

# Addressing the attainment gap through early intervention:

assessment of the first of a multi-year project

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This paper follows on from a previous paper where we identified issues with the way the attainment gap is calculated. We identified that to address this gap solely using academic research is unlikely to be effective and that schools also needed to conduct their own research to develop approaches that best meet the needs of their students. Furthermore, based on research from the Education Endowment Foundation and the Department for Education, we identified that the most effective approaches are ones that begin early, continue over the long term and meet the specific needs of students. Finally, based on research conducted within our school, we identified that our students' challenges centred primarily on issues relating to beliefs, self-study, health and support. As a result, we developed a multi-year mentoring project aimed at addressing these challenges. This paper discusses the initial findings after the first year of this multi-year project.

## KEYWORDS

DISADVANTAGE STUDENTS

PUPIL PREMIUM

ATTAINMENT GAP

INTERVENTION

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Pupil Premium funding marked a renewed focus by the UK government on addressing the disparities in educational outcomes between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Whilst funding for disadvantaged students has existed for many years, the introduction of Pupil Premium funding delegated decision-making on how this funding is spent directly to schools. As a result, schools have begun to utilise a range of 'out of the box' solutions

based on evidence from organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). However, some schools further along on this journey have begun to develop more bespoke approaches based on a mixture of published research and in-house research that aims to meet the specific needs of their students. Over the last few years, our school has followed a similar pattern, culminating in the development of a multi-year project aimed at addressing the specific challenges facing our students. This project leveraged a central finding

by the Department for Education report on Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils which noted that the most successful approaches were those that were specific to the needs of students and that began early and persisted over the long term (Macleod et al, 2015: 12). As a result, we developed a multi-year project and have now completed the first year of this project. This paper aims to provide a reflection on the progress made so far, challenges still remaining and what lessons can be taken forward.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers can be broken into two interrelated categories: the causes and the responses. I will now summarise the literature on each of these.

### CAUSES

Disadvantaged students are a subset of students, but who are more likely to be affected by certain challenges than their non-disadvantaged peers (Ahmed, 2020: 21). As a result, it is helpful to look at the factors that affect student performance in general before considering which of these factors are most likely to impact disadvantaged students. Furthermore, when considering the factors that impact student performance, it is useful to consider where these factors originate, eg within the home, school or community. This is because whilst it can be useful to identify factors schools are more directly able to influence, many factors are interrelated, so factors that may originate in one domain may still transfer to another and vice versa. We will now consider the different factors that impact student performance and their relative importance to student outcomes:

- In-school factors can account for up to 20% of student outcomes (Rasbash et al., 2010, p.4). This 20% can be divided equally between primary and secondary school, with each contributing 10% (Leckie & Goldstein, 2009: 838). In-school factors include teacher quality, which is thought to result in up to a 40% differential in learning (Sutton Trust, 2011: 2). In addition, the quality of schools and rate of staff turnover has been seen to impact student outcomes, with poorly performing schools tending to attract a lower quality of teacher (Allen et al., 2012: 2). Finally, teacher expectations, also known as the Pygmalion effect, have been shown to have a strong impact on student outcomes (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968: 443). This is because students who are

seen positively or negatively by teachers tend to manifest these expectations in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- Factors generated at the family and individual level contribute around 40% and 38% to students' outcomes (Rasbash et al., 2010, p.4). This includes factors such as those generated in utero where the exposure to cortisol due to maternal stress can adversely impact cognitive, behaviour and motor development (Aizer et al., 2012: 2). In addition, the impact of early environment such as pre-schooling can improve student self-control which is a key determiner in student outcomes (Goodman & Gregg, 2010: 51). This is because of the importance of the development of delayed gratification in a student's ability to make decisions to study over other possible activities or to delay these decisions until study tasks are completed. Finally, and linked to the previous factor, pupil effort has been shown to be linked to educational outcomes (Metcalf, 2011: 20).
- Finally, factors generated at community and neighbourhood level account for 3–4% of student outcomes. These factors include level of education of the community, crime levels and employment type and levels (Rasbash et al., 2010, p.4).

