



## Culture and Values

Research review 2022-3



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## Introduction

The Thriving Schools research, carried out by Teach First in 2018, shows us that it is possible for schools working in disadvantaged contexts to achieve good sustainable outcomes for students, whilst also providing a positive working environment for staff, and how a number of schools achieved these outcomes.

At the heart of the schools involved in the study was a tangible culture that influenced everything they did. Every school was different, but they all shared a commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for their pupils, whilst ensuring that this did not compromise the working environment for staff (Teach First, 2020).

The Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) reference the values and behaviour that all teachers must demonstrate throughout their careers:

*Teachers make the education of their pupils their first concern, and are accountable for achieving the highest possible standards in work and conduct. Teachers act with honesty and integrity; have strong subject knowledge, keep their knowledge and skills as teachers up-to-date and are self-critical; forge positive professional relationships; and work with parents in the best interests of their pupils.*

To have the greatest impact, these standards must be at the heart of every school, reflected in their mission and values.

The importance of establishing a culture of mutual trust and respect is reasserted in the *Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework* (DfE, 2019c) and *Early Career Framework* (DfE, 2019b) as well as being woven through the reformed NPQs (DfE, 2020).

Whilst we are focused on the role of teachers and leaders and their influence on the outcomes for pupils, we also recognise that schools do not operate independently of the families and communities they serve. The culture of the school will only be effective if it is inclusive. For this reason, we need to consider parental/carers engagement as part of the culture and values of the school.

## Values

Some of the features of an improving school are shared values and purpose, and a sense of collective responsibility for achieving them (Stoll, 1998). The values on which a school is based must be shared by everyone, from executive headteacher to lunchtime supervisor, from chair of governors to parents.

The vision and goals must be clearly communicated to staff, students and parents/carers if they are to be a meaningful component of the school culture. When considering school improvement, in the foundational phase the focus should be on motivating colleagues to invest in this shared vision and purpose (Downey *et al.*, 2019). Being clear about the difference you want to make is central to building the tools and capacity to make this happen (Stoll, 2015). The vision should not be overly complex or detailed, but positive and solutions focused (Baars, Shaw Mulcahy and Menzies, 2018c), but it must also be about the development of the whole child, and not purely focused on academic attainment.

## Purpose

Having a shared purpose is a feature of higher-performing schools (Baars, Shaw, Mulcahy and Menzies, 2018c).

The Teach First mission, to achieve a fair education for all, should be shared by the schools and leaders and teachers we work with. At the heart of our work is improving the outcomes for those facing the most disadvantage and overcoming the barriers to attainment that they face.

One of the top building blocks for success is having a whole-school ethos of attainment for all (Sharp *et al.*, 2015).

## Aspirations and expectations

Having high aspirations for students has become a byword, but it misses the requirement for expectations to also be high. Having high aspirations is meaningless, if not matched by a belief or expectation that they are achievable. For instance, a pupil may aspire to attend university but if they don't expect to achieve the grades then

that aspiration remains out of reach. Changing expectations in a realistic fashion is at the heart of achieving the best outcomes. This can mean challenging stereotypes and fixed mindsets or beliefs (Bibby, 2018).

Teacher's expectations can also be shaped by unconscious/conscious biases that they may possess. This can impact pupil attainment negatively and contribute to the attainment gap between different groups (Demie, 2022).

## Inclusion

Inclusion is central to changing the narrative regarding outcomes for students considered to be disadvantaged or vulnerable. A broader lens than SEND must be recognised in order to achieve meaningful inclusion for all students. A shared understanding of inclusion means every student having a sense of belonging, regardless of their characteristics, in order to diminish contextual variation in interpretation and implementation (Glazzard *et al.*, 2015).

Individuals in inclusive settings, particularly disadvantaged students, attain better academic and other outcomes (Gray, Norwich and Webster, 2021).

Inclusive education is a continuous process rather than an end point to achieve. One approach summarises successful inclusive education implementation into five main components:

1. inclusive policies that promote high outcomes for all students;
2. flexible and accommodative curriculum;
3. strong and supportive school leadership;
4. equitable distribution of resources; and
5. teachers who are trained in inclusive pedagogy and view it as their role to teach all learners in a diverse classroom (Schuelka, 2018)

Whilst inclusive education is perceived as resource intensive and expensive, multiple studies point to having all children in one school and in mainstream classes as cost-effective. It also pays off in terms of increased participation in the economy as a result of receiving a high-quality education (Schuelka, 2018).

One of the areas that schools need to consider carefully is how inclusive they are, for pupils and

for staff, and for the wider community. All policies need to be considered in this light to consider who might be adversely affected, including by unintended consequences.

Schools that are overcoming disadvantage have a whole-school ethos of attainment for all. This means viewing each pupil as an individual and avoiding stereotyping disadvantaged pupils by referring to them as a group (Sharp *et al.*, 2015).

