaining pupils from Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 4 and to inform sampling at Phase 2. The survey content was designed to provide a top-level answer to the first research question - what do schools, with a track record of better than average progress for disadvantaged high attaining pupils, currently do (beyond whole school good practice) for that cohort?

2. Phase 2 Qualitative Fieldwork

Phase 2 data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews designed to gather rich data on the ways in which schools are supporting their most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

3. Phase 3 Case Studies

The final stage of data collection involved in-depth telephone interviews with key staff at schools selected, in conjunction with the DfE, from the Phase 2 cohort. Each school taking part in the Phase 3 interviews provided three members of staff for interview – the head teacher or senior management team member, the staff member responsible for additional support for the most able disadvantaged pupils, and a staff member involved with additional support provision.

1.3 Methodology and data collection

1.3.1 Phase 1

1.3.1.1 Constructing the school sample, methodology, and the scoping survey

The sample for the scoping exercise was constructed from two different sources. The main source was 423 schools that the DfE had identified for the purpose of this research as having made better than national average Progress 8 scores for their previously high attaining, disadvantaged pupils in either 2015/16 and/or 2016/17. The second source was from the networks of our research team members. Firstly, the research team was

able to draw upon the knowledge of 29 local Think Higher National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) leads⁶ to create a sub-sample of 34 schools selected because they were locally known for their work in supporting this groups of students. It was felt that these schools would be (a) more likely to respond to the survey and (b) more likely than average to be able to provide valuable insights on how to support the cohort. Secondly, through members of the research team, we received contacts details of 20 schools known through their partnership work with university Widening Participation schemes to be actively supporting disadvantaged able pupils. Once these schools had been added to the main list (and duplicates removed) and any duplications of the NCOP schools removed from the main list, we had a sample of 427 schools on the main list and 34 schools on the NCOP list (461 in total).

The survey was first e-mailed out, using the DfE agreed covering e-mail and a link to the online survey, on Wednesday 14 March, using the subject line, "Supporting Able Disadvantaged Pupils". The final (extended) cut-off date for responses was Thursday 26 April.

1.3.1.2 Data collection, scoping survey

The scoping survey was closed at 10am on Friday 27 April 2018. In total, 54 school leads had responded: 43 (10%) from the main sample and 11 (32%) from the NCOP sample. This is an overall response rate of 12%. The roles of the 54 respondents varied. The majority (39%) were senior leaders, such as headteacher, assistant headteacher, and deputy headteacher. All but one of the remaining respondents had a role title that indicated a particular focus on progression, either specifically for able students (for example, Advanced Skills Teacher for High Prior Attainers; Gifted and Talented Coordinator; lead of UniTracks student cohort) or progression more generally (for example, Whole School Lead for Stretch and Challenge in the Curriculum; Wide Horizons Coordinator; Head of Careers Advice). The exception had a role as an English teacher.

The scoping survey (see Appendix 1) was designed to be a brief, but sharply focused electronic survey that would provide essential information relating to schools' identification of academically able children, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, the survey aimed to identify types of additional support provided by schools. The data collected is presented in tables 1 and 2.

⁶ The Think Higher NCOP programme delivers collaborative outreach in specific local areas where participation in higher education is both lower overall and lower than GCSE attainment levels. The local leads have a grounded and nuanced understanding of the work done in local secondary schools and were well-placed to name schools that would be worth including in the scoping study.

Table 1 shows that all 54 respondents answered the first of the three screening questions positively, and almost all also did so for the two further screening questions.

Table 1 Responses to screening questions (number)

Question	Responses (N = 54)	
	Yes	No
1. Does your school identify academically able children?	54	0
2. Does your school match academically able pupils to those on the Pupil Premium, Free School Meals, or any similar roll?	53	1
3. Does your school have any interventions in place to additionally support academically able children who are also on the Pupil Premium, Free School Meals, or any similar roll?	51	2

Source: Survey responses (Q3 – one missing response)

Table 2 shows that each type of additional support listed was offered by at least half (range: 25 – 45) of the 51 responding schools that offered such support.

Table 2 Types of additional support in place

Type of additional support in place	Number (N = 51)
4.1 Extension classes	39
4.2 Clubs & activities for able/gifted & talented pupils	42
4.3 Individual guidance	42
4.4 Mentoring	42
4.5 Advice on subject choices	45
4.6 Support in relation to attending university	45
4.7 Out of school co-curricular activities (e.g. clubs, activities with other schools, gallery or theatre trips)	34
4.8 Partnership work with universities	43
4.9 Online materials	25
4.10 Other (detail in text below)	7

Source: Survey responses

Table 2 also shows that the list was successful in identifying the most common forms of support. Six of the nine listed additional support activities were each offered by over 80% of the responding schools: Advice on subject choices; support in relation to attending university; partnership work with universities; clubs & activities for able/gifted & talented pupils; individual guidance; and mentoring. By contrast, each of the 'other' types of support described were unique to one responding school only. The seven 'other' responses are set out in Figure 3.

Figure 3 'Other' additional support in place

- Brilliant Club Scholars Programme
- Highly identified group who get some very specific support
- Most Able Parent Evenings (i.e. for parents of the most able pupils);
- Tuition lessons at a nearby registered tuition centre paid for by school
- Partnership work with the University of Warwick through "UniTracks"⁷ (two responses)
- School leader and member of the leadership with this specific responsibility
- Support through examinations with personalised revision programmes and guides
- Target setting

Source: Survey open responses

1.3.2 Phase 2

1.3.2.1 Methodology

Using the data findings collected during Phase 1, the research team, in consultation with the DfE, drew up a list of 35 schools that had responded to the scoping survey and had indicated that they would be willing to take part in telephone interviews to take part in the Phase 2 qualitative research. For the interviews, which were recorded, with informed consent, semi-structured interview schedules were drawn up. The schedules were developed from the research questions, and the data gathered from the scoping survey.

⁷ The main difference in this response, compared to the listed option (Table 2, 4.8), is that this describes partnership work with one university only, rather than plural 'universities'.

They were designed to obtain rich, detailed accounts of the strategies, interventions and support that is in place in schools for the most able disadvantaged pupils. The interview schedules focused on four broad areas of interest: the context in which the school in question operated; current practice in supporting the most able disadvantaged cohort; the effectiveness of current strategies, perceptions of staff and evaluation evidence being gathered; the practicalities of supporting the cohort, including barriers to supporting the cohort. (The full interview schedule is presented in Appendix 2).

1.3.2.2 Data collection, Phase 2

Work on the Phase 2 interviews began on 15th May, and interviews took place between 17th May and 29th June. Of the 35 schools in the sample, 21 provided interviews (Figure 4), three withdrew, and nine failed to respond, or failed to keep interview appointments.

Figure 4 Characteristics of the 21 schools that participated in interviews

Characteristic	Represented in the 21 schools
Regions of England	All 9 regions
Local authorities (LAs)	18 different LAs
School type	5 different school types (academy converter, academy sponsor led, community, voluntary aided, foundation)
Ofsted rating	'Outstanding' or 'Good' – with one exception
Faith schools	Yes
Gender	Boys & girls; girls only; boys only; majority boys.
Percentage of pupils on Pupil Premium	Ranged from c.6% to c.50%, with a good spread in between
Ethnicity	Wide range: from "extremely diverse" to "98% White British"
Socio-economics of school's pupil intake	Wide range: from "very disadvantaged", through "full spectrum" to "not particularly disadvantaged"
Geographic	Full range: rural, village, town, suburbs, city, London

Source: analysis by research team

The interviewees were largely senior managers, with 14 of the interviewees being head teachers, assistant head teachers, principals or executive head teachers. Other roles included gifted and talented co-ordinators, head of careers, and heads of department.

1.3.3 Phase 3

1.3.2.3 Choosing the Phase 3 case study schools

Following initial analysis of the Phase 2 data, discussions with the DfE led to further analysis which informed the choice of Phase 3 case study schools. The emerging data suggested that there was no single-stranded intervention that could be regarded as the 'golden key'. Instead, schools from the sample that appear to have been most successful were those who put together a multi-stranded package of support and opportunities to address the perceived (and sometimes research or evaluation-based) needs of their disadvantaged most academically able pupils. In addition, they had senior leadership focus on the task, and had embedded the work throughout the school structure, from senior leadership to classroom teacher.

From that initial analysis of the Phase 2 work, it was decided that data gathering for Phase 3 would focus on capturing rich data through a second interview with the Phase 2 interviewee, plus interviews with the headteacher and a member of staff delivering at least one aspect of support to the cohort.

1.3.2.4 Data collection Phase 3

During the Phase 2 interviews, interviewees had been asked if, in principle, their schools would be interested in taking part in the further case study work that constituted Phase 3. Of those, seven schools were chosen, and agreed, to take part in Phase 3, using the criteria set out in 1.3.2.3 above. For each school, the intention was to recruit three interviewees, each with a different role in the school and in relation to provision for the cohort. This would enable the generation of triangulated findings relating to interventions identified in Phase 2. For each school taking part in Phase 3, the school's head teacher (or senior leader), the person interviewed at Phase 2, and a person delivering aspects of support for the cohort, were interviewed. The first interview was carried out on 5th July, and the last on 19th July, and nine interviewees from three of the case study schools took part. Two of the remaining four schools said that they would be willing to take part at the beginning of the 2018/2019 school year, but the conditions in the schools as they approached the summer vacation meant that they could no longer assist before the end of the research. The final two schools failed to respond to repeated researcher attempts to arrange interview dates and times.

1.4 This report

In Chapter 2, we present an overview of our findings, using tools such as a theory of change and logic models. Chapter 3 presents our findings in relation to research Questions 1-3. Chapters 4 to 6 present the findings in relation to Research Questions 4 and 5 in turn.

2 Overview of findings

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we present an overview of our findings. Essentially, this is our understanding of what successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils looked like, based on everything the participating schools told us.

The theoretical framework within which we have made sense of the research data is that of the **ecology of human development** (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This ecological framework is helpful when thinking about, or describing aspects, of a pupil's ecological environment. Aspects that **promote human flourishing** can be pinpointed (protective factors), as can aspects that are **disadvantageous for optimal development** and therefore require enrichment (risk factors).

We summarise the findings in relation to:

- A **model of protective and risk factors** for academic success of academically able disadvantaged pupils
- A **theory of change** explaining how good/effective practice in schools addresses the risk factors and promotes the protective factors

We also illustrate with an example how schools could use a **logic model** to summarise an intervention for this cohort in terms of activities to address risk factors or to promote protective factors and covering inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes.

This is to meet Research Aim 6 which relates not to what the findings are, but to how the findings are presented in the report in order to provide research findings which could be easily translated into intervention for trialling.

In Appendix 3, we also provide an **intervention description** template that could aid schools in defining what their intervention delivers for whom and with what results. The 'for whom' is important: we found that definitions of the target group varied across schools.

In Appendix 4, we include the **Quality Implementation Framework** (Meyers, Durlak, Wandersman, 2012). This provides a tool for schools to use to support planning the implementation of a new intervention in their school setting. We've included this because the ways in which some participating school staff spoke not only about what they did, but also about how they went about implementing their intervention approach in their specific school, largely mirrored the thinking process which this framework guides one through.

2.2 Risk and protective factors for academic success of the most academically able disadvantaged pupils

Based on analysis of what we were told by the school staff we interviewed, we have summarised in **Figure 5** the risk and protective factors for academic success of the most academically able disadvantaged pupils during Key stages 3 and 4.

