Is the attainment gap fundamentally flawed?

Challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Inequality of outcome has become one of the most pressing issues in education. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the performance of disadvantaged students. However, despite increased support, no school in England or Wales has managed to consistently close the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. This raises many questions, none more important than: is there an error in how we measure the performance of disadvantaged students? Furthermore, what are the implications of such a potential error? This paper argues that the attainment gap as it is currently calculated is ineffective in identifying the locus of underperformance, the specific needs of disadvantaged students and the support needed to improve outcomes. Finally, this paper attempts to address this by discussing a pilot project focused on identifying and addressing disadvantaged students' needs and the challenges and opportunities this raises.

INTRODUCTION

To close the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers, the UK Government introduced Pupil Premium funding in 2011. Whilst free school meal funding had existed for many years, Pupil Premium funding gave schools greater freedom over where this money was to be spent. By delegating decision-making to schools, the government hoped that money would be spent more wisely and targeted to the specific needs of schools and their students. However, in 2018 the Education Policy Institute reported that it would take 50 years to close this gap entirely (Hutchinson et al. 2018). This was preceded by the Department for Education (DfE)'s 2015 report on 'Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils' (Macleod et al. 2015) which outlined the current best practice in schools where the attainment gap was smallest. Perhaps most significantly, no reports have been able to explain why few, if any, schools in England appear to have maintained a consistent reduction in their attainment gap over a sustained period, or why even seemingly model schools show such variation year-to-year. Our school is no exception to this rule. Whilst the school has developed many systems for supporting disadvantaged students, the outcomes often reflect the national picture of year-on-year variations. As a result, we set out to assess the current understanding of disadvantaged students in an attempt to support our students more effectively and reduce this variation in outcomes over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR THIS GAP?

The literature on disadvantaged students is disparate. A logical starting point is the recent reports specifically addressing the attainment gap and the performance of disadvantaged students, including Macleod et al. (2015) and the 2017 Education Endowment Foundation report on 'Closing the attainment gap' (EEF 2017). Both of these included broad literature reviews looking into ways in which disadvantaged students could be supported and empirical data on why some schools are successful.

The DfE commissioned a report into supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in order to identify good practice. One of its findings recognised the relationship between prior attainment at Key Stage 2 and performance at Key Stage 4. The report recognised the positive correlation was equivalent to 0.88 of standard deviation. However, it went on to surmise that the significance of this 'relationship might be expected because it should be easier for schools to promote high attainment among pupils who have already achieved a good standard of performance (Macleod et al. 2015: 34). This recognition of the positive correlation between outcomes and prior attainment supports the findings within our own school data.

The EEF published a report on closing the attainment gap in 2017. The report highlighted the importance of early intervention that is targeted at specific needs and particularly during the transitionary phases between Key Stages 2 and 3 (EEF 2017: 14). This provides a helpful set of parameters on which to potentially focus.

However, the types of challenge faced by disadvantaged students and the responses to this remain incredibly broad. As a result, we broaden our reading to consider all the potential factors which may lead to differences in outcomes between students, with particular reference to how these may apply to disadvantaged students. Through our research, 18 factors were identified including the following: differences in utero leading to propensities; pre-schooling or lack; home learning environment; innate ability; prior attainment; effort; self-regulation; fatherlessness; cohort structure; quality of teaching; socio-economics; teacher expectations; peer groups; performance measures; parental education level; area; employment of parents; and primary school quality. Each of these factors potentially plays a role in creating the differences in attainment we find later on in secondary school. This left us with a difficult problem. How does one know which of the factors are creating which needs in our students and, more importantly, which ones are within our sphere of influence? Without addressing this, we were unlikely to achieve the EEF recommendations. This was partly addressed by Daniel Sobel's (2019) work.