Grimes (2010), referenced in Schuelka (2018), created a list of 17 elements that denote an inclusive school:

1. All pupils feel welcome in the school
2. All students support each other in their learning
3. All students are well supported by school staff
4. Teachers and parents cooperate well
5. All students are treated equally as valued members of the school
6. All students feel that their opinions and views are valued
7. All students can access learning in all lessons
8. All students can access all parts of the school building
9. All students attend school every day
10. All students enjoy lessons
11. All students are engaged in all lesson activities
12. All students achieve their learning in all subjects
13. All students learn together
14. All students have access to appropriate health services as necessary
15. School ensure that all students enter the school
16. All vulnerable children are successful in their learning
17. School creates a school environment which supports all students' learning

(Schuelka, 2018)

## Equality and diversity

The Equality Act (2010) ensures legal protection against discrimination in relation to the nine protected characteristics. However, it also introduced a Public Sector Equality Duty that applies to public bodies. This requires schools to have due regard to:

- Eliminate discrimination and other prohibited conduct.
- Advance equality of opportunities between people who do and do not share a protected characteristic.
- Foster good relations across all characteristics (UK Government, 2010).

But legal requirements are only the starting point if schools are to create a truly equal and diverse culture for pupils, families and staff.

In January 2021 there were over 8.9 million pupils in England, a small increase from the previous year. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds (defined in government statistics as of any origin other than White British) has been rising steadily over recent years. Approximately a third of pupils in primary (33.9%) and secondary (32.1%), with 24.6% in PRUs and 30.5% in special schools, are from ethnic minority backgrounds (Office of National Statistics, 2021). However, in London's secondary schools, 72% of pupils belong to an ethnic group other than white British (Mayor of London, 2021). The ONS figures fail to demonstrate wide variation across cities and regions.

There were 66,039 teachers, or 14.3% of all teachers who described themselves as being in a minority ethnic group (where ethnicity information had been provided). This is up from 11.2% of all teachers in 2010 (NB figures are based only on data from participants, c. 39,000 others refused or the data was not obtained). In 2017 around 14% of the UK working-age population came from BAME (Black, Asian, minority ethnic)<sup>1</sup>

backgrounds, with this expected to rise to c. 20% by 2030 (CIPD, 2017).

NQTs in inner London are more likely to be from a BAME background than NQTs in other areas of the country. In inner London, retention rates are 56% of white NQTs after 5 years, and 62% BAME NQTs. This suggests the region is influential in retention (DfE, 2018a) p.69.

Whilst the proportion of teachers from an ethnic minority background is in line with the general population, they are not distributed evenly across the country. A quarter of schools (26%) have no BAME staff at all. BAME staff are concentrated in London schools and in more ethnically diverse schools, as well as being more likely to work in more disadvantaged schools. The most deprived areas of London employ c. 45% of all BAME teachers (Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2021).

The lack of representation is stark at higher levels with only 3% of headteachers coming from an ethnic minority background, and 4% of governors/trustees (DfE, 2021a).

The lack of ethnic diversity in school leadership, particularly in urban schools which are otherwise diverse, can be perceived very negatively. This is particularly important for the recruitment and retention of BAME staff as it may be perceived as having a negative impact on the organisational culture. This is because the SLT plays a key role in creating multicultural capital within a school and there is a risk of wider social inequalities being mirrored and reproduced in school hierarchies. The result can be poor retention due to unequal career progression. 'Race' may also intersect with other aspects of identity, such as gender or class, to affect job satisfaction and retention of BAME teachers (Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> This term is not without criticism, but it is widely used in official documents and so is used here, though where possible evidence will be

disaggregated to recognise the heterogeneity of experiences.

Teaching remains a predominantly white profession, even in urban schools serving diverse communities. Figures from 2019 show that 85.6% of teachers identify as White British, but just 65.4% pupils are from a White British background. As a comparison, 78.5% of the working age population of England were recorded as White British in the 2011 census (Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2021).

This is problematic as it could potentially impact student outcomes, and particularly students of Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Research from the US found that Black male students that were assigned a Black teacher in the third, fourth and fifth grades were less likely to drop out of school (Brummet, Gershenson and Hayes, 2017).

It is hard to quantify the number of staff who would consider themselves disabled (under the equality act) or have additional needs relating to hidden disabilities such as IBS or Crohns, ASD and or ADHD, as many do not declare these. Only 0.5% of the workforce identify as disabled in the 2016 government census compared with c. 16% of working-age adults in the general population. In one study, 71% of disabled staff, compared to 81% of non-disabled staff agreed that their workplace was committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. Perhaps even more striking was the low proportion of disabled staff who felt confident that all staff are treated equally in their workplace – just 62%, compared with 75% of non-disabled staff. This was lower than any other group. Only 45% of disabled survey respondents felt confident that decisions about advancement were made without bias compared to 60% of non-disabled staff (Ozolins *et al.*, 2021).

Women make up 75% of the teaching workforce, but men continue to progress into leadership roles faster and in greater proportion, and earn more than women (Office of National Statistics, 2020). Women are also underrepresented as chief executive officers in academy trusts. This persistent underrepresentation at senior levels inevitably contributes to the persistent gender pay gap in schools (Allen, 2018 in Porritt and Featherstone, 2019).

All of these patterns will have an impact on the culture of a school. Where there is a lack of representation at senior levels, this may reinforce stereotyping and lead to undesirable patterns of behaviour. The impacts may be seen, for example, in gender disparities across subject choice (Plaister, 2021b) (Plaister, 2021a).

## Power

It is worth considering power issues as a component of culture or subculture. There may be competing values systems in a school, based on gender, race, language, socio-economic status etc. Role differences in addition can pull a school in several directions (Stoll, 1998).