Figure 5 Emerging model of risk and protective factors for academic success of able disadvantaged pupils

Protective factors	Risk factors
Able disadvantaged pupil	Able disadvantaged pupil
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high prior attainment [L5 @ KS2] • achievement at or above targets • interested in learning • has particular interests • having books, equipment, uniform etc. • high attendance • well behaved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • falling behind against targets • attendance issues • behavioural issues • low aspirations for post-Y11 • lack of confidence, self-esteem
School culture	School culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high quality teaching • ethos of high achievement • supportive academic intervention to address underachievement • school culture of positive behaviour • school culture of support for emotional, social, psychological issues • opportunities provided through school for developing interests and skills outside the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty recruiting high quality teachers • does not understand the needs of its disadvantaged, academically able pupils
Pupil's family circumstances	Pupil's family circumstances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parental support of school with value placed on educational success • parental encouragement to participate in positive activities outside school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of parental attention • lack of parental support for educational success at home (may be a lack of understanding of how to do this) • limited experience of the world beyond the immediate locality • no or limited experience of cultural activities (theatre, art galleries, music, dance) • no or limited experience of belonging to out of school clubs or community associations, activities • material poverty – lack of resources

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affected by deprivation in community environment (rural/urban/city), e.g. widespread drug and/or alcohol misuse; high unemployment, and/or underemployment; limited amenities (e.g. theatres, art galleries, sports facilities, libraries, youth organisations)
School's wider community (partnerships)	School's wider community (partnerships)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> school staff meet with parents of able disadvantaged pupils, engage them in supporting school's efforts for their child ↔ at home, parents encourage and enable pupil's efforts school links in with world beyond school (e.g. universities, employers, creatives, arts and sporting activities etc.) to broaden horizons of able disadvantaged pupils ↔ universities, employers and others reach out to support schools in these efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> limited contact between parents of able disadvantaged pupils and school staff limited contact between school and world beyond school around broadening horizons of able disadvantaged pupils

Source: Phase 2 and Phase 3 interviews

Some of the participating schools had conducted research with their pupils in order to identify the barriers (risk factors) to their academic success. This, in itself, helped to address one risk factor: namely, that school staff did not know or understand what the issues were for the most able pupils in their school who were also disadvantaged. As an example, the approach used by one school is described in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6 How one school researched the material and cultural needs of its pupils

Every few years we run a big census in school to try and understand what those material needs and cultural capital needs are. We have about 95 questions that we ask students via Survey Monkey. Some of them are yes/no. Some of them they have to put on a scale, some of them they have to give a longer answer. Largely it's to help staff to understand how we can support them in the curriculum. We normally set aside a lesson for it, usually either PSHE or computer studies lesson. Because we can send them different links we know who's doing what in terms of different year groups, in terms of PP [Pupil Premium] and non-PP students. They have no idea that that's why they're being asked, they just get given a link, they're told to follow that link and therefore they answer the questions.

The questions are a broad range, largely trying to gauge family background, not personal but for instance 'have parents been to university'; 'does anybody help with

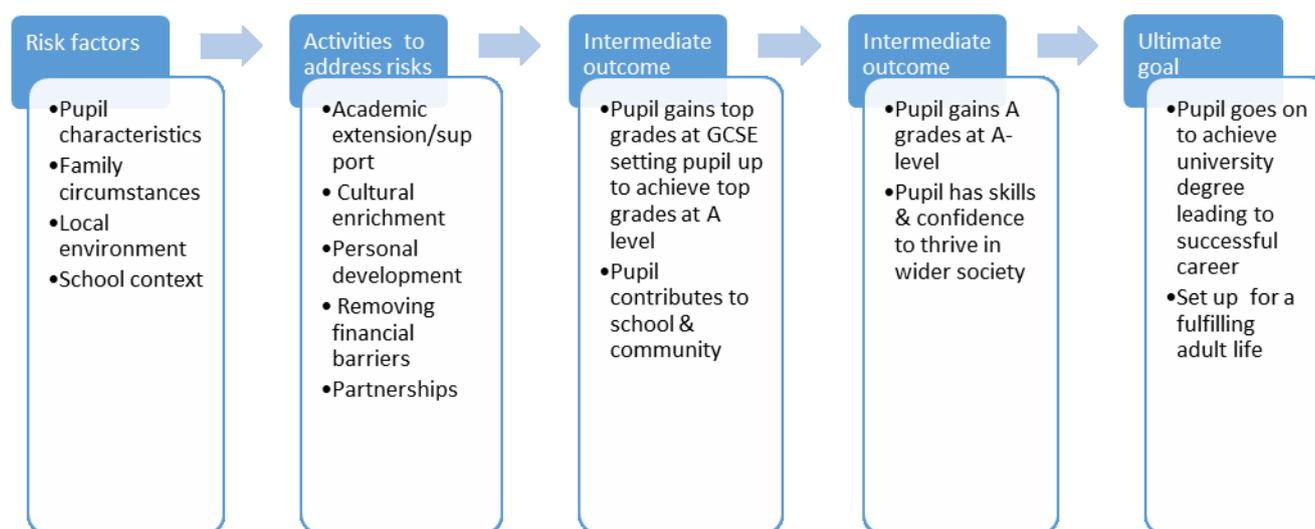
homework'; 'do they have a place to do their homework'; we ask them broad questions in terms of opportunity, so we ask them if they've been to certain university cities, if they've been to sites in the local area that would mean that education is promoted at home, there's a broad opportunity for them to learn beyond the classroom; we ask them about very specific material needs, so we ask them 'do you have a winter coat', we ask them 'do you have a pair of shoes that are waterproof that you can wear on a rainy day', 'do you think you have a healthy diet', things like that. We ask them whether they've ever read a map, whether they've ever read a newspaper, whether they watch documentaries.

Source: amalgamated from Phase 2 & 3 interviews with School 7 Interviewee 18⁸.

2.3 Theory of change

The work schools do to support the most academically able disadvantaged pupils can be summarised in a theory of change (Figure 7) that encapsulates how a school and its partners **address** the risk factors and **promote** the protective factors to enable these pupils to achieve at or above target (extrapolated from KS2 attainment) for GCSE.

Figure 7 Theory of change



⁸ Participating schools were given a random number between 1 & 35. Staff interviewed were given a separate random ID number between 1 & 70. Quotations are cited using both numbers e.g. School 7, Interviewee 12.

As the theory of change shows, schools were clear that the success for this cohort required more than a focus on academic activity, whether that was support to address underachievement and/or 'stretch and challenge' to enable pupils to reach top grades. Schools expressed a more holistic view of the ultimate outcomes desired for this group. For example:

"I think it's being aware of the barriers because then you can plan appropriate and effective interventions and that's not just about academic outcomes, that's about a child and aspirations and all the other things that make a decent person." (School 22, Interviewee 45).

"[Our intervention for the most able pupils, including most able disadvantaged pupils] is very much focused on academic outcomes and the target setting and all those sorts of things but, as the person running it, I've always tried to impress on the students and the staff the importance of the wider elements and the cultural elements of it, feeling that one couldn't really come without the other." (School 11, Interviewee 12)

Schools can use this theory of change approach to help them summarise the risk and protective factors affecting their most academically able disadvantaged pupils, the action they will take to address risk and/or promote protective factors, and the desired outcomes from these actions.

2.4 Logic model

The theory of change encapsulates broadly how planned interventions will support reaching the desired outcomes. A logic model summarises exactly **what** any specific intervention will do to address a risk factor or promote a protective factor in order to move towards achieving the desired outcomes. A logic model is usually set out in terms of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes.

Using a logic model, any school can summarise what inputs (e.g. staff, time, money) link to activities (e.g. X academic stretch and challenge classes or Y sessions of mentoring) to achieve what outputs (i.e. intermediate impact) e.g. tracking of academic and other measures (such as attendance, behaviour etc.) leads to what outcomes (i.e. aims and goals e.g. GCSE results, university applications, university places). **Figure 8** shows an example based on information from a participating school.

Figure 8 Example of a logic model for intervention to address an academic risk factor

Risk factor	Input e.g. staff, time, money	Activities	Outputs i.e. immediate or intermediate impact	Outcomes i.e. ultimate goals
Some most able disadvantaged pupils have nowhere quiet to study at home	Teacher salary x 3 hours per week School room with computers, internet etc.	3 after school study periods (targeted at most able disadvantaged)	Independent study skills enhanced; curriculum enrichment activities completed.	Supports pupils to gain highest levels at GCSE
	Teacher salary X 5 hours per week. School room with computers, internet etc.	After school homework club (targeted at all Pupil Premium pupils)	Homework is done with teacher help available if required.	Supports pupils to stay on track for GCSE attainment.

Logic models can be used to summarise a planned intervention to address a specific risk factor or to promote a specific protective factor. The same format can also be used to record actual input, extent and uptake of activities, and any evidence of immediate impact towards meeting the ultimate desired outcome/s.

3 Supporting most academically able disadvantaged students

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we address Research Questions (RQ) 1-3:

1. What do schools, with a track record of better than average progress for disadvantaged high attaining pupils, currently do (beyond whole school good practice) for that cohort?
2. Which strategies do good practice schools believe are the most effective in supporting the cohort?
3. Do any particular strategies stand out as being particularly effective in supporting disadvantaged high attaining pupils?

We first set out a model encapsulating what we have learned from the participating schools about the key components of successfully (i.e. most effectively) supporting the most academically able disadvantaged students (RQ2). We then discuss the components in turn, providing examples (RQ1). Finally, we report on the activities that proved to be most popular with the most academically able disadvantaged pupils in the 21 participating schools (RQ3).

3.2 A model of successful support for this group

A key finding from the research was that successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils was not about a single intervention. Rather it was about a suite of activities that, individually and together, made a positive impact.

From analysis of the telephone interview data (Phase 2), we produced a tentative model of effective support for the most academically able disadvantaged students. During the case study (Phase 3) interviews, we asked for feedback on the model. The revised version is summarised in **Figure 9** and set out in more detail in **Figure 10**.

Figure 9 Model of successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils

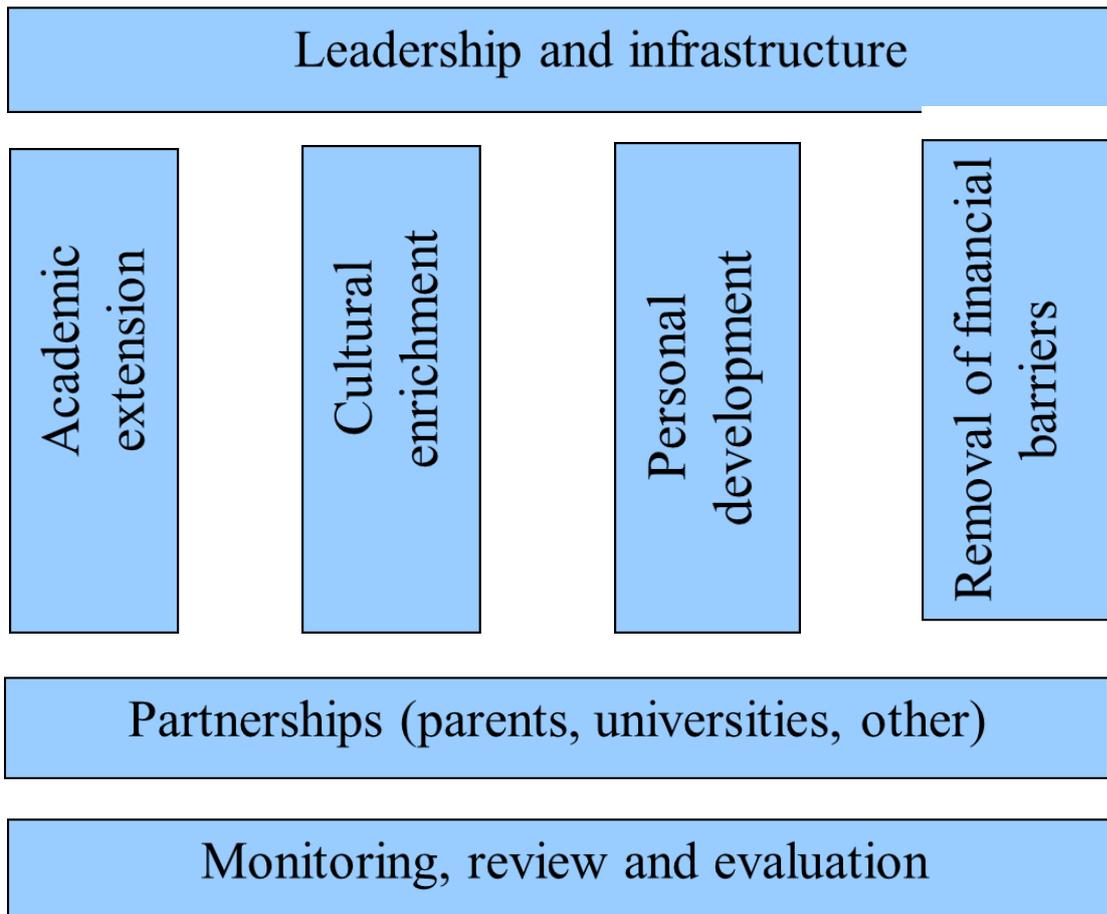


Figure 10 Model of successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils

1. Leadership and infrastructure

- The most academically able disadvantaged pupils are identified
- The senior leadership team shows commitment to and leadership around addressing the needs and supporting the progress of this group
- Commitment to high achievement for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils is embedded into school life – e.g. CPD for staff on how to support progress; this focus is included in lesson plans.