In Narrowing the attainment gap, Sobel suggests, that 'hard data', i.e. school performance data, can only indicate a problem. However, in order to understand and address this in a targeted manner, one needs to gather 'soft data' from the students themselves (Sobel 2019). Furthermore, Sobel likens the support of disadvantaged students to that of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) students. We would never approach SEND students in a general catch-all manner and apply out-of-the-box solutions for a group of students with specific needs. Therefore, perhaps viewing disadvantaged students as being individuals who may have some commonalities nationally, but who have specific needs which require personalised and targeted solutions within schools and individually, is more likely to result in positive outcomes.

RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

The investigation began by considering whether there was an attainment gap within our school. By starting with a neutral question, we made no assumptions which might have led us to omit key areas from investigation. Furthermore, we hoped to identify any possible issues with our method of calculating and reporting attainment data, which we believed may be part of the issue our school and many others face in trying to consistently narrow the attainment gap. In addition, we surveyed relevant literature not only relating to disadvantaged students, but also within fields that buttress this such as psychology and sociology. We felt broadening our literature review might provide valuable insight and ideas into the specific needs and challenges faced by disadvantaged students. Finally, we focused on developing a trial project that attempted to systematically identify the specific needs of our students and responses to these. This was a lofty undertaking, but we felt it necessary due to the underwhelming results of our own significant efforts and those of most schools. In addition, the DfE report of 2015 highlighted the fact that an important difference between more successful and less successful schools in closing the attainment gap was their ability to specifically target the needs of their students. This was and remains the goal of Pupil Premium funding. The key findings of our investigation are explored in more detail further below.

DATA ANALYSIS

IS THERE AN ATTAINMENT GAP?

Our first task was to analyse our school performance data. We began by looking at the performance data for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students over the past three years. The data appeared to show a gap in performance for two of the last three years (Figure 1 overleaf).