Delpit (1988) proposes five aspects of what she considers to be a 'culture of power' within education:

1. Issues of power are enacted in the classroom.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power – it is a culture.
3. The rules of the culture of power reflect the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, you are told explicitly the rules of that culture make acquiring power easier.
5. Those who have power are frequently least aware of or less willing to acknowledge its existence. Those without power are most aware of its existence.

## Whole child development

Considering whole child outcomes as integral to educational outcomes is crucial. Links between physical and mental health are well known (Crenna-Jennings, 2021), but evidence also suggests that social and emotional, and cognitive factors influence pupil behaviour and learning (Ellis and Tod, 2018).

A wide range of leadership research shows that successful schools actively promote positive values, a love of lifelong learning, as well as supporting the development of personal and social capabilities, and that successful leaders



deem these social outcomes to be as important as academic outcomes (Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016).

Evidence suggests that the impact of COVID-19 shows a statistically significant association between wellbeing and learning indicators. Pupils experiencing negative wellbeing are therefore also more likely to experience challenges with learning and vice versa (ImpactED, 2021).

Whole child development is a holistic development approach that encompasses physical, social, emotional and academic development through the creation of appropriate conditions within education systems and school communities. It also incorporates the active support and engagement of the community. 'It recognises that all children, particularly those facing extreme adversity, require a range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and core values that will enable them to engage as productive and ethical citizens' (ACER, 2020, p. 4).

## Psychological safety

Psychological safety is having the belief that it is safe to speak out without risk of humiliation or being teased for the ideas you share. It is also the freedom to make mistakes without worrying about looking stupid – a crucial element in learning (InnerDrive, no date).

This sense of psychological safety is also an important element in creating high-performing teams. According to Google, creating psychological safety could involve approaching conflict as a collaborator rather than an adversary; speaking human to human to recognise deeper needs to elicit trust and promote positive language and behaviours; anticipating reactions and planning countermeasures; replacing blame with curiosity; and asking for feedback on delivery. Psychological safety can be measured by asking the team how safe they feel and how this feeling can be enhanced (Delizonna, 2017).

A psychologically safe environment is one where people:

- are trusted and feel safe
- can be honest with managers and colleagues
- are able to speak up when they need to
- have the freedom and security to try new things and make mistakes
- feel safe enough to be creative and take risks

Whilst this list is focused on education staff, it is equally relevant for pupils. Everyone should be able to be themselves, in order to perform at their best. Education Support offers a range of specific actions that can be taken to foster a culture of psychological safety in schools (Education Support, 2021).

## Belonging

Belonging, or a sense of connectedness, can be seen as an element of psychological safety, as well as of inclusion. Several studies have drawn links between connectedness and outcomes, which include reducing risk-taking behaviours. This link is based upon an understanding that the school social context is critical in shaping adolescent behaviour (Chapman *et al.*, 2013).

Chapman *et al.* highlight a large number of studies that identify negative associations between school connectedness and adolescent risk behaviours, such as alcohol and substance abuse, carrying weapons, damaging property and others. Higher connectedness was always reported by students when teachers managed the class in a controlled, positive way, with high expectations from teachers and parents.

Eric Kalenze talks of the importance of emphasising the collective 'we'. He positions the idea of 'belonging' as being about a whole school culture rather than 1:1 relationships, linking this to the concept of psychological safety relating to the school environment rather than individual relationships (Kalenze, 2019).

Greg Walton, though, highlights the problem of simply assuming the phrase 'you belong' will achieve the desired effect. He highlights the very good reasons students may have for questioning whether or not they belong: the difficulty of

transitions, friendship groups and disrupted learning, alongside longer-term issues of systemic discrimination or exclusion. He suggests recognising these challenges and acknowledging the worries are normal. Most of all, the research shows that belonging is an ongoing process that is improving but may never be quite complete. Recognising student identities and positive representations of these groups and identities is important (Walton, 2021).

## Culture

Attempting to change a school's culture is messy and challenging. Change is hard and it takes time, mostly because culture is the unwritten rules that govern everybody's behaviour, prevailing over any written policy. Culture can be an ally or an impediment to school improvement.

Some schools have instantly recognisable cultures – Michaela Community School (Birbalsingh, 2020), Parklands Primary School, Eton – were deliberately designed and are now sustained around particular values and visions. The majority of schools though have a culture that has emerged organically and may be both positive and negative in its impact, and resistant to change.

Building a strong, positive school culture is essential for both students and staff. A strong body of literature demonstrates the link between working conditions and teacher satisfaction, but further demonstrates that this is also connected to pupil outcomes (Kraft and Papay, 2014). Concerningly, 38% of all educational professionals consider that their organisational culture had a negative effect on their mental health and wellbeing (Education Support, 2020).

High performing schools seem to be particularly attentive to raising disadvantaged pupils' attainment and display particularly high levels of shared staff purpose, with an explicit linking of cultures to practice, such as high expectations leading to a tangible influence on teacher practice (Baars, Shaw, Mulcahy and Menzies, 2018).

The Thriving Schools report (Teach First, 2020) demonstrates that it is possible for a school to have successful academic outcomes whilst maintaining a positive working environment for staff.