2. Four activity strands

The first strand is vital: a critical success factor. The intensity of the other three strands varies, depending on the **specific risk factors** affecting individual pupils and of this cohort within the **context** of each school.

- **Academic** extension ('stretch and challenge') and, where necessary, academic support to get back on track (address any underachievement)
- **Cultural** extension activity ('widening horizons', 'raising aspirations', 'opening eyes/minds to opportunities')
- **Personal** development activity (e.g. support/opportunities around raising confidence, addressing emotional and/or social issues, leadership opportunities, community involvement)
- **Addressing material poverty** directly, if necessary (e.g. paying for equipment, lending uniform, paying for/contributing to cost of trips)

3. Partnerships (parents, universities and other external organisations)

- The four activity strands are each underpinned by engaging parents in a positive relationship with school.
- Any, or all of the four activity strands, depending on school circumstances, can be supported through partnerships with external organisations, including universities, businesses and charities.

4. Monitoring, review and evaluation

- Monitor and review the evidence of impact in relation to each activity
- Evaluate whether or not to continue, amend or cease the activity

Source: Phase 2 and Phase 3 interviews

3.2.1 Leadership and infrastructure

The successful support model **Figure 9** includes three aspects of leadership: identifying the most academically able disadvantaged pupils; demonstrating commitment to their academic progress and achievement; and ensuring this aim was embedded into daily routines in the school. These are discussed in turn.

3.2.1.1 Different ways of identifying the cohort

Listening to the way in which our interviewees spoke, we learned that across our participating schools, many different terms were in use to describe academically able pupils including: 'more able', 'most able', 'able and ambitious', 'able and talented', 'gifted and talented', 'high prior attainer' (HPA), 'high ability', 'top set'.

Regarding disadvantaged pupils, 'Pupil Premium' and 'disadvantaged' were used almost interchangeably in speech. In practice, 'disadvantaged' was frequently defined in wider terms than 'Pupil Premium' (see **Table 3**).

Table 3 Methods of identifying 'disadvantaged' pupils

Methods of identification	Number of schools (N=21)
Pupil Premium	21
Information from primary school and/or local authority – e.g. had applied for Free School Meals; safeguarding issues	8
Postcode data – e.g. lived near to a Pupil Premium pupil; lived in a specified deprived ward' lived in a social deprivation local area	6
Information from parents – e.g. invited by letter to disclose any disadvantage; disclosed during face to face meetings	3
Teacher observation – arriving at school without food or without equipment	1
Special educational needs	2
English as an additional language	1

Source: Phase 2 interviews

All but one of our 21 participating school used more than one way to identify the 'most able' (**Table 4**).

Table 4 Methods of identifying 'most academically able' pupils

Methods of identifying 'most academically able' pupils	Frequency (Number of schools, N=21)
Key Stage 2 assessment data	19
Other information from feeder primary schools	7
Year 7 interview with pupil and/or additional information from Year 7 parents	5
Year 7 baseline tests (e.g. SATs, CATs, reading age)	13
Subsequent annual review of assessment data or teacher information (i.e. can add to the list)	11

Source: Phase 2 interviews

The range and multiplicity of ways in which our participating schools identified their 'most academically able' pupils meant that the criteria varied from school to school. For example, performance at KS2 counted as 'most able' varied from 'Level 4' to 'above Level 5'; others spoke in terms of KS2 scores with the cut-off varying from 'more than 106' to 'more than 125' (where 100 is the 'expected level'⁹). Thus, for example, for a disadvantaged pupil in a school that started from their list of 'most able' and, within that, identified those who were also disadvantaged (Group 2 as defined in **Table 5**), it could make a big difference as to who was included or excluded depending on whether the school's criterion was a score of 106 compared to 125. An awareness of the complexity of identifying the 'most able' was the rationale for the multiple methods used by our participating schools. For example, there was an awareness that underachievement among potentially very able pupils could be overlooked during primary school and that different pupils might flourish in the new environment of secondary school – and as they grew older during secondary school. We were told by many of the schools that no-one came off their list of 'most able' pupils but others could be added over time.

Depending on the catchment area of the school, the relative proportion of disadvantaged pupils to advantaged pupils varied, as did the proportion of pupils identified as 'most able'. Our research found that schools identified the cohort of 'most academically able disadvantaged pupils' in four different ways (**Table 5**). Schools identified by the DfE

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/scaled-scores-at-key-stage-2> [last accessed 2.8.2018]

(purely for the purposes of this research) as making above national average Progress 8 scores for their previously high attaining disadvantaged pupils figured in all four groups.

Table 5 Four different ways of identifying the 'most academically able disadvantaged' pupils

Method of identification	Number of schools (N=21)	Of which, number on DfE list
Group 1. Equally focused on 'most able' and 'disadvantaged' – integrated identification	4	3
Group 2. Started with 'most able' and identified 'disadvantaged' in that group	6	5
Group 3. Started with 'disadvantaged' and identified 'most able' in that group	9	3
Group 4. Did not identify pupils in groups; targeted individuals based on needs	2	2

Source: Phase 2 and Phase 3 interviews

A minority of interviewees (all working in school in areas described as 'very disadvantaged' mentioned that the change from KS2 levels to SAT scores had resulted in a smaller number of disadvantaged pupils being defined as 'high prior attainment'. For example, in one school this had resulted in a drop from 15% being high prior attainers (HPA) to 5%.

A minority of our participating school interviewees spoke about [positive discrimination](#) towards including disadvantaged pupils among the 'most able'. For example, one school in Group 2, which used cognitive ability tests (CATs) as the primary method of identifying their 'most able' pupils, had identified the issue raised by having a school-set 'most able' score and sought to address it by lowering the score for disadvantaged students (see Figure 11).

Figure 11 Example of a school starting with 'most able' category and identifying disadvantaged pupils within that

School 1 (Year 7-11) had a high number of able pupils but the school had a low proportion of disadvantaged students (around 6%). Work with able disadvantaged pupils in this school was very new. Initially, they had no pupils who were disadvantaged and met the school's 'most able' criteria. The 'most able' benchmark (128 on cognitive ability tests) was subsequently lowered to 123 for disadvantaged students, but this identified only a very small number of 'most academically able disadvantaged' pupils (0.45% of all pupils). The school was considering lowering the threshold further for disadvantaged pupils to help them identify 'most academically able disadvantaged' pupils.

Source: Phase 2 interview

Another Group 2 school described a shift over the previous two years towards "positively discriminating" to include a greater proportion of disadvantaged pupils in their specific KS3 provision for 'most academically able' pupils:

"If we're looking at two students who are about equal, we're trying to look at the idea that a disadvantaged pupil has had to overcome more barriers to get to the same academic point. So [we are] trying to positively discriminate." (School 11, Interviewee 20)

The two schools in our research that did not identify 'most academically able disadvantaged' pupils did this for different reasons. One described their approach to intervention as being based on individual need manifested as 'underachievement':

"We have a culture in our school, regardless of whether they're advantaged or disadvantaged, we look at their academic side. So, if any student underachieves, regardless of their race, colour, social background, we intervene. We do not try and single out the Pupil Premium students and so on in the classroom [...]. We don't do that. What we do is, we look at the whole class; we look at the whole group of students. The teaching in the classroom needs to cater for the need of every single student. Our ethos in the school is, underachievers: we intervene, regardless of who they are." (School 25 Interviewee 3)

The other identified disadvantaged pupils and had a programme of intervention in place to address their needs but did not identify or provide any additional support to 'most academically able' disadvantaged pupils. The rationale was that the "excellent" quality of education on offer benefitted all pupils:

"[...] where you have got the school ethos right and if things are going well in the school and everyone has got high aspirations for students and they're being

monitored really carefully, all their data is very carefully analysed, then I think everybody benefits from that, whether or not they are disadvantaged. [...] What it really comes down to is what happens in the classroom. We have got excellent lessons and specialist teachers - we don't have teachers teaching outside of their own subject. [...] All of the staff have commented on every student in every subject in terms of what is going well, what they need to focus on, do they need any additional support. This is a live document that staff in the school can see. So this builds up a picture for each student. [...] I think all those things make a difference to the progress of disadvantaged students. We have still got a way to go and that is our remaining challenge. We are outstanding but it is about being outstanding for all students." (School 21 Interviewee 32)

To address the "remaining challenge", a teaching assistant had been employed to focus on disadvantaged pupils in lessons but the 'most able disadvantaged' pupils were not specifically identified.

3.2.1.2 Commitment from the top

We asked the 21 Phase 2 interviewees to tell us about, "what, if any, overall strategic policy (or approach)" the school had in place around supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils. This proved to be a key question in terms of the responses distinguishing between schools that were more, or less, successful with their most academically able disadvantaged group, as evidenced by above national average Progress 8 scores for this cohort.

All of the schools in our sample that had a clear strategic focus on the most able disadvantaged students were successful with that cohort, as evidenced by above national average progress scores. (The list of schools with above average Progress 8 scores was generated by the DfE purely for the purposes of this research.) All the schools in our sample that were not on that DfE-generated list operated a different strategic approach: for example, 'to address disadvantage', 'to address underachievement'. Within the limits of a small-scale qualitative sample, these data suggest that a strategic commitment to the academic progress and achievement of the most academically able disadvantaged pupils is likely to be a key element of achieving above average success with this group. This view was also expressed by interviewees from these successful schools. For example:

“I do think there’s a whole school commitment to this. I think it’s definitely part of the school’s vision to support these students.” (School 7, teacher and mentor¹⁰).

“What I do know about this particular group, and about success of this group is, if you haven’t got the leadership of it right, you’re not going to get anywhere.” (School 22, headteacher).

The finding is based on small scale qualitative data, so must be viewed as indicative that there may be something here worthy of further research.

3.2.1.3 Embedded practice

To have the best chance to impact on pupils, school policy has to be enacted through practice. All of the schools with a strong policy focus also described embedded practice at four levels:

- Senior leadership team: a named senior leader driving and reviewing impact of practice within the school for this group
- Whole-school professional development: professional development activities for staff focused on most able disadvantaged pupils
- Classroom: the most able disadvantaged pupils were specifically included in lesson planning
- Beyond the classroom: this cohort was a focus for pastoral support, such as mentoring, and for opportunities to develop wider skills and interests through cultural visits, and joining clubs or societies.

Some schools without a strong policy focus on most able disadvantaged pupils were able to describe everyday practices focused on this group but these tended not to include senior leadership or whole-school professional development.