The above estimations provide a helpful breakdown of the relative importance of different factors in student outcomes. We would expect disadvantaged students to experience a higher degree of adverse experiences in some of these areas. However, knowing which areas specifically requires further examination. This leads us to potential approaches in identifying and addressing these areas.

### RESPONSES

In 2017, the EEF published a report on closing the attainment gap. This report provided a range of findings. The report highlighted the following:

1. What happens in the classroom makes the biggest difference. This suggests

what teachers do, or rather what teachers are empowered to do, makes the greatest difference.

2. Intervention that starts early shows the greatest promise. Therefore, potentially, by the time of secondary school a gap has often developed between students. Therefore, whatever schools do, it should be introduced as early as possible and for as sustained a period as possible (EEF, 2017).

Finally, as mentioned, attempting to identify the barriers to student performance requires specific understanding of the needs of our students. In his work *Narrowing the attainment gap*, Sobel suggests that 'hard data', ie school performance data, can only indicate a problem. To fully understand and address these challenges in a targeted manner, one needs to gather 'soft data' from the students themselves (Sobel, 2018). Finally, Sobel argues that we should treat disadvantaged students as we would Special Educational Needs Department (SEND) students, whereby we acknowledge a shared set of potential challenges, but each individual child will experience their own unique challenges. In this sense, we should not treat disadvantaged students as simply homogeneous.

## RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

We developed our project in three stages; defining our aims, identifying the challenges experienced by our students and then formulating our response. I will now discuss each of these in turn.

### AIMS

Having surveyed the literature on factors affecting pupil performance and specifically disadvantaged students, we identified and were guided by three key principles. These were:

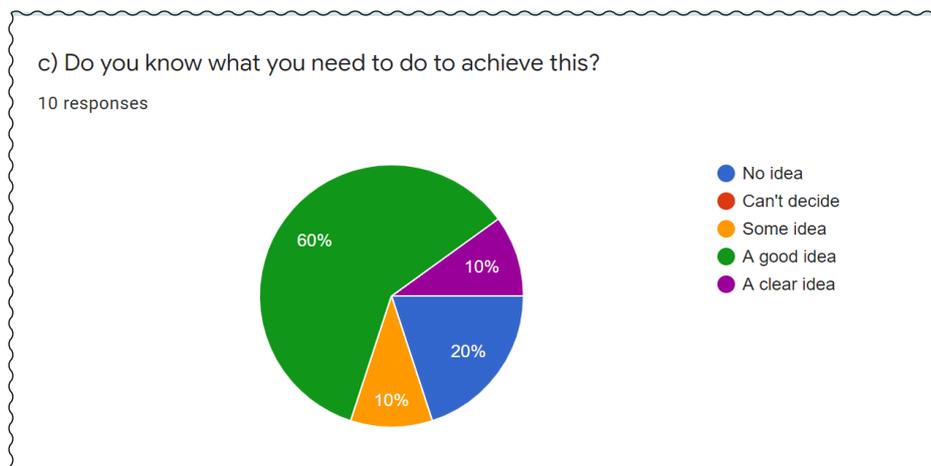
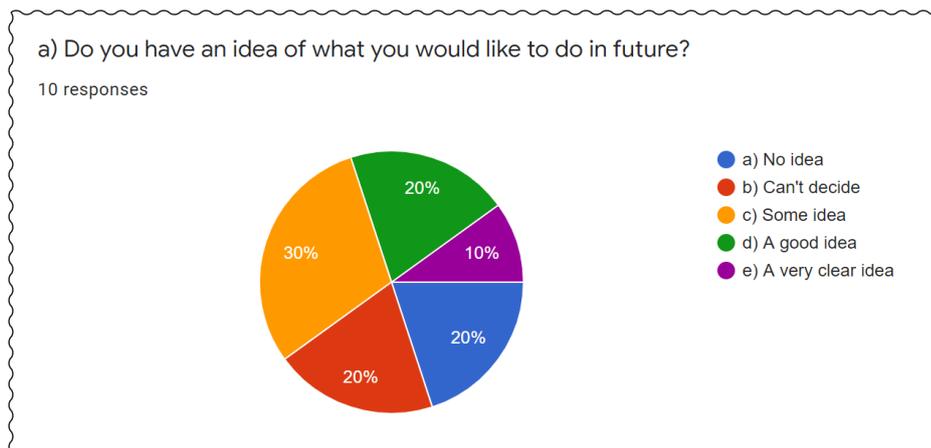
1. To be research-informed
2. To be long-term
3. To be targeted