A strong professional culture in a school influences both teacher development and retention, so should be seen as a key priority (Scutt, 2019). Retention in schools with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is a key challenge and there is significant evidence suggesting that poor work

environments are associated with high staff turnover, and that these conditions are particularly prevalent in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

*Mounting evidence suggests that the seeming relationship between student demographics and teacher turnover is driven not by teachers' responses to their students, but by the conditions in which they must teach and their students are obliged to learn.*

(Johnson, Papay and Kraft, 2012)

## Defining culture

The culture of a school is what determines the day-to-day behaviours of both staff and pupils. It is often captured by the phrase, 'the way we do things around here' (Stoll, 1998).

Analysis of literature on school cultures and practices also considers the intangible assumptions and values held by teachers, seeing school practices as emerging from a school's culture. Practices are the most concrete and visible aspect of that culture, which allows insight into the underlying assumptions and values (Baars, Shaw, Mulcahy and Menzies, 2018).

This report categorises the cultures and practices in schools by theme:

- aspirations and expectations
- positivity, energy and purpose
- collaboration and competition
- data and evidence
- behaviour and attendance
- staffing
- leadership
- targeting resources
- partnerships and activities
- learning environment
- parental engagement

(Baars, Shaw, Mulcahy and Menzies, 2018)

## Consistency

The Thriving Schools research identified consistency as a significant feature of schools that were sustainably successful. The strategies varied, but it was important that they were shared and implemented consistently by all members of the school community (Teach First, 2020).

A word of caution: paradoxically, whilst group learning is at the centre of a school's culture, it must also protect individual 'mavericks'. Creativity and novelty is a crucial element in preventing organisational isomorphism.

## Implementation

For the culture of the school to reflect the values and purpose intended at its heart, implementation is key. This must be over both the short and the longer term (Teach First, 2020).

## Changing a culture

Stoll suggests that a school's culture evolves over time, from being explicit at foundation, through an established period when it continues to grow and evolve, to maturity/stagnation and potential decline when it can become dysfunctional (Stoll, 1998). It is important to remember that a school's culture will be influenced by the external context and wider changes both socially and locally, as well as politically and economically.

A number of typologies of school culture have been considered in the literature. Hargreaves considers the instrumental domain and the expressive domain in order to suggest an 'ideal culture' at the centre (Hargreaves, 1995). Stoll and Fink argue that schools are never standing still, but always either getting better or getting worse, and their typology model reflects this (Stoll, 1998).

A different approach can be taken from outside education. Sinek says 'start with why' – what is the purpose and the underlying belief? Then consider the how and the what (Sinek, 2011). He explores case studies of companies acting in

apparently unconventional ways to achieve success and identifies the 'circle of safety' as an idea central to their cohesion – a culture that makes people feel they belong and influences their behaviour positively (Sinek, 2017). Coyle goes further in his consideration of culture, corporate and others, to identify three foundational concepts: safety (you belong here), vulnerability (you can take risks) and purpose (you are here for a reason) (Coyle, 2019).

## Leadership

Leadership is a crucial element in successful outcomes for students (Day *et al.*, 2009; Robinson, 2007). Where leadership in schools is good, schools are more likely to be able to improve their Ofsted category. Conversely, where leadership is graded below overall performance, 93% of schools fail to improve (Teach First, 2016).

Attracting both teachers and leaders to schools in disadvantaged areas is hard. In one survey, 20% of respondents said nothing would induce them to apply for a job in a school in special measures, and only around half would consider it if there was a clearly enforced and effective behaviour policy. A slightly smaller proportion would consider it, but only if it involved a substantial promotion or reduction in teaching timetable – both near impossible to offer for schools in straitened circumstances (Allen and McInerney, 2019).

Theories of leadership only partially reflect or explain approaches in schools, particularly those in a challenging context (Harris and Chapman, 2002). Leadership styles have often seemed to reflect the latest fashion or politically correct notion of schooling, with the current focus on distributed leadership seen as a solution to 'heroic' individual models of leadership that previously dominated (Hallinger, 2003). Other models emphasise a pattern of transition in leadership from more authoritative to more distributed, reflecting the phases of improvement in a school (Day *et al.*, 2009).

The main purpose of distributed leadership is to improve leadership capacity for improvement, i.e. it is not a form of delegation (Solly, 2018).

(Sharma, 2021)

There is also some evidence that different types of leadership impact pupil outcomes. Research from Sevenoaks School found that the more inclusive a teacher's leadership style was, the better student performance was (Parham and Moss, 2021)

The importance of leadership in creating and maintaining a positive staff culture has also been demonstrated. In one study, a range of interventions suggests that a change in leadership style can be a key factor in school cultural change. The largest effect size was found for supportive leadership, albeit based on a small sample size. Of particular significance was the visibility of leadership, along with participative decision-making (Morris *et al.*, 2019). The results are highly contextual, but context is an essential factor when investigating leadership and school change (Hallinger, 2018).

## School improvement

*Real improvement cannot come from anywhere other than within schools themselves ... it requires an understanding of and respect for the different meanings and interpretations people bring to educational initiatives*  
(Stoll, 1998, pp. 13–14)

It is important to be clear what we mean by school improvement. There is a real risk that a focus on school improvement simply leads to constant change (often without improvement), without also remembering to maintain the things that are already good (Evans, 2019).

High-performing schools appeared to make more use of very early support for pupils falling behind in key curriculum areas. Where lower-performing schools demonstrated similar practices, they tended to use a narrower range of strategies or were in the earlier stages of implementing approaches (Baars, Shaw, Mulcahy and Menzies, 2018c).