3.2.2 The four main activity strands

Each of the four activity strands summarise interventions designed to promote protective factors or to reduce or eliminate a risk factor. Some schools selected interventions for this cohort based on published evidence of impact and cost-effectiveness (e.g. Sutton Trust research was mentioned by several, as was the Education Endowment Fund toolkit). Some also mentioned being influenced by learning from Pupil Premium conferences or from external organisations such as the [PiXL Organisation](#), the [Brilliant Club](#) and [Raising Achievement of Disadvantaged Youngsters](#) (RADY). More commonly,

¹⁰ The interviewee number is not given for these two quotes. Instead, the role is given to illustrate that this point was made by interviewees in different roles.

school staff described identifying a need (risk factor) for this cohort and then designing in intervention to address that risk that fitted well in their school context. These ‘home grown’ interventions were typically piloted, tweaked, reviewed and evaluated for impact.

Many of the activities described by schools focused on ‘disadvantaged pupils’ or ‘most able pupils’. ‘Most able disadvantaged’ pupils could, and reportedly did, benefit from these activities. It was much less common to hear of interventions either targeted at, or specifically designed to address risk factors and promote protective factors for, this cohort of pupils. In this section, we focus on these as far as possible.

3.2.2.1 Academic activity strand

A **protective factor** for this cohort of pupils was being taught by highly skilled and deeply knowledgeable teachers. This point was made frequently by interviewees; for example:

“The quality of the teacher in front of them is the biggest thing that makes a difference.” (School 11 Interviewee 20).

“It comes down to good teaching and staff. Where kids have made the most progress it has been because of teaching.” (School 12 Interviewee 28)

“It’s all about teaching and learning.” (School 21 Interviewee 32)

A wide range of activities (**protective factors**) were reported to support the academic achievement of the most able group in general (i.e. without any specific focus on the disadvantaged pupils in that group). Examples, drawn from different schools, include:

- weekly academic mentoring from a senior leader;
- advice for most able pupils and their parents on GCSE and A-Level subject choices informed by the [Russell group booklet](#);
- expecting the most able students to commit to one after school club a week to gain extra support and attention from staff;
- running clubs and activities for the ‘most able’ pupils, such as [Imagineering](#), STEM for girls;
- Y.7-11 maths and English and science projects;
- ‘gifted and talented’ pupils going to gifted and talented conferences;
- having ‘curriculum pathways’ for all e.g. all high achieving pupils had to take the subjects that will result in the EBacc. (Other schools in our sample deliberately did not make such a curriculum pathway compulsory for the most able.)

However, focusing only on having protective factors in place will not, of itself, address the risk factors for underachievement affecting academically most able disadvantaged pupils.

There is a need also to intervene actively to address those risk factors. In **Figure 12** we provide a logic model example of one such activity.

Figure 12 Logic model example of intervention to address underachievement among this cohort

Risk factor	Input e.g. staff, time, money	Activities	Outputs i.e. immediate or intermediate impact	Outcomes i.e. ultimate goals
Underachievement in January of Y11 mock English GCSE exam by 15 most able disadvantaged pupils	15 x2 = 30 hours of teacher time for meetings. 40 hours x English department head time - to plan and lead the booster sessions. Room to meet in. Room to hold the sessions in.	1. One hour meeting with each pupil plus parent/s to go through revision techniques. 2. Weekly 'more able' booster sessions. 3. Follow-up meeting to review progress.	1. Pupil and parents understood how revision at home would help. Pupils revised. 2. These pupils attended the booster sessions. 3. Easter mock GCSE results went up as much as one level for all 15 pupils.	Supports 15 pupils to gain highest levels at GCSE. Booster sessions support all 'most able' cohort to achieve highest levels at GCSE.

Source: Phase 3 interview, School 22, Interviewee 54

The Activity 1 summarised in **Figure 12** was viewed as cost-effective not only because it boosted achievement in the Easter mock exam but because it boosted the confidence of these pupils that they could achieve at the highest levels, on a par with more advantaged peers from around the country.

School 7, a case study school, described two main activities that were targeted at the most academically able pupils: an after school club (**Figure 13**) and mentoring (**Figure 14**).

Figure 13 After school club for most able disadvantaged pupils

Description: In Year 8, we specifically target the most able disadvantaged students. We get them involved in what we call the ‘maximising achievement’ group, so the students are not aware that they’re pupil premium. They’re invited to join that group. We tell them that we think they are very able, perhaps they need a bit more help in certain areas to really help them achieve that talent. Then, from Years 8, 9 and 10 they are part of that group. They meet at school a couple of times a week. Sometimes the focus will be on them having a quiet place to do their homework; sometimes they will be doing extra-curricular activities.

We tend to find that the more we can encourage them to stay at school to take part in music activities or sport or clubs or whatever, it has impact on their academic performance. We also give them tasks based on the Sutton Trust tasks research¹¹ from a few years ago. Basically we encourage them to peer mentor, to have mastery of subjects, things like that. I give them a list at the start of the year and they have to collect evidence throughout the year that they are achieving those tasks based on those Sutton Trust activities.

We also give them a notebook. We found in previous years that Pupil Premium students in particular rarely talked to adults in a deep and meaningful way about anything. Their conversations tend to be very much restricted. It tends to be very cursory, very low level interactions. So we asked them to keep a small notebook where they could log conversations they’ve had with adults. Parents have commented about how pupils have become more curious about the world, about how they’ve asked much more all-enveloping questions about the news, about career paths or previous experiences of their parents, things like that, that have helped them with the curriculum. So we tend to do that with years 8, 9, 10 and that then sets them up for Year 11.

Inputs: Led by one member of the senior leadership team at assistant head level.

Impact: We’ve increased threefold (11 to 33) the number of students from a Pupil Premium background who then go on to do A-levels and then go on to university.

Source: Phase 2 and 3 interviews, School 7

¹¹

[https://v1.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Teaching_and_Learning_Toolkit_\(July_12\).pdf](https://v1.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Teaching_and_Learning_Toolkit_(July_12).pdf)

The second main activity to boost academic achievement described by School 7 was mentoring (Figure 14).

Figure 14 Mentoring for most able disadvantaged pupils

<p>Description: Six teachers each spend 15-30 minutes fortnightly with designated pupils (including the most able disadvantaged pupils). The mentoring covered a wide range of topics, including practical advice around academic work, homework, discussions around aspiration, any material barriers to success, issues at home.</p> <p>“Mentors will try and understand where the pupil feels their future lies. They will try and plant seeds in terms of ‘well, you could do this’ or ‘maybe you would like to do that’ or ‘you seem to be interested in this’ to try and encourage them more.”</p> <p>“I just try to focus on confidence and try to encourage them to believe in themselves etc. [...] I try to encourage them to have more confidence, to be a bit more organised and, if I can, if they identify any material problems just trying to assist them.”</p>
<p>Inputs: Mentors are selected from staff with capacity to spare on their timetable. This means there is no additional cost involved</p>
<p>Impact: Increased homework completed on time; reduced detentions; improved wellbeing and therefore engagement and attainment in lessons; enabled material barriers to be addressed.</p>

Source: Phase 2 and 3 interviews, School 7

3.2.2.2 Cultural extension activity strand

A lack of cultural capital was viewed by many interviewees as a risk factor for the most able disadvantaged pupils. This encompassed, for example, a lack of exposure to the arts (music, dance, drama), lack of travel and therefore of knowledge of the world beyond a limited geographic area.

Most of the schools sought to address this by ensuring that the most academically able disadvantaged students were included in cultural enrichment activities, such as schools trips within England and abroad, and visits to the theatre, to art galleries, to concerts.

3.2.2.3 Personal development activity strand

A lack of confidence and of social skills was also viewed as a risk factor for the success of this cohort. To address this, schools sought to engage the most able disadvantaged

pupils in personal development opportunities such as debating clubs, chess clubs, national competitions (e.g. related to the English or science curriculum) in order to widen their experience of the world, and build their confidence. The example given in **Figure 15** was an unusual one – but also viewed as a cost-effective and effective one. The external visitors (from the school’s partnership organisations¹² – e.g. local university outreach staff and local business people who volunteered their time free) were primed not to speak until spoken to by the pupils, thus ensuring that every pupil had the opportunity to initiate small talk in a social situation amongst strangers.

Figure 15 Building social confidence through a social event

Risk factor	Input e.g. staff, time, money	Activities	Outputs i.e. immediate or intermediate impact	Outcomes i.e. ultimate goals
Lack of social skills and confidence	Headteacher time to plan and attend Liaison with external partners Attendees’ time Cost of refreshments	Head teacher’s tea party attended by able disadvantaged pupils, headteacher, external guests (e.g. from local businesses, local university)...	Experience of hosting guests Experience of initiating conversations with strangers Increased confidence for future social events	Feeling comfortable among more advantaged peers e.g. at university

Source: Phase 3 interview

Informal mentoring was also sometimes used as a way of boosting self-confidence and self-belief. For example, interviewee 21 thought that the most effective support that was given to this cohort in the school was making time to listen to these pupils:

“I think it’s very simple: it’s just listening to them: giving them some time. Listening to them; listening to what they want. Even simple things like when a student comes in and they are panicking, just sitting them down, making them a cup of tea, giving them a chocolate biscuit; just listening to them about what’s going on and then action plans together to get them around that. So, not forcing your

¹² See Sections 3.2.3.2 and 3.2.3.3 below for further information on school partnerships.

opinion as a school on them; just listening to them about what they want and about how they can go forward.” (School 27 Interviewee 21)

3.2.2.4 Addressing barriers related to material poverty

Addressing barriers to success in education that derived from a family’s material poverty was a part of the Pupil Premium/disadvantage-focused work of the schools in our sample. For example, a school might pay the cost of replacing lost or broken essential equipment for any disadvantaged student where the family could not afford to do so. This reduced stress on the pupil by removing a potential cause for school sanction and promoted a sense of being understood and valued, thus reinforcing an academic focus. The aspects of addressing material poverty that were specific to the most academically able disadvantaged related to removing financial barriers to engaging in activities that supported their aspirations for adult life. **Figure 16** provides some examples.

Figure 16 Examples of financial barriers removed for most able disadvantaged pupils

Example of financial barrier	Action to remove this barrier to aspiration	Reported benefit for pupils
MENSA membership fees	Paid by school for every disadvantaged pupil that met the membership criteria	Provided access to challenging activities and a 'most able' peer group
Cost of travel to visit university campuses	Costs paid by school for most academically able disadvantaged pupils	Included in experience/s that boost aspirations for adult life
Cost of entrance exams for certain university courses, such as medicine and engineering	School lets KS3 and KS4 pupils and parents know that these expenses need not be a barrier to a career in medicine or engineering; the school will pay for this for most academically able pupils interested in these university courses	Gives pupils and their families the confidence that financial barriers to aspirational university courses will be removed
Costs associated with being a university student	School staff speak to most academically able disadvantaged pupils and their parents about the options for meeting these costs, including bursaries, grants and loans	Gives pupils and their families the confidence that financial implications of attending university can be managed
Cost of books to extend and deepen subject knowledge	School bought books to extend and deepened subject knowledge of most able disadvantaged pupils and gave or lent them to the respective students	Pupil confidence about ability to tackle university course grew with increased knowledge and understanding of subject
Cost of taking part in national competitions	School paid for equipment/materials required, entry fees and travel costs	Pupils benefitted from mixing with most able non-disadvantaged peers; supported sense of belonging among peers with high aspirations for their adult futures

Source: interviews from Phase 2 and Phase 3 (examples drawn from different schools)

3.2.3 Partnerships that underpin the activity strands

In this section we summarise in turn the three main types of partnership that underpinned the activities in schools designed to support the most academically able disadvantaged pupils: partnerships with parents of this group of pupils; with universities and with other external organisations, such as local or national employers.