### CHALLENGES

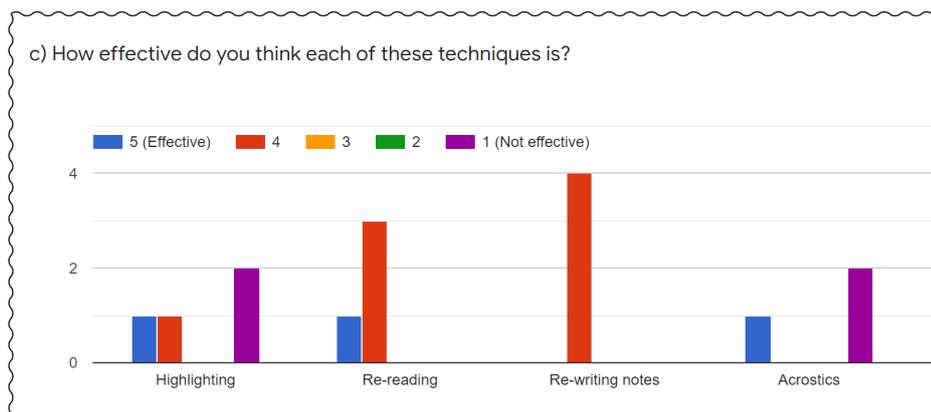
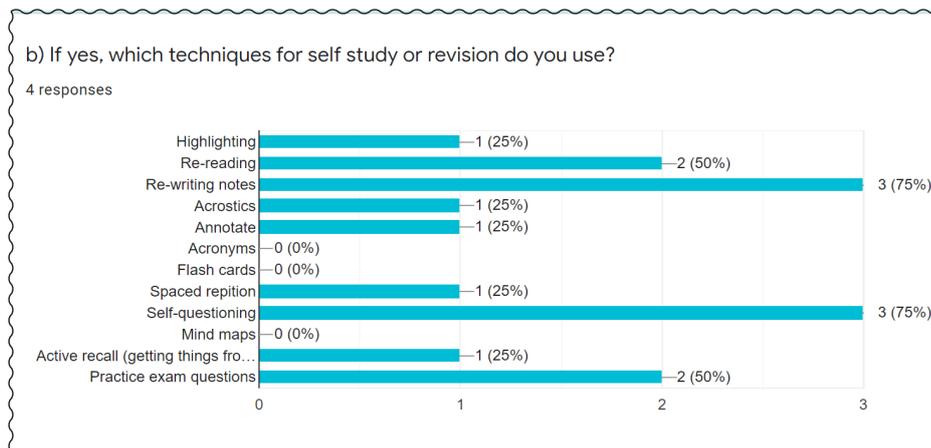
The aim of being research-informed was partially achieved by completing the literature review. However, this only presented a range of possible causes. To identify the specific challenges our students faced, further research was needed. This included collecting data from four sources, students, staff, parents and data. We achieved this by conducting a series of face-to-face interviews with a group of Year 10 disadvantaged students. These students had been involved in a pilot project the previous year and our hope was they would be more capable of revealing insights into the challenges they may have faced through their school careers up until this point. The interviews involved a range of questions aimed at identifying what if any needs students had and whether there were any patterns we could identify. We then repeated this interview with parents and teachers and triangulated the results with school data to identify patterns of challenges experienced by our students. Finally, the interviews were structured to cover the following nine areas:

1. Accessibility – Prior attainment, literacy, and numeracy
2. Learning – Effort, homework, and preparation
3. Beliefs – Aspirations, expectations, and qualities
4. Commitment – Attendance, punctuality, extracurricular activities
5. Behaviour – Self-regulation and metacognition
6. Resources – Books, environment, internet, and equipment
7. Support – Parents evening, accessibility, support on homework
8. Health – Sleep, diet, and exercise
9. Self-study – Revision and study skills

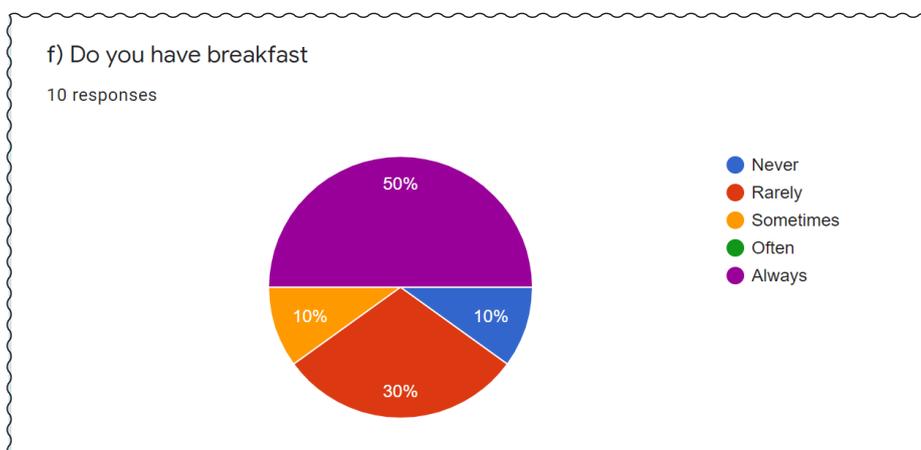
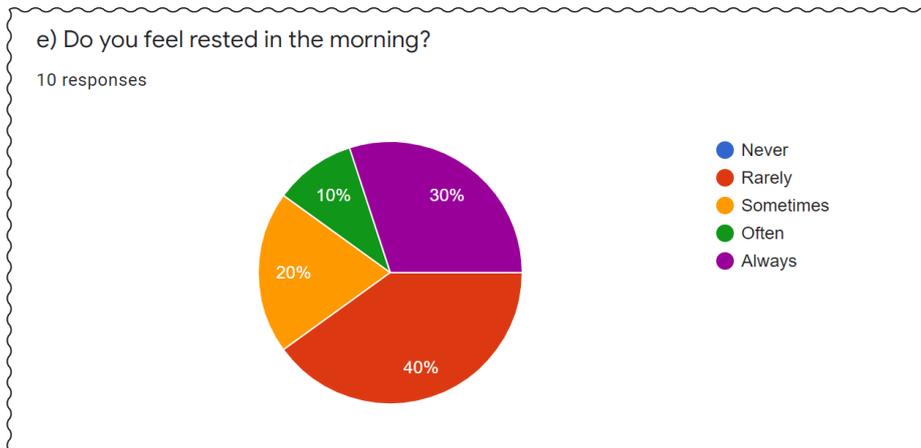
From our research, we identified specific challenges with ‘Beliefs’, ‘Self-study’, ‘Health’ and ‘Support’. Firstly, with regard to beliefs, whilst many students suggested they had an idea of what they would like to do in future, there was a discrepancy with their understanding of what was required to achieve this.