The EEF describes a 5-step school improvement cycle:

1. Decide what you want to achieve.
2. Identify possible solutions.
3. Give it the best chance of success.
4. Evaluate impact.
5. Secure and spread change (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019).

Having a shared culture and vision is essential for achieving and sustaining this cycle of improvement.

Research by Day et al. shows that a school's ability to improve and sustain effectiveness over the long term is a result of the headteacher's or principal's ability to diagnose the specific needs of their school, and then articulate values that are shared across the school. School improvement is context sensitive and 'layered' (Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016). Sustained improvement of a

school depends upon the staff assuming a level of ownership over proposed changes (Hallinger, 2003).

Significant changes have occurred over the past decade with regard to school governance and organisation, with the emergence of multi-academy trusts and other multi-school groupings. Research into school improvement in school groups builds on what is known from existing research about leadership and improvement in single schools. This research highlights the importance of:

- vision
- values
- effective leadership that is focused on building capacity and adapted to context
- improving the quality of teaching and learning (Greany, 2018)

The House of Commons Education Select Committee report suggests that the most successful MATs share the following characteristics:

- recognition of the crucial role played by teaching staff
- regional structures which allow schools to share expertise and resources
- mechanisms for tangible accountability at all levels
- a shared vision for school improvement across all schools within the trust
- a commitment to improving performance and attainment (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017, p. 8–9)

A final point about school improvement is that correlations between indicators are generally very weak – how 'good' a school is depends very much on personal priorities. All schools will have strengths and weaknesses. Competition for places is a poor indicator of educational effectiveness, particularly for primary schools (Hannay, 2021).

## Tackling disadvantage

The culture and values of a school will always, to some extent, reflect their context and their community. It is important that this context is not seen as a limitation, but an asset.

A recent study suggests that differences in school quality as indexed by Ofsted ratings, bear little relation to the individual outcomes for students, therefore offering a criticism of the usefulness of Ofsted ratings as a guide for choosing a school (von Stumm *et al.*, 2020).

FFT education datalab with the IntegratED partnership has established the School Quality Index. This seeks to establish more comprehensive indices to overcome the problems of Progress 8 and other accountability measures. The index looks at attainment but also inclusion, which is separated into sub-dimensions:

- disadvantaged pupils
- pupils with a first language other than English who have recently arrived
- Pupils with EHCPs
- joiners and leavers
- absence
- exclusion

In aggregate, it is argued that this index gives a more rounded view of the quality or effectiveness of a school (Thomson, 2021).

## Impact of COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is hard to quantify, but it is clear that in many cases disadvantaged pupils have been harder hit in terms of disruption to their learning.

Disadvantaged pupils missed more school than other pupils during the autumn term, 2020. In general, disadvantaged pupils missed 50% more sessions than other pupils (Bibby, Plaister and Thomson, 2021). The impact of attendance on learning is unclear, but other evidence indicates that disadvantaged students have faced greater barriers to accessing and engaging with online learning remotely (Crenna-Jennings, 2021; Montacute and Cullinane, 2021).

## Structures

Stoll argues that culture and structure are interdependent, but that most school improvement approaches focus on structural change, for example, time tabling, roles and responsibilities, space. However it is the underlying cultures that determine the success of initiatives or can act as a barrier (Stoll, 1998).

## Improving teaching and learning

Teaching quality is the key factor in improving outcomes for pupils, but improving teaching is heavily dependent on leadership and culture. The role of leadership in the features of schools that positively influence the quality of teaching and learning is significant, and therefore vital to the success of school improvement in most cases (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2019).

From inspections of further education providers, Ofsted identified a number of actions as having the greatest influence in improving teaching, learning and assessment (Ofsted, 2014):

- establishing a mission and set of values that prioritised learners
- high involvement of all stakeholders
- significant investment in high-quality staff development
- an unrelenting focus on developing the skills learners need for progression
- ensuring the effective sharing of good practice across teams

## Evidence-informed school improvement

Part of being evidence-informed is ensuring that evaluation is carried out in order to determine whether any changes introduced are effective. One handbook suggests that approaches should be evaluated before implementation, on a smaller scale, before being introduced more widely. This will enable teachers and leaders to make better informed decisions about allocating resources.

A ten-step process is suggested (IEE, 2020):

1. Really understand the problem or issue you would like to address.
2. Review existing evidence to better understand your issue and to identify a potential solution.
3. Write a research question.
4. Plan a robust impact evaluation.
5. Carry out the evaluation as planned.
6. Analyse your data.
7. Describe your findings.
8. Identify the limitations of your evaluation.
9. Draw conclusions.
10. Decide on your next steps.

## Working conditions

Workplace culture contributes positively to wellbeing. A strong sense of community is appreciated by all members of staff at every level and arises from: a strong sense of teamwork and collaboration; a supportive and no-blame culture; shared values within a team; and a positive, inclusive, compassionate and friendly ethos (Ofsted, 2019b). The 2021 teacher wellbeing index shows that stress levels are higher for staff who are not supported well by their organisations – 85% compared to 72% (Scanlan and Savill-Smith, 2021).

Stress levels increase incrementally with the number of hours typically worked. Of those who work 41–60 hours per week 81% are stressed, compared with 93% of those working 61+ hours per week. Presenteeism is also a key concern, with 54% of those who are stressed saying they would always turn up to work when ill (Scanlan and Savill-Smith, 2021).