This data served as a starting point for our investigation, but was not hugely informative. As a result, we parsed these aggregate figures into prior attainment groups (Figure 2). The results of this were far more informative.
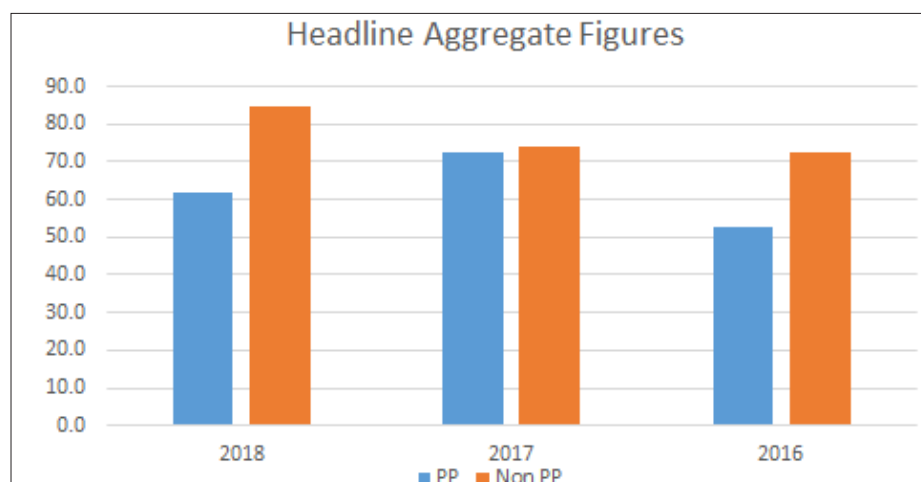
Figure 1: Cohort aggregate data for % progress towards targets. (PP: Pupil Premium.)
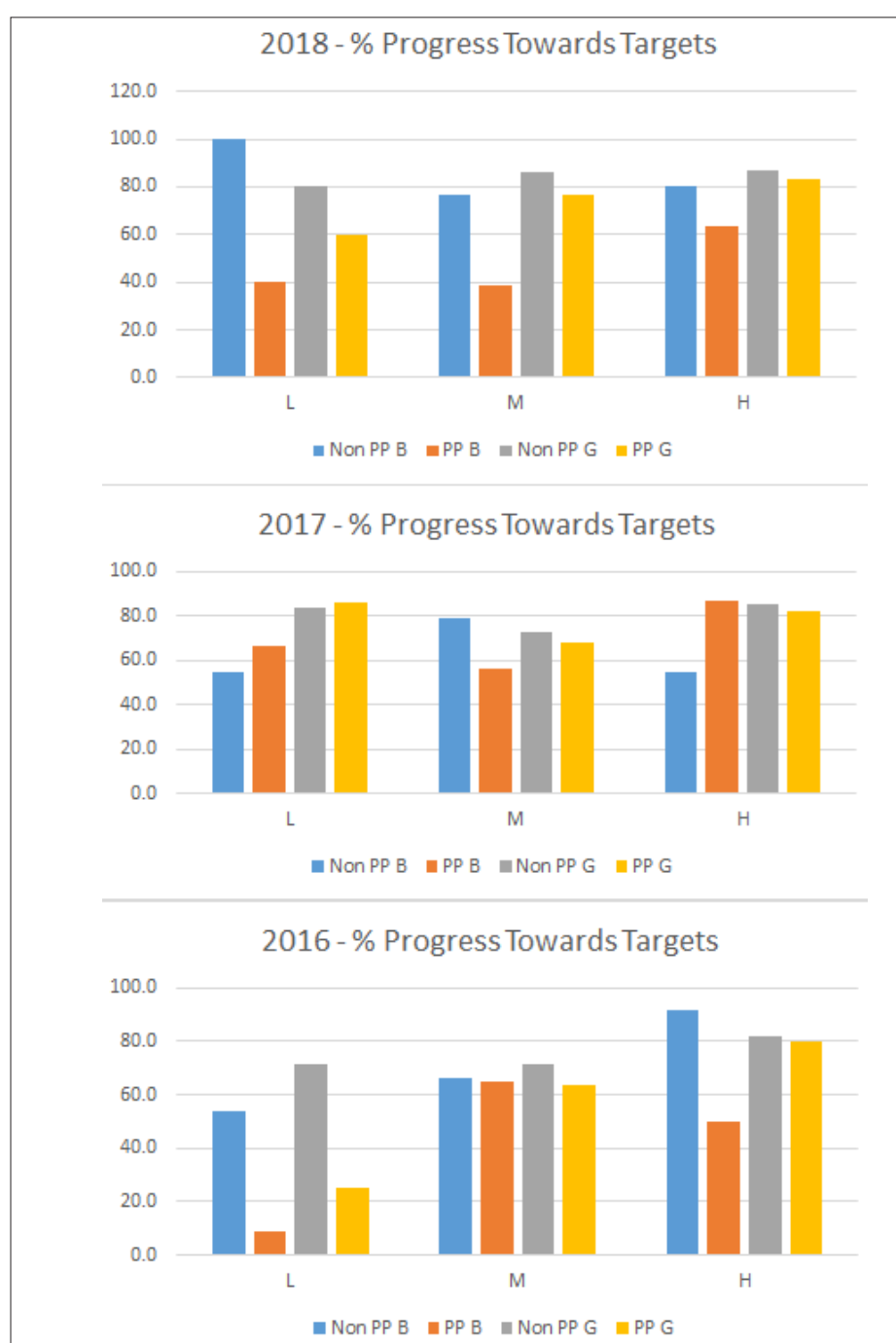

Figure 2: Prior attainment data. (PP: Pupil Premium; B: boys, G: girls.)

Figure 2 shows that in the high prior attainer group, high prior girls perform virtually equally to their peers whereas high prior boys seem to fluctuate. In terms of mid-prior attainers, once again girls perform close to their peers consistently, whereas boys tend to fluctuate once again. Finally, in the low prior attainer group, girls perform close to their peers in two out of three years, whereas boys underperform significantly in two out of three years.

From this data, we can identify underperformance particularly with boys within all attainment groups and particularly in low prior attainers. Girls on the other hand tend to perform in line or close to in line in the high and mid-prior attainer groups, but not in the low prior group. The initial findings from this analysis alone began to indicate that the attainment gap may be a more specific problem than we previously thought. However, there were still questions regarding the fluctuations in outcomes we wanted to address

Beyond the variables in the make-up of the disadvantaged cohort in any given year, there is another variable, the make-up of the non-disadvantaged cohort. As a result, we then decided to analyse the cohort make-up of the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged cohorts for these years.