3.2.3.1 Partnership with parents of most able disadvantaged pupils

Over and above the routine ways in which schools seek to engage parents (such as Options evenings and Parents evenings), some schools in our sample did more to engage **disadvantaged** parents, such as inviting them in for a specific morning meeting with breakfast provided early in Year 7. That event was focused on encouraging continued reading at home and continued monitoring that homework was done, as well as providing an opportunity to explain how the school could offer the pupils many opportunities for out of school activities without involving the parents in expenditure they could not afford. All the work to engage parents, especially work focused on working with parents of disadvantaged students, helped to underpin the four main activity strands described earlier.

Specific work to engage parents of the **most academically able disadvantaged** pupils was less often described in our data. Sometimes this was a simple follow-up of non-attendance at a parents' evening – for example, in one school, if the parents of the most able disadvantaged pupils did not attend the Options Evening (where a senior leader meets with all the most able students and their parents and gave them the Russell Group Informed Choices booklet and talked it through with them), that person would call the parents and talk to them by phone instead. In other cases, it was about meeting with individual parents to discuss ways in which any financial barriers could be removed or reduced to enable their child to feel confident of parental support in aspiring to attend the best university for their chosen subject.

3.2.3.2 Partnership with universities

As part of the Government's social mobility policy, universities are expected to be proactive in widening participation in higher education. Schools in our sample reported benefitting from these activities, many of which were specifically focused on the most academically able disadvantaged pupils. Schools in the sample described their partnership work with regional and national initiatives, as well as with individual universities.

Some issues around this were raised. One was that schools not serving mainly disadvantaged areas could still have disadvantaged pupils attending but found it harder to access widening participation schemes for these specific pupils. Another was that the way in which school and universities defined disadvantage differed: schools mainly used

Pupil Premium status whereas our interviewees who mentioned this described universities as mainly using postcode data. A third issue raised was that the quality of pupil experience on university 'widening participation' activities varied, with a small minority mentioning negative experiences. Negative experience during these activities were reported as putting pupils off applying to university.

Overall, visits to universities, and partnership work with university widening participation schemes, was a major activity strand focused on, or skewed towards, the most able disadvantaged pupils. For example, School 21, which reported a lot of activity for disadvantaged pupils but little that was focused on the most able disadvantaged, had been able to send four 'high prior attaining' disadvantaged pupils from Year 10 to The University Project, run by Oxford University. This involved spending a week at Oxford University in the summer followed by telephone mentoring, and a follow-up revision session in the Easter holidays of Year 11.

Many of the schools in our sample described this type of partnership work with local and regional universities. For example, School 26 was involved with: its local university (University of Birmingham's subject –specific UniFest and other outreach events); in a regional widening participation scheme, ThinkHigher; and with the University of Warwick Outreach Service (various in and out of school events, including a Year 10 summer school for disadvantaged high achieving pupils). A senior leader from School 11 had built up partnership links with Oxford and Cambridge Universities over 5 years. That school arranged an annual visit to Oxford or Cambridge University for the most able students, with a particular focus on including the disadvantaged most able pupils. In 2017-18, this visit involved a campus day tour and talking to undergraduates.

3.2.3.3 Partnership with other external organisations

Schools reported a wide range of partnership work with external organisations that supported their work around motivating and challenging their most academically able pupils, including the disadvantaged ones. **Figure 17** provides an example of this work from one of the case study schools.

Figure 17 Examples of external partnerships (case study school)

<p>Description: We work with a company called Solutions for the Planet. We've worked with them for a few years now. This is a programme and it's also a competition nationally. It's launched by the company externally but then the programme itself is run within the school over a period of 6 months. There's a heat; there's a semi-final stage; and then there's a grand final stage which is held in Westminster in London for the top 10 or so teams across the country.</p> <p>The competition is that they come up with a big idea; either a service, a product or a campaign which will help the world in some way. It can be absolutely anything. The idea is the students come up with a business plan to say, 'Right, if we were to launch this as a business, this is what it would look like, this is what we're aiming it towards, this is what we'd want to see as short term, medium term and long term effects on the planet and how it will help the planet or community over a period of time So that could be anything from trying to reduce pollution; trying to save water; trying to reduce bullying in the school or across the country; it could be a service provider or an app that helps manage food waste, it could be absolutely anything that helped the planet.</p>
<p>Benefits for the pupils: Experiences that they would never get in the classroom. The semi-finals, for example, are held at universities across the region. We've had Year 7s get through to the semi-finals, so you've got Year 7 students being in and around universities. During the judging process, they're actually touring university so they're actually being exposed to further education right from Year 7. They would stand in front of an audience of 100 plus people like a Dragon's Den-style judging panel. [...] It's not done in lessons so that sense of independence, that teamwork and the resilience to actually improve on their work and do well. It's all down to them, it's all self-driven [...].</p>
<p>Impact: We've had teams in the grand final for the past 3 years now and they've always been [our most able, including disadvantaged] students. [...] Those kids would work on their Solutions for the Planet programme in their study periods (summarised in Figure 8) so it all links together and it links to their success.</p>

Source: Phase 3 interview, School 11 Interviewee 69

Over and above the external partnership work done to support aspirations for every pupil, some schools in our sample also engaged in external partnerships to support the aspirations of the most academically able disadvantaged pupils in particular. For example, School 29 benefitted from the provision of external mentoring by an international company (through its local base) which was targeted at 'high achieving Pupil Premium' pupils who were at risk of not progressing as well as they could have done. This involved monthly meetings with the external business mentor and included visits to the workplace. This was reported as being very successful in sustaining aspiration and ambition among the cohort.

3.2.4 Monitoring, review and evaluation of each activity

3.2.4.1 Evidence sources

Monitoring, reviewing and evaluating the impact of interventions to support the most academically able disadvantaged pupils was normal practice in the participating schools that identified such a group. (The one exception was the school where this focus was very new and where the number of such pupils was very small.)

There were four main ways of doing this (evidence sources).

Figure 18 sets these out in frequency order and provides summary details.

Figure 18 How these schools monitored, reviewed and evaluated the impact of their interventions for this group

Evidence source	Composite details and examples
Data on academic progress	<p>Internal school assessment results: monitored regularly against ‘flight path’ or ‘tracking’ data – several schools mentioned setting targets above those expected by prior attainment tracking models</p> <p>External exam results: GCSEs; ultimately A-levels</p>
Pupils’ views	<p>Pupils’ complete evaluation sheets after an intervention; speak with students one to one or in small groups to seek their views of impact; annual survey of Year 11 pupils to gain their retrospective views on what helped them</p>
Views of key staff	<p>Views of form tutors, of Heads of Year, of subject teachers – based on their knowledge of individuals and/or this group. Data/perceptions re improved: attendance, behaviour (e.g. measured through reduced sanctions or increased house points or equivalent), engagement, well-being, involvement in extra-curricular activities</p>
Progression data	<p>Numbers applying to university; numbers accepted by universities; numbers going on to Higher Level Apprenticeships (degree equivalent)</p>

Source: Phase 2 and Phase 3 interviews (examples drawn from different schools)

One additional way was mentioned by only two of the participating schools: this was to seek the views of the school’s partners in an intervention: the parents of pupils involved, and any employers or other external organisations involved.

3.2.4.2 Examples of evidence of impact on attainment

The types of evidence of impact on attainment were, of course, in line with what evaluation data were collected.

Figure 19 Examples of evidence of impact on attainment of most able disadvantaged pupil group

Type of data	Examples of evidence of impact on attainment for most able disadvantaged pupils
Reading ages	“Huge improvement” (School 22)
Attainment gap	The gap has “narrowed” (School 11); The gap is “closing’ (School 21); “close [...] and, at the moment, surpass the gap: our disadvantaged groups are performing better than the rest of our cohort [...] due to] very tailored support” (School 17).
Progress 8 score	<p>2016 Progress 8 for high prior attainment (HPA) Pupil Premium pupils was 0.19: in 2017, it was 0.5 i.e. “that was a serious impact on that group” (School 22).</p> <p>2016-17 Progress 8 score for HPA_Pupil Premium group showed a gender gap: HPA Pupil Premium boys had fallen way below the HPA Pupil Premium girls: in Y11, 10 males – Progress 8 prediction was -0.64: 7 females it was +1.26. (School 27).</p> <p>2016-17 Progress 8 score of 0.33. (School 33)</p>
Percentage of total Pupil Premium cohort going on to any university	45% (School 7)
Qualitative data from school staff	Year 7 most academically able disadvantaged students took part in a national debating competition. Head of Year reported that their confidence had grown as a result. (School 1)

Source: Phase 2 and Phase 3 interviews (examples drawn from different schools)

3.2.4.3 Some issues raised relating to evaluating impact

Gender: Several schools mentioned the national issue around the attainment gap for White working class boys. One school provided some data to evidence this gap in their own results. In this school, the 2016-17 Progress 8 score for Pupil Premium group was comparable with the non-Pupil Premium group (i.e. overall Progress 8 was 0.52 and for Pupil Premium only (N=39) it was 0.51. The interviewee noted a gender gap within that: 22 boys: 0.36; 17 girls: 0.7.

“The current issue is that the HPA [high prior attaining] PP [Pupil Premium] boys have fallen way below the HPA PP girls: in Y11, 10 males – Progress 8 prediction is -0.64: 7 females it is +1.26.” (School 27 Interviewee 21)

The perennial issue of attribution: Several of the school staff interviewed raised the issue of how difficult, if not impossible, it is to directly attribute measurable gains in academic progress to specific activities or to a suite of specific activities aimed at the most academically able disadvantaged pupils:

“[...] like anything in school, cause and effect, that direct correlation, is very hard to say but I would say that, as an SLT [senior leadership team] sat there, we said ‘OK, the indications are that this is working, and it’s worth us continuing with this particular programme’.” (School 7 Interviewee 68)

The attribution issue was a key reason why many of the schools included qualitative data in their evaluation of their interventions: if the pupils involved articulated that the intervention had made a positive difference to them and there was measurable academic progress, school staff felt more confident about there being a link between the two. Qualitative data was also gathered in relation to particular cultural extension or personal development activities where ‘hard’ data is lacking. For example, in relation to evaluating the impact of pupils attending a national competition, one school lead noted:

“[...] there’s not so much hard data but what we will do is we always look at students and we ask students to tell us. So we’ll ask them for a simple, ‘What went well? Even better if ...? [EBI]’. We’ll ask them to rank what they thought of the experience and how it’s impacted upon them. We’ll assess it that way.” (School 1 Interviewee 7)

Pupil voice was also viewed as of value, in and of itself, by a number of the participating schools. For example, one interviewee put it like this:

“I do a pupil voice questionnaire after each intervention has taken places, and I do it at the start and end of each academic year to ask them their thoughts, what has gone well, what hasn’t gone so well, what are they taking on board, what things could they improve on (both the school and what they could learn more about).

For example our post-16 student understanding more about the UCAS process. Lower down her school it gives them the opportunity to raise their own aspirations and have the conversations that potentially they won't have at home. So they are invaluable from our point of view." (School 28 Interviewee 8).

Improved practice benefiting all – and raising the bar around closing the gap: Another issue raised around evidence of progress and impact on the most academically able disadvantaged pupils was that

"I still would say that our data suggests that there is a gap, though it's a narrowed gap and the rising tide of our performance at school has raised all boats including the disadvantaged. Though I would still say, clearly, there is still something in disadvantage that we haven't wholly managed to pin down. So it's an ongoing, continual battle and focus of everything that we do, I would suggest, even still." (School 11 Interviewee 20)

3.3 Most popular with this group of pupils

Several teachers made the point that what interventions are most popular with the most able disadvantaged pupils varies from pupil to pupil, depending on individual interests and personalities. Nevertheless, across the 21 participating schools, three activity strands stood out as most popular with the most academically able disadvantaged pupils. These were, in frequency order, cultural extension activities, mentoring (a personal development activity) and academic extension or support activities. Composite summary details are provided in Figure 20.