A review by the Teacher Development Trust suggests that the quality of teachers' working conditions has 'a clear, consistent relationship with student attainment'. They suggest five aspects most closely associated with increased student attainment:

1. Creating opportunities for effective teacher collaboration (to look at data, planning, assessments);
2. Involving teachers in whole school planning, decision-making and improvement;
3. Creating a culture of mutual trust, respect, enthusiasm in which communication is open and honest;
4. Building a sense of shared mission, with shared goals, clear priorities and high expectations of professional behaviours and of students' learning; and
5. Facilitating classroom safety and behaviour, where disruption and bullying are very rare and teachers feel strongly supported by senior leaders in their efforts to maintain this classroom environment.

(Weston, Hindley and Cunningham, 2021).

Retention rates among early career teachers are particularly worrying, with significant drops between 2012 and 2018 (Worth and Van Den Brande, 2019).

Research on retention suggests that workload is the foremost barrier to teacher wellbeing. More importantly, it is the nature or type of the workload more than the quantity itself which is significant. In particular administrative tasks, or high volumes of marking, take up a large proportion of non-teaching time, resulting in less than half of teachers' time being spent on teaching (Ofsted, 2019b).

According to Education Support's Teacher Wellbeing Index 2021, 54% of all staff have considered leaving the education sector in the last two years – 63% of senior leaders and 53% of school teachers. The main reason given was workload, however relationships with the senior leadership team are the ones that affect wellbeing most negatively (Scanlan and Savill-Smith, 2021).

## Wellbeing

Self-reported wellbeing at work is generally low or moderate, despite most teachers being positive about their workplace. Positive factors such as culture and relationships with colleagues are offset by high workload, lack of work–life balance and a perceived lack of support from leaders (Ofsted, 2019b).

In 2021, 84% of senior leaders and 69% of school teachers reported being stressed. Of those surveyed, 42% of staff considered their organisation's culture had a negative effect on their wellbeing. This is an increase on previous years, although it should be recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic may mean recent trends are not directly comparable to previous patterns. Trust was seen as affecting mental health and wellbeing, with 91% of those who felt distrusted by their line manager believing that this negatively affected their wellbeing. A positive effect on their wellbeing was reported by 60% of those who felt trusted (Scanlan and Savill-Smith, 2021).



Nearly three-quarters (74%) of teachers did not believe that their initial teacher training courses prepared them well to manage their own wellbeing. Importantly, those working for up to 5 years felt better prepared to prioritise their own wellbeing than those who had worked for longer (Scanlan and Savill-Smith, 2021). This suggests that ITT courses are now better at supporting teachers in managing their own wellbeing, however the last two years have been exceptional which may have influenced responses.

A new staff wellbeing charter outlines a number of commitments that the DfE and Ofsted are making in relation to acknowledging the direct and indirect impact their policies can have on the mental health and wellbeing of education staff. They also invite schools and colleges to sign up to the charter and commit to developing a long-term strategy for improving staff wellbeing:

1. Prioritise staff mental health.
2. Give staff the support they need to take responsibility for their own and other people's wellbeing.
3. Give managers access to the tools and resources they need to support the wellbeing of those they line manage.
4. Establish a clear communications policy.
5. Give staff a voice in decision-making.
6. Drive down unnecessary workload.
7. Champion flexible working and diversity.
8. Create a good behaviour culture.
9. Support staff to progress in their careers.
10. Include a sub-strategy for protecting leader wellbeing and mental health.
11. Hold ourselves accountable, including by measuring staff wellbeing (DfE, 2021b).

Kat Howard has pointed out that despite an increased focus on wellbeing and strategies for addressing the root issues from the centre, very little has actually been done by way of implementation. She reflects on a 'broken system' and what needs to be done, proposing a manifesto for the profession:

- I don't mark at home because I don't feel I should need to.
- I don't work in the evenings because I need to sleep.
- I don't send emails late at night because I don't want to read them.

- I don't leave conflict unresolved because it leaves me unsettled at the end of a day.
- I don't write lengthy lesson plans because I don't feel they are valuable.
- I don't make excessive to-do lists because they make me feel inefficient.
- I feed my professional self because I want to feel like I'm becoming better.
- I don't accept that my purpose should be compromised.

'This is wellbeing. Not one ounce of yoga' (Howard, 2020, p. 37).

Education Support outlines the three biggest issues around education wellbeing:

- reducing unnecessary paperwork and data gathering
- reducing the volume of workload
- recognising the high intensity or high pressure work environment which exists in education settings

Importantly, respondents said that a working culture that encourages people to talk openly is the best way to tackle mental health stigma. Over half (57%) of respondents did not feel confidence in disclosing problems to their employer (Scanlan and Savill-Smith, 2021). The importance of the working environment, in terms of culture, workload and teaching environment, is clear in research that suggests teachers would trade-off higher pay in favour of supportive environments with fewer challenges from pupil behaviour (Burge, Lu and Phillips, 2021).

## Autonomy

Teacher job satisfaction is strongly correlated with autonomy and retention, and perceptions of workload manageability. Unlike in most professions, autonomy does not increase with age or experience in teaching, except with promotion into leadership roles (Worth and Van Den Brande, 2020). This may explain why to date more senior members of staff may demonstrate greater job satisfaction, despite appearing to have a greater workload/work a greater number of hours. However this pattern may have shifted somewhat in response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with senior leaders becoming more dissatisfied (Walker, Sharp and Sims, 2020).