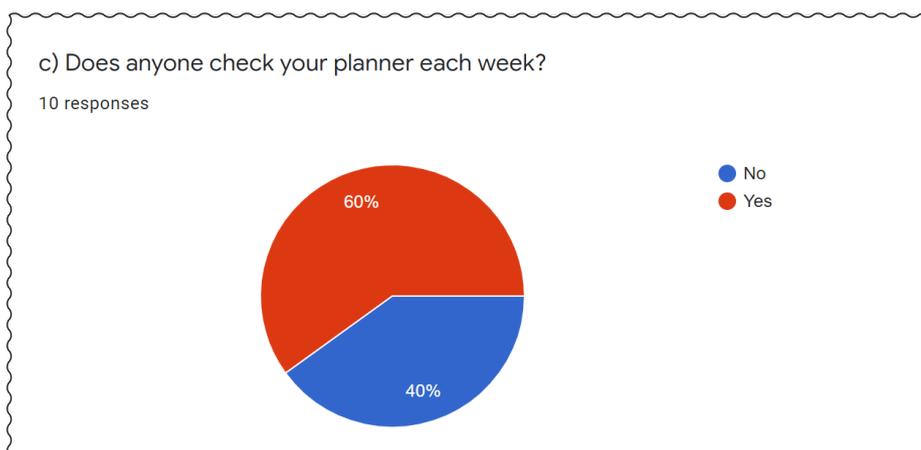
Secondly, with regard to self-study, students indicated a lack of understanding on how to engage in self-directed study and what approaches are most likely to be effective.



With regard to health, some students reported rarely feeling rested and some not having breakfast before school.



Finally, students reported not always having their planners checked to help them keep on top of home learning, as well as limited options for direct support from parents with homework.



**RESPONSES**

With our project focusing on the new intake of Year 7 students, several of the challenges would have yet to present themselves. However, the school had already made provisions to address the issues of breakfast and rest through meetings with parents during the induction process. In addition, parental involvement tends to start strong and lessen over time. This left key areas of focus: aspirations, self-study and support. To address these, we developed a mentoring programme that aimed to support vulnerable learners early on and supported them throughout their school journey. Students were paired with a sixth-form mentor and met weekly. Each year

of the programme is intended to focus on a different element pertinent to the needs of the students at that time. The programme therefore included the following stages:

Year	Aim	Skills	Phases
7	Goal – Identify and set your goal	Research Evaluation Presentation	Capture – Careers interview Clarify – Create profiles Organise – Rank order Review – Justify why Engage – SLT presentation
8	Plan – Create a roadmap to for your goal	Planning Consulting Acting	Research – Requirements Roadmap – Draft plan Present – To stakeholders Commit – Finalise plan Action – Select options
9	Skills – Develop the skills you need to achieve your goal	Effort Time management Self-regulation	Effort – How much is needed Metacognition Systems – How to study Practice – When to study Attitude – What mindset is needed Trial – Find out what works
10	Experience – Gain experience of your goal to increase motivation	Perseverance Initiative Communication	Identify – Placement Contact – Employer Arrange – Placement Attend – Work Review – What did you learn?
11	Deliver – The results and progress toward your goal	Managing pressure Metacognition Self-regulation	Review – Current progress Identify – What needs to be done Plan – Make final battle plan Action – Follow through Share – Mentor a Year 7

The key findings of our first year are explored in more detail further below.

## INITIAL FINDINGS

As a result of the weekly sessions, students reported a significant change in their clarity on future goals. Of the 17 students enrolled on the programme, 14 reported that they had either moved from having no or some idea of potential future goals, to having clear to very clear goals. The remaining three students noted no change in their goals due to already having clarity. However, in addition to goal-setting, all 17 students responded to have greater clarity on the route to achieving these goals including the three respondents who noted no change in their goals. This demonstrated the core goal had been achieved at least in part. In terms of self-study, the results were more mixed. Eight of the 17 students

responded to having greater clarity on the most effective methods for studying. Most significantly, these students were able to identify which methods were most likely to aid learning and had utilised these methods at some point over the course of the year. Nonetheless, this remains an area of further development and one that should continue to develop as students approach Key Stage 4.