Figure 20 The activities most popular with this group of pupils (as reported by participating teachers – composite views)

Activity type	Why this is popular
<p>Cultural extension - e.g.</p> <p>University visits.</p> <p>Visits to local businesses, meeting employers.</p> <p>Taking part in clubs and societies; taking part in external competitions for schools; going on theatre trips, music trips.</p>	<p>University visits, especially residential ones, gives these pupils “the proper feel of what it might be like to go to university” (esp. first generation). Provides motivation. Helps with A-level choices. By meeting and talking to students and lecturers, they learn going to university is not beyond them.</p> <p>Links with employers help these pupils assess whether that career is something they want to do or not.</p> <p>These activities are memorable and provide motivation – which can help to support buy in to other areas of the curriculum.</p> <p>Taking part in national schools competitions make a big difference because these pupils are mingling as peers with people from more affluent backgrounds.</p>
<p>Personal development – specifically mentoring</p>	<p>It’s one to one; it’s informal. It helps these pupils see teachers as, “somebody that’s on their side and supportive”; it builds aspiration; helps to support student’s self-belief and provides encouragement.</p> <p>These pupils like being noticed, considered important and appreciated - a member of staff knowing your name and talking to you, that seems to be the most impactful. It shows you are important.</p>
<p>Academic extension and/or support – e.g. Clubs for after school personal study; revision workshops; after school tailored learning programme</p>	<p>Supports attainment. These pupils are really keen, especially on the clubs/workshops that are tailored towards the areas they need to improve on. because they become very aware of where they want to be and what they need to get there</p>

Source: Phase 2 interviews (all quotations and views are from these interviews)

4. The practical implications for implementing support strategies

4.1 Introduction

The Phase 2 telephone interviews sought to establish the schools' experience of implementing their support strategies. Two questions were asked, first, for details of the practical challenges faced by the schools as they implemented support, and, secondly, whether it was felt that the support that was in place could be implemented in other schools. The interviewees' responses fell into two main categories in relation to the practical issues – staff time and cost. In addition, there were a range of other responses relating to, for example, parental support, issues around differentiation, and pastoral issues. These responses are presented below, as are responses to the question, 'could your school's support strategies be implemented in other schools?'

4.2 Staff and pupil time issues

Challenges related to time were mentioned by the majority of interviewees. The issue of time related to staff time, and taking pupils out of lessons and out of school. One interviewee commented that, 'Staff time is such a major, major [issue]. [...] It is so, so difficult because our time is stretched [and] if I want any staff member to do something in their spare time it is just a [big issue]' (School 4 Interviewee 14). This challenge was particularly acute when it came to allowing staff to be released from classrooms in order to accompany pupils on out of school events. Similarly, one interviewee said that it was a challenge to arrange staff to cover after school events, even those in the school.

In terms of the pupils' time, the central issue related to removing pupils from the classroom, and, more so, from school in order that they could access additional support. This was a key concern for some school staff, but senior leadership support for effective out of classroom activity could mitigate concerns. One interviewee explained, 'We are lucky because our school supports us taking pupils out of lessons so that we can engage in these different programmes [...] As pupils move up the year groups staff are concerned if pupils are missing the same lessons each week for mentoring, so we try to avoid this,' (School 24 Interviewee 12).

One additional point was made by one interviewee, who said that the needs of the cohort were so individualised that the additional support that the school put in place was particularly time consuming (School 34 Interviewee 23).

4.3 Cost

The interviewees provided a range of responses to the issue of cost in relation to support for the cohort. There was a clear division between those interviewees who believed that there were cost constraints and barriers to supporting the cohort, and those who said that their schools did not face such constraints, and argued that they did not think that such constraints existed more widely.

Examples of the former position were provided by School 6 Interviewee 30 who said that, despite the school being near a university that has an active widening participation outreach scheme, the school could not take advantage of this because it could not afford to pay for transport and staff cover. Shortage of funds for out of school trips and events was also cited by five other interviewees. However, there were some very strong statements that argued that there was no real cost constraint. An example is given below:

‘We’re given an awful lot of money to overcome these barriers. That’s the bit we recognise, but a lot of schools, I don’t believe, do recognise. It’s a lot of money, £935 for an average disadvantaged student, but in some cases far more than that [...] – for example, LAC [Looked After Children] and so on. You’ve got core funding as well, apart from the funding which is associated with pupil premium, there is core funding as well that’s [...] given to you as your disadvantage funding block funding. And some schools get a huge amount of money in relation to that that is way more than our school. So there is a lot of money, in theory, philosophically tied up with helping disadvantaged students. And I’m not 100% sure (because that’s based on deprivation in the area rather than the disadvantaged group specific to the school – it includes them), and I’m not sure whether all schools are giving those disadvantaged students a fair deal. That’s quite assertive of me. I understand there are huge school pressures on finances, but not against the loss for a child who should have had a fair deal.’ (School 17 Interviewee 31)

In a similar vein, another interviewee contrasted their school’s use of Pupil Premium funding with other approaches to using that funding source:

‘We’re lucky as a school in that we are allowed, more or less, within reason, as much of the pupil premium budget as we’re allowed, so we do have a lot of money to build aspiration and things like that. In a lot of schools I know, that’s not the case because they have to spend it on staffing or other costs etc. We were very keen as a school to try and limit that as much as possible because we always felt that if pupil premium was wound up that could be people’s jobs on the line.’ (School 7 Interviewee 18).

This view was echoed in the comments of another interviewee (School 34 Interviewee 23) who noted that ‘a lot’ of the Pupil Premium budget in their school was being used to ‘prop up’ the school budget. They also mentioned that the PP budget was funnelled to support the low achieving, rather than the most able, disadvantaged pupils.

4.4 Other practical issues

The interviewees provided a range of non-time and non-cost challenges faced in providing support for the cohort. These included: pupil confidence and persuading them to take part in activities; parent support issues; home learning environment; attendance; communication problems with outside bodies; and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The most frequently mentioned issue was in relation to what the schools saw as a lack of parental support for, or understanding of the potential of their children. A related issue, in the schools’ viewpoint, was problematic and difficult home environments for some children in the cohort. Some examples of commentary by interviews were: ‘parental support is always a challenge, especially if you want to do anything after school [...] a lot of the time, students don’t have a quiet, stable environment at home’ (SID 28/PID 12); ‘parents don’t see the point of trips and events, like going to university talks. This was the main barrier in the last year with that particular group of more able disadvantaged’ (SID 20/PID 24). One of the interviewees noted that their school was alert to such barriers, and ensured that as soon as a child entered the school, steps were taken to maximise family engagement:

‘You’re talking about an 11-year-old coming in with a family that’s already got potential disengagement from the education process, so we have to re-engage them as soon as they come through the door, and show them what the benefits are that they can get. So we make sure that we see all the disadvantaged families quite early, and make sure that they’re aware that their circumstances, or their historic circumstance, is not a barrier, will never be a barrier in this school.’ (School 17 Interviewee 31).

Another interviewee explained their school’s approach to parental engagement:

‘Get the parents engaged and tell them what they need to be doing at home, telling them that their kid is actually incredibly bright, and opportunities are available, but to do that they are competing against really bright pupils all over the country who have their parents to sharpen elbows and kicking doors open for them, and pushing them into things that they maybe don’t want to do – so parental organisation at home.’ (School 22 Interviewee 16)

The scope of home learning environment issues was seen to be quite wide, ranging from lack of basic equipment (pens, rulers etc.), to emotional and behavioural issues, via poor

organisational skills. In addition, low levels of parental education were also perceived as an issue. Linked to poor organisational skills was the issue of school attendance and time-keeping.

In addition to home-related issues, a smaller number of additional issues were raised. These included: persuading pupils from the cohort to attend out of school events; poor communication from universities offering widening participation opportunities, with the main issue being that too little advance notice was given; and the issue of pupils in a high achieving school being unwilling to be seen to be receiving additional support. All of these issues had been addressed by the schools in question, with, for example, one interviewee explaining that pupil reluctance to attend out of school events had been addressed by having pre-event meetings, maximising the information about the events, using older pupils to explain what happens on the events, and talking to parents about projects.

4.5 Implementation in other schools

Responses to the question, 'Could your strategies realistically be implemented in other schools?', stressed the commitment of schools and staff to providing for the cohort, and that this was the main factor in the successful implementation of strategies. Examples of this were:

'I think the unique thing about our school is that the staff from the very top to the bottom are open to it, and they are actively encouraged to do it by the senior leadership team.' (School 24 Interviewee 12).

'If I had to put my neck on the block and say, "Why is this school so good at [spending Pupil Premium money effectively]?", it's because the people [school staff] are prepared to think about it and go the extra mile. And they are very, very supportive of pupils pastorally, as well as academically. And they understand a big way of motivating them is to get the best possible results for them, but sometimes that might mean trying to counter a whole raft of external problems to make that happen.' (School 7 Interviewee 18).

Notwithstanding the stress on their schools' commitment to provision for the cohort, interviewees also accepted that there were no reasons why support strategies could not be implemented in other schools: 'The strategies in this school are not particularly specific to this context [...]. There is not anything specifically unique that this school does,' (School 13 Interviewee 22).

5. Strategies that schools have tried, but have failed to successfully support the cohort, or have proved impractical.

5.1 Introduction

A wide range of support strategies that had proved to have been less successful than hoped for were noted by the interviewees. Initiatives had been assessed, and in some cases, evaluated, using a variety of methods, including student feedback surveys, cost-benefit analysis, attendance figures, and staff assessment. That the initiatives and strategies were being assessed and evaluated was important, and indicated that activity alone was not a sufficient measure of success for the schools.

A number of key strategies, and their negative evaluations are presented below.

5.2 Less effective strategies and their evaluation

The most frequent reason for either stopping, or scaling back on certain strategies was the assessment that the cost in staff time and/or funds was not justified in terms of outcomes. For example, one school had found that extensive support put in place for one academically able disadvantaged young athlete (PE staff support, pastoral staff buying sports kit for the young person, pupil premium co-ordinator seeking out competitions for the young person) was not cost-effective in terms of academic outcomes and so this type of support was not repeated. Another interviewee gave an account of funding that was put in place to enable a small group of young people to attend a summer school, but 'as it was so expensive and only targeted a small number of disadvantaged students, it seems that the programme was not cost effective in terms of [staff] time and money allocated,' (School 13 Interviewee 22). One interviewee made the observation that, 'Usually strategies that take a lot of staff time are hard to maintain, and end up only being effective for the first one to two weeks, but then the impact drops off,' (School 12 Interviewee 28).

Interviewees were sceptical of the value of 'off the peg' and 'bought in' tuition, courses or other support. Examples of this included agencies offering mathematics courses, and online tuition. That scepticism was a result of assessments of the impact of such courses. For example, one interviewee gave the example of additional, online tutoring:

'An example is the online tuition that was led by a private company, in fact we've had two private companies, and the second company was showing no more success than the first. We measured that based on lack of attendance by proposing that the students sign in and sign out, though even signing in and

signing out there's no guarantee that they're actually doing the work. So, then you look at the work and see what the quality of the work was. So in terms of that we were finding 25% were accessing the online tuition, because the first barrier is at home. There's a barrier because they're not very good at using computers at home, they're good at using their mobile phones and Wi-Fi, but not using their computer. They sometimes don't have a computer. And then you're reliant on the teacher [the online tutor] who can't see the student, doesn't know the student, doesn't know their ability, doesn't know their specific area of problems; and the results that we were getting back in end of term tests, when we were saying "could you work on this this term", were negligible, and the end of term tests that they were providing online when we gave them back to our teachers to look at, were all, in every single department, saying "that is a lot worse than we were doing in-house". (School 17 Interviewee 31)

Similar problems were noted in relation to external workshops, with two interviewees giving examples. One of these related to a creative writing workshop, 'the results of which were that 27 of the pupils improved by one grade, and 11 pupils improved by one grade in the long-term. So, for about £2,000 it wasn't very good, so, we decided to stop doing that and do grammar and spelling workshops instead,' (School 22 Interviewee 16).