Dixons Academies Trust challenged traditional thinking about MATs in favour of 'aligned autonomy' – creating a balance between consistency and self-determination. The aim was to maintain agility despite their size, with an effort towards a flatter hierarchy; high alignment with high autonomy (Sparkes, 2018).

## Workload

Working hours are thought to be linked to teacher wellbeing, but there is little quantifiable evidence that longer hours are damaging to mental health or wellbeing. FFT datalab has explored the relationship further to consider the impact of extra hours, but also the nature of the work undertaken in those hours. Extra time spent on professional development may not be damaging, but extra time spent on marking and lesson preparation are strongly associated with a decline in wellbeing (Jerrim, 2020).

The total working hours of teachers in England has remained broadly unchanged for 25 years, averaging around 48 hours per week, though with some indication of a fall in 2018/19 (Worth, 2020). Secondary teachers spend almost as much time on marking, planning, administration and management as they do on teaching and, despite government efforts (DfE, 2018b), there has been no meaningful reduction in the time spent on non-teaching tasks (Allen *et al.*, 2019).

According to TALIS in 2018, full-time lower secondary teachers in England reported working on average 49.3 hours pw, above the OECD average of 41 hours. This also marked an increase from 2013 of 48.2 hours on average. For full-time primary teachers, the reported average was 52.1 hours pw, more than any other participating country except Japan. Over half of both primary and secondary teachers felt their workload was unmanageable (Foster, Long and Danechi, 2021).

Data from the TALIS 2018 survey shows that in all countries, longer working hours are associated with a decline in teacher wellbeing (Jerrim, 2020). However, work by Worth and Van den Brande suggests that it is more closely linked to teacher autonomy, and the extent to which workload is seen as manageable, rather than the number of hours worked per se (Worth and Van Den Brande, 2020).

## Work–life balance

Many teachers and school leaders speak of the difficulty of 'switching off', with 20% regularly losing sleep due to worry (Teacher Tapp, 2018). Individual definitions of balance will vary hugely depending on personal circumstances. Where this threatens retention is where the balance becomes inflexible, or weighted too heavily in one direction.

## Toxic schools

This term has gained much currency, although it is still important to recognise that often a school that is 'toxic' for one teacher is a good fit for another. However, there may be some common negative features:

- high staff turnover
- a 'sinking' school where morale is low and staff demotivated
- a 'hot house' school which is overly controlled by leaders
- repeated restructuring
- bureaucratic
- teaching culture of balkanisation or individualism
- 'groupthink' mentalities that reinforce negative behaviours

(Woodley and McGill, 2018)

## **Communication**

The importance of effective communication is a repetitive phrase in the literature around leadership.

For middle leaders, this is crucial in ensuring team members understand the rationale behind day-to-day decisions, particularly when handed down from senior leaders (Baars *et al.*, 2015).

## **Formal and informal**

The ubiquitous and sometimes intrusive nature of email cannot be ignored. Whilst some schools adopt a policy of restricting email hours to the working day, others recognise that for many staff with caring responsibilities, this may actually be a hindrance rather than a help. The most effective approaches seem to be having strong principles about the appropriate use of email, as well as a high level of autonomy in staff response (Teach First, 2020).

## **Staff voice**

A study of effective middle leadership drew attention to the importance of consulting the team before making decisions, ensuring that individuals felt their voices were heard (Baars *et al.*, 2015).

## Student wellbeing

Concerns around student wellbeing have been mounting in recent years, exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2017, the prevalence of probable mental disorders has increased from 1 in 9, to 1 in 6 young people (Crenna-Jennings, 2021).

The Marmot Review of the impact of the pandemic highlights the impact on children's social and emotional development, particularly in the early years. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have experienced more negative impacts than their less disadvantaged peers. The impact on parents is also unequal (Marmot *et al.*, 2020).

Social and emotional and cognitive factors influence pupil behaviour and learning. Whilst the focus is often on the relationship of the pupil with the curriculum as a priority, for some pupils this requires attention to their relationship with themselves and/or relationships with others (Ellis and Tod, 2018).

Young people's mental and emotional health scores are worse the lower down their family is on the income scale. Feelings about their family's socio-economic circumstances are also associated with self-esteem, particularly when in comparison to more affluent peers. This highlights the significance of localised inequality and perceptions of inequality beyond any absolute measures (Crenna-Jennings, 2021).

As children move from primary to secondary school, personal wellbeing drops and continues to drop as they move through secondary school. The decline is greater for girls than boys. Self-esteem falls on average as children move into adolescence with particular concerns about not fitting in and being judged visible in the transition to secondary school. Increased psychological distress, in levels of worry and pressure, also increases through secondary school (Crenna-Jennings, 2021).

Evidence from May–November 2020 (during the first lockdown period of remote learning) suggests a statistically significant association between

wellbeing and learning indicators. Pupils experiencing negative wellbeing were more likely to also experience challenges with learning and vice versa (ImpactED, 2021).

## Student voice

When talking about the culture in schools and the impact this has, it is important to consider student voice. It is crucial to understand whether interventions put in place are having the intended effect, and to know whether there is diversity or consistency of experience for students.