Figure 3 demonstrates how varied cohorts compare to one another in any given year and over time. As we had identified from the attainment data analysis, a preponderance of groups, e.g. higher numbers of low prior boys, is likely to result in a negative attainment gap. We tested this theory and found the following. In 2017 when the school attained a close to zero gap, the disadvantaged cohort had 18.8% high prior boys and just 3.8% low prior boys. This seems to explain the evisceration of the gap that year. Conversely, the non-disadvantaged cohort had few high, with 6.9%, and more low prior attaining boys, with 16.9%. In 2016, when the school's
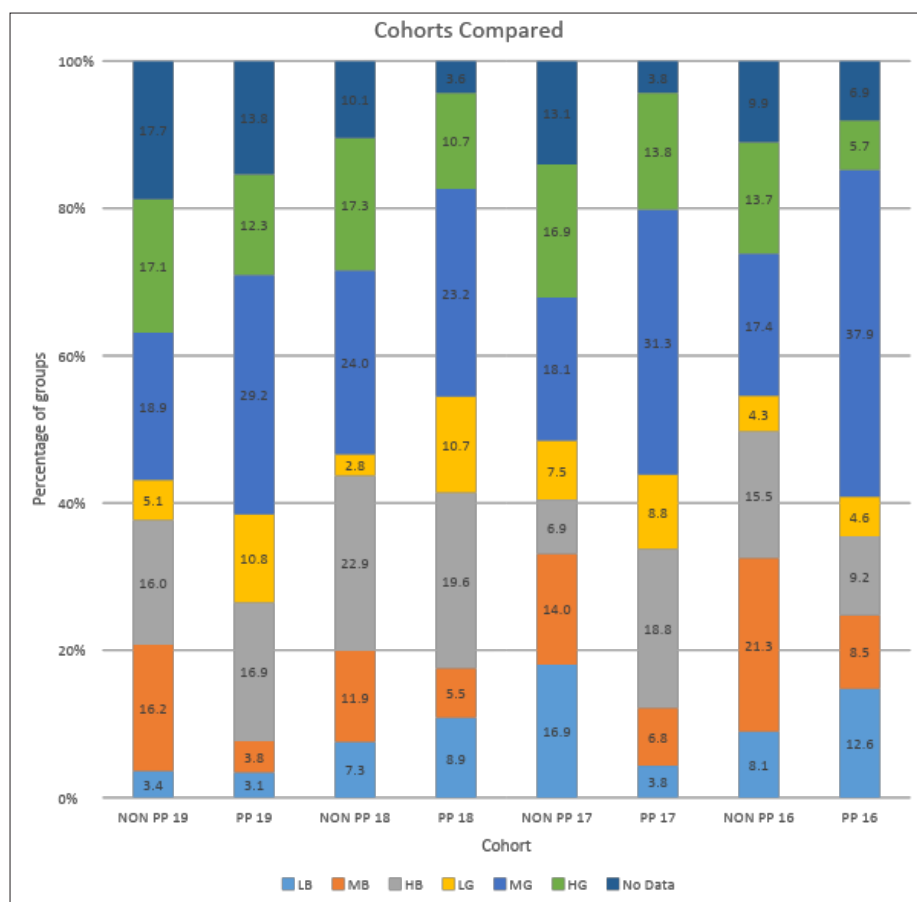
Figure 3: Cohort comparison data. (L: low prior, M: mid-prior, H: high prior; B: boys; G: girls.)

gap was greatest, these proportions were reversed, with just 9.2% high prior boys and 12.6% low prior attainer boys. The non-disadvantaged cohort once again had the opposite, with 15.5% high prior boys and 8.1% low prior boys.