Other difficulties related to after school study periods, university links, and personalised workshops. For example, one school had found that its local university, which had been very pro-active in outreach work with schools and the cohort, had shifted its focus to colleges and opportunities for the school pupils had diminished as a result. In another case, the school had assessed a widening participation scheme as, 'not translating into skills they can use in their school life. But we are continuing with this because a lot of the students have not been outside of the local area, so this is a good chance to broaden their experience and visit a university,' (School 15 Interviewee 5). After school study periods had been found difficult to maintain in one school because members of the cohort were unwilling to stay after school – 'They don't want to be in the building any longer than they have to. That's a cultural barrier,' (School 11 Interviewee 20). Issues were also reported with tutoring, with one school finding that although one pupil benefited from external tutoring paid for by the school, two others did not. The interviewee noted that any one-to-one tuition provided in the future would be by one of the school's own maths teachers who would already have a relationship with the pupil/s and understand their specific needs.

6. The barriers schools face in trying to support the most able disadvantaged

6.1 Introduction

The interviewees were asked to identify the main barriers their school faced in attempting to support the cohort. These barriers were divided into three categories: barriers internal to the school; barriers in relation to the cohort and their parents/carers; and barriers in relation to making links with other organisations. Following those questions, the interviewees were asked to give examples of the ways in which their school had attempted to overcome the barriers. The resulting data is presented here

6.2 Barriers internal to schools

6.2.1 Barriers relating to school staff

The most frequently mentioned barrier related to school staff. Seven of the interviewees identified such barriers, relating to difficulties in recruiting 'good' staff; staff time (see above, 4.2); social class differences between staff and pupils; and staff 'mind-set'. The overall picture from these interviewees was of some staff failing to accept the need for enrichment activities, or, indeed, to provide additional support for any able children, with staff not having the capacity, nor, in some cases, the capability to provide additional support for the cohort.

In terms of the 'right' type of member of staff, and difficulties in recruiting them, one interviewee explained:

'Recruitment of good staff is difficult. By "good" staff I mean staff that have a personality to work in deprived areas, and a personality where they can form a good relationship with disadvantaged pupils, and pupils can understand that the person is there for them. We have difficulty with that.' (School 12 Interviewee 28)

Teaching staff attitudes were a barrier raised by other interviewees, with resistance to additional provision for able children irrespective of their backgrounds:

'One thing is teacher attitudes toward gifted and talented. I have had quite a lot of push back after I ran a session on gifted and talented teaching because there is still the feeling that gifted and talented students will pass by themselves so, therefore, our focus should be on lower ability students or those who are struggling. So trying to change that ethos has been quite challenging. And there are some staff who say that "gifted and talented" isn't really a thing because there

is not a strong definition of what G & T is, or how you look for it, so they kind of see it as a bit of a waffly subject.’ (School 15 Interviewee 5)

Two interviewees also noted that some staff had difficulties understanding the impact of disadvantage on pupils’ attitudes and attainment.

The other staff-related barrier was related to time issues (see above, 4.2). One lead for able pupils noted that it was always difficult to get other staff, both teaching and support staff, to help out with trips and initiatives; further, they also admitted that ‘sessions I run obviously impact on my own lessons’ (School 28 Interviewee 8). This latter point linked with another internal barrier that dominated staff thinking - the over-riding demands of examination results and external assessment pressure.

6.2.2 Barriers in relation to the cohort and their parents/carers

The interviewees mentioned a number of barriers, as the schools saw them, related to the family and home backgrounds of the cohort. The interviewees provided an extensive list of barriers in this regard, more than in relation to other ‘internal’ barriers; these are listed below:

- Pupils’ fear of failure
- Pupils and parents’ fear of the costs of higher education
- Pupils not knowing what they are really interested in academically
- Lack of awareness on the part of pupils and their parents of the wider world, leading to low aspirations.
- Pupils’ fear of leaving home, and mixing with people not like them
- Lower aspirations at home, and not working hard at home after school
- The difficulties schools face in trying to raise the aspirations of parents and pupils
- Difficulties in getting parental support
- Problems with engaging parents
- Hard to reach parents with low aspirations for their children
- Bright pupils hiding the fact that they are able to avoid being isolated
- Lack of self-confidence
- Attendance issues
- Pupils refusing to accept help because they feel a stigma attached to the help.

The interviewees were vocal about this particular issue, and the general approach was, in effect, summed up by one interviewee who said that it was ‘aspirations at home – that’s where the attitude to education comes from – schools can’t change this,’ (School 29 Interviewee 17). Another interviewee commented that the difficulties in this area were becoming more difficult to manage over time: ‘there is a slow change in cohorts which isn’t just about our schools but disengaged parents who blame school rather than try and work in partnership with schools – that’s becoming more difficult to manage,’ (School 17 Interviewee 31). However, a different approach to the issue could be found in the comment of one interviewee:

‘The vast majority of those Pupil Premium parents are lovely parents, they’re great parents, they’re supportive, but they simply don’t know how to be supportive. Obviously, the older those pupils get, the less able they [the parents] might feel to be able to be able to help with homework, to help them fill out forms to go to university, to be able to accompany them to places because of their work, or their shift patterns or whatever else.’ (School 7 Interviewee 18)

6.2.3 Barriers in relation to schools making links with other organisations

There were very few responses to this question, and those comments were generalised. For example, one interviewee said that there were problems in, ‘getting hold of the latest research and best practice in supporting this particular group of students’ (School 6 Interviewee 30); while another said that they thought ‘the community’ needed to be involved more with helping to support the cohort (School 16 Interviewee 33).

6.3 School action in overcoming barriers to supporting the cohort.

The responses are presented here to the first two barriers described above (6.2.1 and 6.2.2), as the question of overcoming barriers in relation to making links with other organisations elicited no responses.

6.3.1 Overcoming barriers internal to schools

Approaches to overcoming internal barriers focused on changing attitudes among staff and pupils, ensuring good leadership and clarity around the strategy throughout the school, and improving staff capability. Examples included changing the ethos of the school in relation to the cohort – ‘the school has been very successful at creating a “can do” attitude among the pupils and staff, so that the ethos of the school is all about high expectations of strong educational outcomes,’ (School 11 Interviewee 20). The same interviewee stressed the committed leadership of the head teacher, the assistant head,

senior leadership team, and all staff. Ensuring that staff, including key staff such as gifted and talented co-ordinators and home-school liaison staff, were trained and effective was also seen to be an important step. An example was, 'Previously the gifted and talented co-ordinator role was much smaller, with no protected time and no specific training. We now have someone with a more specific responsibility who has training and qualifications in the area,' (School 15 Interviewee 5).

6.3.2 Overcoming barriers in relation to the cohort and their parents

A range of strategies were described in relation to schools' attempts to overcome barriers that the schools had identified in relation to parents/carers and home environments. The strategies typically mixed supporting and engaging the pupils, along with engaging their parents/carers. The interviewees explained that successful strategies depended on engaging pupils and parents as soon as they joined the school. Meetings between responsible school staff, new pupils from the cohort and their parents/carers were held, either group events, or family-school staff meetings. Some schools were able to benefit from using specialist staff, such as home-school liaison staff, or parent support advisers.

One interviewee gave an account of the type of questions their school asked itself and the school's parents' board in relation to overcoming these barriers, along with some of the strategies they had in place:

'We've done a lot of work with parents over the past few years because that was a bit of a barrier. That has actually really helped. When we have Options Evenings for Year 9, we have around 85/90% of parents turn up, which is absolutely tremendous, considering when I very first started here you'd probably only have a few parents turn up. So that is amazing that parents seem to be a lot more on board now [...] We set up a parental consultation group so we had them on board, if we were going to be presenting something to parents, we actually had them as a sounding board: "how should we present this? If we presented it like this, is that the right way? Is that user friendly for the parents? Is that going to get the parents' backs up? Is there too much information on there for the parents to access?" That was a fantastic way of getting a bit more parental engagement, because they gave us loads of advice.' (School 4 Interviewee 14)

In addition to parental engagement, schools also addressed individual pupil's needs and difficulties in relation to their lives outside of school. Strategies included being aware of changes in behaviour, attendance, eating habits, lack of school uniform and school kit. Awareness of potential difficulties for pupils then triggered support from pastoral teams, for example, hot meals before and after school, clean clothes, addressing pupil needs by visiting them at home. An example was:

'We overcome all of these barriers a bit at a time. We do have a very strong person in school who is the Home School Liaison Officer so, as and when we identify those barriers, we get that person involved because that person can actually make a home visit, and try and get to the bottom of the problem. But sometimes what we find is the lack of support from home, or sometimes both the parents are working and the child is living at home on their own. I'll give you an example of one girl who was attending school every day after 10 o'clock, but, later on, we found out that both the parents work, and they leave early in the morning, and everything is up to the child herself to get themselves ready to come to school. She's the only one at home, and that's not happening. That opens up different issues, and then we work with external agencies to support the family, as well as the child. For that child, the situation has improved, but it's ongoing, and now Social Services are involved. For her, we've got a cab waiting outside ever morning to make sure. We send a cab out at 8 o'clock and she can come here on time. The school's paying for it.' (School 25 Interviewee 3).

7. Conclusions

Through our small-scale, largely qualitative study, we sought to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

From analysis of interview data from 21 diverse schools spread across all nine regions of England, we found that successful support was not about a single intervention, such as mentoring or tutoring. Rather it was about tailoring support to pupils' needs across four areas: academic extension (and support if necessary); cultural enrichment; personal development; and addressing material poverty. Crucially, this work depended on three aspects of school leadership: identifying the most academically able disadvantaged pupils; demonstrating commitment to their academic progress and achievement; and ensuring this aim was embedded into daily practices in the school. Its effectiveness was underpinned by partnerships beyond the schools gates: with parents, local businesses and employers, and universities.

This study has demonstrated that English secondary schools in diverse settings and with diverse pupil populations can be successful in promoting high achievement of their most able disadvantaged students across Key Stages 2 to 4. We hope that schools will view it as providing useful ideas about how they might adopt similar approaches to support their most able disadvantaged pupils to achieve their potential.

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Appendix 1 Scoping survey

**Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the
most academically able disadvantaged pupils.**

About the research

The Department for Education (DfE) has asked the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR) at the University of Warwick, to conduct a scoping survey focused on additional school support for academically able, but disadvantaged, young people (Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 4). The results of the survey will inform DfE decisions relating to the implementation of the Future Talent Fund.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked to complete this short, electronic survey designed to help the researchers at CEDAR establish the work being carried out at schools to support academically able, but disadvantaged, young people. The answers to this survey will be confidential, and kept by CEDAR on a password protected data base on secure University of Warwick servers. When the data from the survey is used to write a report to the DfE, it will be anonymised. If you have any questions about the survey, or the research, contact Dr. Stephen Cullen, CEDAR, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL, S.M.Cullen@warwick.ac.uk.

Consent:

Please tick the boxes.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the above information concerning this survey, and know who to contact to ask any questions.
- I understand that participation in the survey is voluntary and that I can stop whenever I want to
- I agree to participate in the survey.

Name & role

Surname: _____

Given name: _____

Role on school staff: _____

Q1: Does your school identify academically able children?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes, go to question 2, if you answered no, go to question 5

Q2: Does your school match academically able pupils to those on the Pupil Premium, Free School Meals, or any similar roll?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes, go to question 3, if you answered no, go to question 5

Q3: Does your school have any interventions in place to additionally support academically able children who are also on the Pupil Premium, Free School Meals, or any similar roll?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes, go to question 4, if you answered no, go to question 5

Q4: What type of additional support is in place for these young people (check as many of the list below as applicable):

- Extension classes
- Clubs & activities for able/gifted & talented pupils
- Individual guidance
- Mentoring
- Advice on subject choices
- Support in relation to attending university
- Out of school co-curricular activities
- Partnership work with universities

Any other, please state: _____

Q5: Could you please provide the contact details (e-mail and telephone) of the school staff member most concerned with the support of able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Please indicate if that staff member would be willing to be contacted to take part in a telephone interview to provide further details and contextual information relating to the support for able, disadvantaged pupils:

Staff details: _____

Is willing to be contacted: Yes
 No

Thank you for completing this survey.