The impact of COVID-19 has been hugely variable, but at least one study has revealed that older students lost the sense of being part of a school community during lockdown. Girls were particularly anxious about returning to school (ImpactED, 2021).

## Parental engagement

According to polling by Parent Ping, when asked what they felt were the most important qualities of a school, 97% parents answered 'my child is happy', with 91% 'my child feels safe'. In comparison, 88% said 'my child develops socially' and 86% 'my child develops academically'. So whilst academic success is important to parents, it is far from being their sole focus, and certainly should not come at the expense of other aspects of the school experience (Wespieser, 2021).

Much research around parental engagement is connected with social justice and equality, and the desire to address issues perceived as potential factors in the disadvantage gap. One accusation is that a culture of poverty has informed work in this area, with a homogenising impact that treats all groups experiencing poverty similarly, for example in the concept of a 'cycle of deprivation'. In this view, parents are associated with social problems in a manner that affects relationships with schools. Placing the primary responsibility on parents also risks absolving the system and ignoring structural disadvantages.

*One of the most pervasive parts of the myth of the deficit model of parenting is that poor parents (e.g. parents experiencing poverty) are also poor parents (e.g. parents who do not come up to expected norms of parenting).*

(Goodall, 2019)

The research shows that this notion of parents in poverty being uninterested in their children's learning and reluctant to engage with schools, is a myth. Parental engagement is valuable, but it cannot overcome systemic issues. It should also be recognised that the notion of teaching parenting skills or practices must be contextualised. We should reflect on how we

acknowledge the discourse and counter it (Goodall, 2019).

A Unicef study looking at the global impact of COVID-19 focused on parental roles in learning, particularly in the context of home learning. Availability of child-oriented books at home was shown as important for foundational reading skills, with the share of children acquiring reading skills being higher in households where there is at least one book in all countries studied (Bossard *et al.*, 2020).

The EEF provides guidance for working with parents with 4 key recommendations:

1. Critically review how you work with parents – be optimistic about the potential.
2. Provide practical strategies to support learning at home.
3. Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning.
4. Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

(Education Endowment Foundation, 2018)

According to a 2013 study looking at parental engagement in relation to narrowing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children, common features of successful interventions are:

- They are based on the best available evidence.
- They state explicitly what change they anticipate achieving and define their criteria for success or failure.
- The planning of activities is informed by research into local needs and circumstances.
- They are properly resourced, with sufficient capacity.
- Senior staff are engaged with and committed to the intervention.
- Measures are taken to overcome potential participation barriers.
- A robust evaluation is built into the programme from the beginning.
- They are sustainable.

(Grayson, 2013, p. 1)

Some of the findings reflected the importance of offering advice and emotional support, but with services offered universally rather than targeted, to reduce stigma. A number of parenting characteristics are statistically associated with children's levels of achievement including: parental promotion of reading and learning, parents' relationships and interactions with the child, and disciplinary practices. Poorer children and their families often have high aspirations but lack social capital. Access to better information about options, along with practical advice and support can improve outcomes for both children and families (Grayson, 2013).

(Strømme and Helland, 2020) also draw the link between parents' social position and their children's educational outcomes. Parents with more cultural resources are more likely to be involved through having future educational expectations. Economic resources also enable greater support for their children's current schooling, though they identify differences between the impact of cultural and economic resources.

Parental engagement can both narrow and, in some cases, widen the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

## Community engagement

Schools are more than the sum of the pupils and staff, but part of the wider local community. Understanding the cultural context of the wider community of the school is important for achieving shared purpose and values.

Non-formal learning is often delivered by schools and community-based providers in collaboration. This may be using the school as a location or sharing staff. It can offer an important complement to school-based opportunities and promote wider mixing of groups of children and young people with a positive benefit for confidence and resilience (Robertson, 2021).

## Cultural capital

According to the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF), inspectors will make a judgement on the quality of education by evaluating the extent to which:

- leaders take on or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life (Ofsted, 2019a).

Cultural capital is the idea is that the more capital or resources you have, the more powerful your position in society. For Bourdieu (and others), this extended beyond economic capital, and into culture. He suggests that some forms of culture are valued over others and therefore contribute to inequality in the same way as income or wealth (Routledge, 2016).

It has been pointed out many times that the current system privileges not merit, but middle-class cultural capital (Goodall, 2019). Research shows that students with more cultural capital outperform their peers in comparison with economic capital. This may be correlated with parents' educational aspirations and more direct involvement in schooling. They highlight the issue that most research has studied the difference between high and low socio-economic status, between the middle and the working classes, and tended to ignore the differences within classes (Strømme and Helland, 2020).

One finding suggests that the cultural or professional 'fraction' were more interested in their child's pursuit of personal interests aimed at self-fulfilment and autonomy. This also matched the children's own attitudes. Whereas the economic 'fraction' were more instrumental and goal-oriented, with a greater sense of pressure and rules e.g. about homework and grades (Strømme and Helland, 2020).

## Character education

Non-statutory guidance is provided in the form of the *Character Education Framework Guidance* with six character benchmarks for provision:

- A. What kind of school are we?
- B. What are our expectations of behaviour towards one another?
- C. How well do our curriculum and teaching develop resilience and confidence?
- D. How good is our co-curriculum?
- E. How well do we promote the value of volunteering and service to others?
- F. How do we ensure that all our pupils benefit equally from what we offer? (DfE, 2019a)

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