This was our first significant finding. It appeared that our attainment gap was in part the result of our cohort and the ratio between high and low prior attainer boys. In addition, the relative make-up of the non-disadvantaged cohort compounded any gap. Whilst this did not fully explain the gap between the two cohorts, it helped us identify a locus of underperformance and more importantly an area to focus our literature review on more specifically.

INTERVENTION

HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THIS GAP?

Our intervention process began by identifying a sample group of students. We stratified a sample group of students which represented a cross section of the cohort including gender and prior ability ranges. Students were then informed of the project and consent was sought from and granted by parents. In addition, all students selected were identified as performing either slightly or significantly below targets and expectations, and thus might potentially benefit from intervention.

Before designing and delivering intervention, we needed to gather soft data on our sample group to ascertain their needs and the potential barriers that might be impacting their progress.

To do this, we created a detailed assessment form covering a range of potential factors that may impact performance including:

- Accessibility – numeracy, literacy and prior attainment

- Learning – effort, homework, preparation

- Beliefs – aspirations, expectations and qualities

- Commitment – attendance, punctuality, extracurricular activities

- Behaviour – self-regulation

- Resources – books, environment, Internet and equipment

- Support – parents evening, homework

- Health – sleep, diet, exercise

- Self-study – revision, study skills

We then interviewed each child and analysed the results collectively for patterns and individually. From doing this, we found some interesting patterns.

This specific set of students all had access to many, if not all, of the resources they needed such as computers and revision materials. This was in part due to the school's support in some areas. As a result, the conspicuous issue of material deprivation was either already being managed or not a particular issue with this group. Issues did arise on how much time was spent each week doing homework, with 70% only doing one to two hours per week. In addition, many students demonstrated a pronounced lack of understanding of what methods of study were most effective, with the majority responding that they used highlighting and rewriting notes as their primary study methods. This could in part explain the lack of time spent doing homework; students simply may not know what to do. However, the greatest challenges appeared to be on beliefs and aspirations. 70% of students said they had little if any idea as to a potential future career. In addition, when pressed, even more students said they did not have

a clear idea of a road map to achieve any goal. Finally, on an individual level, some students said they did not feel fully rested and did not have a good breakfast each morning.

As a result, we developed a programme aimed at supporting students to identify potential future careers and the steps necessary to achieve them. This segment was to be delivered by the careers teams over the course of the term. Each student would receive a dedicated slot to discuss their future career options for a minimum of an hour, or more if required.

In addition, we developed a programme for developing study skills based on learning to learn and VESPA. We decided to utilise sixth form students to introduce an element of one-to-one mentoring. Diligent and representative sixth formers were selected with the hope they would be able to connect more easily with their tutee and deliver a more empathetic approach, having gone through their GCSEs only recently. Students were to meet their mentee once a week for a half-term and thereafter each half-term.

At present, we are approaching the end of the first phase of this project. So what have we found so far?

OUTCOMES – WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT?

At present, we are still collating the findings and exit interviews with students; however, we have identified the following through data analysis, ongoing conversations with students and mentors as well as teachers:

ATTAINMENT

1. We have identified that the locus of our attainment gap is within low prior attainers.

2. In addition, low prior attaining boys are the most consistent and significant underperformers over several years.

3. Our attainment gap is compounded when the cohorts (disadvantaged vs non-disadvantaged) contain more or less of these groups in comparison to the other.

BARRIERS

4. The project has identified a particular weakness in the aspirations and career goals of at least some of our disadvantaged students.

5. The project has identified that these students also lack a good understanding of effective self-study skills, i.e. metacognition and revision.

INTERVENTION

6. Many Year 10 students initially fear support, viewing it as a judgment on them, and the social stigma attached.

7. Students enjoy and value the mentoring sessions once they begin.

8. Students feel that this, in combination with the careers interview, has helped them identify or clarify potential careers.

FUTURE

9. For this project to be most impactful, we will likely need to start in Year 7 and sustain this through students' entire school careers.

10. This conclusion is supported by the EEF who suggested that interventions that start early and are sustained are most likely to produce outcomes. ∎

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