Appendix 2 Phase 2 interview schedule

Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

Phase 2 Semi-structured interview schedule for school staff.

- Talk through Information Sheet and Consent Form. Assure confidentiality.
- Ask permission to record. Explain you will be taking anonymised notes too.

A. Introduction: Context

1. To start by giving me some context, please could you tell me a little about the population the school serves, including any particular issues faced by families and children in the area.

2. a) How does the school identify its most **able** pupils?

- *Probe:* Does the school work with feeder primary schools in this context, identifying most able and disadvantaged pupils.
- Once identified as 'most able', how is that recorded – e.g. is there a specific register?
-

• b) How does the school identify **disadvantaged** pupils?

- (i) Who is responsible for doing this?
- (ii) What is included within the term 'disadvantaged'?
- (iii) Roughly speaking, what proportion of the school's pupils are from disadvantaged backgrounds?

• c) How does the school identify '**most able disadvantaged**' pupils? Who is responsible for doing this? How is this recorded?

•

3. Now please tell me about your role in the school in relation to **identifying** and **supporting** most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

- *Probes:* How long have you had this role? Why did this role become yours? (e.g. background and experience) What other roles do you have in the school? (e.g. subjects taught, additional roles, part of the school's senior leadership team).

- Continues

-

- **B. Current practice in support for the most able disadvantaged cohort**

4. What, if any, **overall strategic policy (or approach)** does the school have in place around supporting most academically able disadvantaged pupils?

- *Prompt:* What outcomes does the policy (or 'approach') aim to achieve?

-

5. I have a list of some **supportive interventions**. As I read it out, please tell me which ones are used in the school [same list as in the survey]:

Read out the list:	Tick those that are used
1 Extension classes	
2 Clubs & activities for most able/gifted & talented pupils	
3 Individual guidance	
4 Mentoring (by peers, by staff, or external)	
5 Advice on subject choices	
6 Support in relation to applying for and attending university	
7 Out of school co-curricular activities (ask for examples, e.g., gallery, or theatre trips, clubs & activities with other schools).	
8 Partnership work with universities	

9 Online materials	
10. Engagement with feeder primary schools.	
11 Any others? (ask for details)	

b) To your knowledge, why were these interventions chosen? (*Prompt*: e.g. Their evidence-base? They seemed logical?)

c) To what, if any, degree are there specific approaches to support a) different year groups; b) subjects; different types of disadvantage?

6. To bring that list of support to life for me, please think of some **individual most able disadvantaged pupils** (you don't need to give their names) and talk me through specific support given to them?

- *Probe*: Check whether the support is provided by the school, or is accessed by the school for the pupils, or is external to the school.
- *Probe*: Why is *that* support put in place for that particular pupil?
- *Probe*: how successful is this support/can you describe the impact this has on the pupil
-

7. We're interested in any **partnership work** the school undertakes in order to provide additional support to able disadvantaged pupils. For example, it might be in relation to parents, other schools, youth organisations, universities, employers.

- If the school has any of these partnerships to support able disadvantaged pupils, please tell me why and how these partnerships were formed and what benefit the school sees the young people as getting from the partnerships.

- **C. Effective strategies for supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.**

8. What, if any, **evidence** is there as to which of the various strategies and methods of support in place we have talked about are the most **effective** in terms of having a positive impact on pupils' attainment, aspirations, or attitudes towards future education and career choices? (*If no evidence, ask about perceptions of effectiveness, and what these perceptions are based on.*)

- *Probes:* How, if at all, are the support strategies assessed? (Is this done in a formal, systematised way, or in an informal way?)
- Are the strategies reviewed at any point to determine whether they are worth continuing?
-

9. Which of the different strategies and method of support are most **popular with pupils**, do you think? Why is that – what is it that helps the pupils to really engage with what is on offer?

- *Probe:* How is this known? Ask for examples of pupils (we don't need to know their names) who have really picked up on a particular offer.
-

10. Have there been any strategies or methods of support that **haven't** been as effective as hoped? If so, could you tell me about these, and how the assessment was made that they were not as effective as hoped?

- *Probes:* Have any of the less successful strategies been discontinued? For how long were they offered before they were discontinued?
Continues

- **D. Practicalities of supporting the cohort**

11. From your perspective, what are the **practical issues** relating to the strategies that are currently in place to support most able disadvantaged pupils? (*Prompt:* For example: (i) staff time (ii) staff knowledge and skills, (iii) costs, and (iv) impact on other areas of school life.)

Probes: If you were in a school that had few, if any, support strategies in place for this cohort, what do you think the implications would be of introducing the strategies that your school has in place?

Do you think that the strategies your school uses could, realistically, be implemented in any school?

12. Thinking to the future, in your view, how could the support be **extended**, and further **embedded**?

b) What, if any, additional support would the school need to do this? (Prompt: For example: Outside support - links with universities or other bodies? Specific funding?)

- **E. Barriers to supporting the cohort**

13. What do you think are the **main barriers** that the school has faced in attempting to support the cohort?

- *Prompts:* For example: (i) factors internal to the school; (ii) in relation to the pupils in question; and (iii) in relation to making links with external organisations like universities.

-

14. Have there been barriers that the school, or the pupils, have faced that have been **overcome**? Could you give an example, and explain how the problems were overcome?

F. Anything else?

15. Is there **anything else** you think that we should know about in relation to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils? The DfE is particularly keen to understand what would enable other schools to implement successful support interventions; what do you think are the important factors in relation to this?

Many thanks for taking part in this work!

Appendix 3 Template to describe an intervention

Example of a simple format for an intervention description

Short description of service offered or intervention to be delivered:

- Try to capture this in one sentence

Market sector:

- who you hope will buy your service (or use it, if not for sale)

Target of service:

- define the intended beneficiaries of the service/intervention
- age range of service/intervention beneficiaries
- common problems or risk factors addressed by the service/intervention

What the service/intervention delivers

- main aims
- main activities, each with critical success factors (i.e. factors that make the activity distinctive and effective)

Outcomes

- list of outcomes reported against (e.g. school exam results, GCSE results)
- latest (and average) outcome results

Source: adapted from ResultsMark programme profile

Appendix 4 Quality Implementation Framework

From: Meyers, D.C., Durlak, J.A. and Wandersman, A. (2012) 'The Quality Implementation Framework: A synthesis of critical steps in the implementation process', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 50, 462-480. (Specifically, Table 3, 469-470)

Questions to answer at each step in the Quality Implementation Framework

Phases and steps of the quality implementation framework	
Phase 1: Initial consideration regarding the school setting	
Assessment strategies	
1.	<p>Conducting a needs and resources assessment:</p> <p>Why are we doing this?</p> <p>What problems or conditions will the innovation address (i.e. the need for the innovation)?</p> <p>What part(s) of the school and who in the school will benefit from improvement efforts?</p>
2.	<p>Conducting a fit assessment:</p> <p>Does the innovation fit our school?</p> <p>How well does the innovation match the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identified needs of our school community? ▪ School's mission, priorities, values and strategy for growth? ▪ Cultural preferences of our pupils and their families?
3.	<p>Conducting a capacity/readiness assessment:</p> <p>Are we ready for this?</p> <p>To what degree does the school have the will and the means (i.e. adequate resources, skills and motivation) to implement the innovation?</p> <p>Is the school ready for change?</p>
Decisions about adaptation	
4.	<p>Possibility for adaptation</p> <p>Should the planned innovation be modified in any way to fit the school and target group?</p> <p>What feedback can school staff offer regarding how the proposed innovation needs to be changed to make it successful in our setting and for the intended target group of pupils?</p>

How will changes to the innovation be documented and monitored during implementation?

Capacity Building Strategies (may be optional depending on the results of previous elements)

5. Obtaining explicit buy-in from critical stakeholders and fostering a supportive school climate:

Do we have genuine and explicit buy-in for this innovation from:

- Leadership with decision-making power in the school?
- From front-line staff who will deliver the innovation?
- The local community (if applicable)?

Have we effectively dealt with important concerns, questions, or resistance to this innovation? What possible barriers to implementation need to be lessened or removed?

Can we identify and recruit an innovation champion(s)?

Are there one or more individuals who can inspire and lead others to implement the innovation and its associated practices?

How can the school assist the champion in the effort to foster and maintain buy-in for change?

(Note: Fostering a supportive climate is also important after implementation begins and can be maintained or enhanced through such strategies as school policies favouring the innovation and providing incentives for use and disincentives for non-use of the innovation.)

6. Building general/organizational capacity:

What infrastructure, skills, and motivation in the schools need enhancement in order to ensure the innovation will be implemented with quality?

Of note is that this type of capacity does not directly assist with the implementation of the innovation, but instead enables the school to function better in a number of its activities (e.g. improved communication within the school and/or with other agencies; enhanced partnership and linkages with other agencies and/or community stakeholders).

7. Staff recruitment/maintenance

Who will implement the innovation?

Initially, those recruited do not necessarily need to have knowledge or expertise related to use of the innovation: however, they will ultimately need to build their capacity to use the innovation through training and on-going support.

Who will support the staff who implement the innovation?

These individuals need expertise related to (a) the innovation, (b) its use, (c) implementation science, and (d) process evaluation so they can support the implementation effort effectively.

Might roles of some existing staff need realignment to ensure that adequate person-power is put towards implementation?

8. Effective pre-innovation staff training

Can we provide sufficient training to teach the why, what, when, where, and how regarding the intended innovation?

How can we ensure that the training covers the theory, philosophy, values of the innovation, and the skill-based competencies needed for staff to achieve self-efficacy, proficiency, and correct application of the innovation?

Phase 2: Creating a structure for implementation

Structural features for implementation

9. Creating implementation teams:

Who will have overall responsibility for implementation within the school?

Can we develop a support team of qualified staff to work with front-line staff who are delivering the innovation?

Can we specify the roles, processes, and responsibilities of these team members?

10. Developing an implementation plan:

Can we create a clear plan that includes specific tasks and timelines to enhance accountability during implementation?

What challenges to effective implementation can we foresee that we can address proactively?

Phase 3: Ongoing structure once implementation begins

Ongoing implementation support strategies

11. Technical assistance/coaching/supervision:

Can we provide the necessary technical assistance to help the school and staff deal with the inevitable practical problems that will develop once the innovation begins?

These problems might involve a need for further training and practice in administering more challenging parts of the innovation, resolving administrative or timetabling conflicts that arise, acquiring more support or resources, or making some required changes in the application of the innovation.

12. Process evaluation

Do we have a plan to evaluate the relative strengths and limitations in the innovation's implementation as it unfolds over time?

Data are needed on how well different aspects of the innovation are being conducted as well as the performance of different staff implementing the innovation.

13. Supportive feedback mechanism

Is there an effective process through which key findings from process data related to implementation are communicated, discussed, and acted upon?

How will process data on implementation be shared with all those involved in the innovation?

This feedback should be offered in the spirit of providing opportunities for further personal learning and skill development and organizational growth that leads to quality improvement in implementation.

Phase 4: Improving future applications

14. Learning from experience

What lessons have been learned about implementing this innovation that we can share with others who have an interest in its use?

Researchers and innovation developers can learn how to improve future implementation efforts if they critically reflect on their experiences and create genuine collaborative relationships with those in the school setting.

Collaborative relationships appreciate the perspectives and insight of those in the school setting and create open avenues for the innovation; and any factors that may have affected the quality of its implementation.

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