The intention of using sixth-form mentors has been to provide students with a role model, point of contact and empathetic presence that remains a constant through their first year in school. Of the 17 students 16 responded positively to the support of their mentor. Furthermore, the use of the mentor enables students to keep on top of homework, planning,

as well as troubleshooting issues before they result in negative consequences. This simple model of problem-solving has been of value, with mentors accompanying mentees to teachers at points to address and resolve issues which students may otherwise not. Finally, with regard to health, the present cohort of Year 7 students have reported lower levels of issues related to tiredness or hunger. This is in part due to their level of development as well as the school's insistence on ensuring students are fed through a before-school breakfast club.

## REMAINING CHALLENGES

Our school data suggests that student attendance falls as students' progress through their school journeys. Why this happens is not entirely clear at present. In part a lack of goal focus could be contributing to this. As a result, the development of a goal at Year 7 may help to mitigate this. Nonetheless, continued progress towards achieving this goal will also hopefully motivate students to continue progressing and attending. However, further in-school research is needed to identify the reasons for the increase in absence and poor attendance in later years. Finally, attendance is a key contributor to student outcomes in schools and for this project to succeed. As a result, careful attention will have to continue to be paid to ensuring students attend consistently or there is potential for the initial gains to be lost.

A further ongoing challenge has been that of educating students in person and remotely at different points in the year. This has meant that during parts of the year we were hampered due to the need to transfer mentoring to online platforms. This created logistical and technical issues which could not always be easily resolved. As a result, for projects like this to work, they will have to ensure all students have internet access and devices or provide an opportunity for limited numbers of students to attend on site without compromising Covid restrictions.

Furthermore, the opportunity for the allocated time to be lost increases with the introduction of technology that can fail for many reasons. As a result, finding the most robust methods that enable time to be used effectively, and safety to be maintained always, will be essential going forward.

The decision to utilise sixth-form mentors has a significant potential challenge which is that sixth-form mentors will depart after two years. This could potentially undermine the progress made so far that has been built on strong relationships fostered over the first two years. In addition, with disadvantaged students more likely to struggle with relationships, this could have serious impacts on the success of the project. As a result, students will need to be prepared for the likelihood of a transition to either a new mentor or, where appropriate, for students who have developed enough to become mentors themselves. This will need to be done sensitively to not undermine the ongoing working relationships students have developed. At present this has not been decided, but with students entering their second year now, we will need to begin to plan for this shortly.

Finally, ongoing engagement of students and stakeholders is vital. Given the long-term nature of the project, there is potential for the project to be viewed as perfunctory by students. At present, students view the sessions as supportive and without stigma. However, as they develop and become more conscious of peer pressure and influence, the sessions may acquire a negative association. As a result, students may be less willing to engage in something their peers are not. Finally, the duration of the project could come to be viewed as onerous and too much of a commitment, causing students to either fade in interest or actively choose to withdraw themselves. As a result, ensuring the exercises and tasks are varied, as well as celebrating success and effort, will be key in encouraging continued participation.

## CONCLUSION

We began this project with the intention of taking what we had learnt from our previous investigation into the attainment gap and applying it to our school context. Our vision has been to develop an approach that is grounded in academic research and is focused by our school-based research. As a result, we developed an approach to the attainment gap that is intended to work over the duration of a student's school career and that specifically addresses the challenges of goal creation and providing support, amongst other challenges. At the end of our first year, our results indicate students have responded well to this project, with the majority reacting positively to having created goals to aspire to. In addition, students have welcomed the support of a sixth-form mentor to aid them with this project and more broadly. However, despite these successes, there remain several ongoing challenges, each of which requires continued attention to ensure these early positive gains are maintained and this long-term project yields long-term impacts that compound over time.



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