

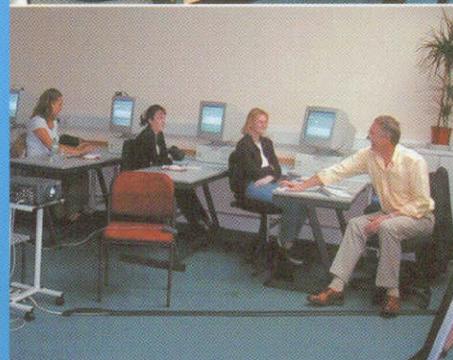


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# High Performing Specialist Schools: What Makes the Difference?



April 2002

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Aims and Objectives

This summary sets out the major findings of an NFER project investigating the success factors underlying high performance in Specialist Schools, based on fieldwork in 20 case-study schools. The study had the following main aim:

- ◆ the identification of those features of schools' practices and characteristics which appear to make a significant difference in terms of student performance gains, in a sample of high-performing and improving Specialist Schools.

## Main Fieldwork Findings – Identifying Success Factors

In each of the 20 featured schools, the research team interviewed, in most cases, the headteacher, one or two senior managers, two heads of department, a governor, two classroom teachers, and two student groups. The interview schedules featured open-ended questions, asking respondents what they felt were the main success factors in their own schools. The responses to these questions were categorised under the following broad headings:

- ◆ high-quality teachers and teaching
- ◆ school ethos and culture
- ◆ monitoring and evaluation
- ◆ leadership and management
- ◆ curriculum improvements
- ◆ extra-curricular activities
- ◆ resources.

**High-quality Teachers and Teaching** A strong theme in many case-study schools was the importance of high-quality teachers and teaching to the achievement of whole-school success. This point was made by senior staff, students and teachers alike, whose comments suggested that dedicated teachers, carefully-focused teaching strategies and changes to class size and composition can be influential upon performance gains. The interview data also suggested that improvements in teaching had been facilitated by certain organisational factors such as careful recruitment, quality assurance schemes, and support for teachers to focus on teaching and to share good practice.

**School Ethos and Culture** The detailed case-study research confirmed the importance of school ethos and provided the opportunity to further 'unpack' this success factor. In all, 20 of the case-study schools, headteachers, members of staff and students emphasised that they worked and studied in schools, where high expectations were present and the ethos of success was accepted by all, including parents. On being asked what general advice members of staff would give to schools that had just taken on Specialist status, the need to adopt a whole-school approach was identified as key.

**Monitoring and Evaluation** Comments from the interviewees, especially from headteachers and senior managers in the 20 case-study schools, suggested that these institutions, without exception, were well advanced in terms of applying systems of monitoring and evaluation and in making active use of performance data. The interview data suggested that the following aspects of monitoring and evaluation were important:

- ◆ detailed use of value-added data
- ◆ data used and not just collected
- ◆ regularity in tracking student progress
- ◆ student involvement in data use
- ◆ monitoring and evaluation of staff and increased accountability.

**Leadership and Management** The need for an effective approach to leadership and management was identified as an important aspect of success in all of the case-study schools. Headteachers were described by their staff in a number of ways:

- ◆ all displayed self-belief in understanding how to improve their own schools;
- ◆ all were very focused on their goals and committed to bringing about success (however that was measured) in their schools;
- ◆ more than half the headteachers featured were considered somewhat unconventional in their approach;
- ◆ a common feature was the approachability of headteachers – enabling new ideas, generated by management teams and teaching staff, to be taken on board;
- ◆ all had experience in securing extra funding for their schools, from a number of different sources.

It did not matter whether the school was urban or rural, in a deprived context or in a socially advantaged location, the vision of the headteacher appeared to be a critical factor in the school's success. Usually this vision was shared amongst senior managers and teaching staff.

**Curriculum Improvements** Staff in several of the case-study schools saw curriculum improvements (or '*curriculum freedom*') as an important factor behind their performance gains. These improvements included:

- ◆ **curriculum extension** – the provision of new courses beyond the existing curriculum;
- ◆ **curriculum change** – the introduction of new cross-curricular dimensions within the existing curriculum;
- ◆ **curriculum tailoring** – the modification of the existing curriculum for particular students' needs.

**Extra-curricular Activities** The 20 case-study schools had well-developed programmes of extra-curricular activities for their students to take part in. The types of activities schools had made available to their students were wide ranging and took place before, during and after school hours. Interviewees felt that taking part in activities outside the regular curriculum helped to:

- ◆ improve students' confidence and self-esteem;

- ◆ motivate students and raise their expectations;
- ◆ contribute to the ethos and culture of the school;
- ◆ ease the transition from primary to secondary school.

**Resources** All the case study schools visited by the research team had benefited from one or more of the following extra resources within the school:

- ◆ construction or modification of new on-site buildings and facilities – these included ICT suites, maths and science blocks and sports halls;
- ◆ extra staffing and the ability to offer more competitive salaries for more experienced, qualified staff;
- ◆ provision of new ICT equipment, including personal computers, laptops for teachers and students and new software.

### What makes the Difference?

There has already been some work on the identification of the factors or characteristics that represent best practice in Specialist Schools (Tooley and Howes, 1999; Gillmon, 2000; Wicksted and Hagen, 2001). Some of these previously identified habits or characteristics resonate with what the present study found, but the research also indicated a need to go beyond the ‘key characteristics’ approach. The NFER team reflected on the question of ‘what really makes the difference?’ and identified a number of recurring success factors as highlighted by interviewees. These were:

- ◆ interconnectedness
- ◆ whole-school ethos
- ◆ management styles
- ◆ teachers going the extra mile
- ◆ innovative use of staffing
- ◆ active use of performance data
- ◆ a focus on the individual
- ◆ a broad and flexible curriculum
- ◆ resources and status.

**Interconnectedness** The need for all the various essential factors to be implemented together, in a coherent and ‘joined up’ way, is in itself one of the most important requirements for a Specialist School to be successful. The managers of these schools have to achieve a balance between the broad aspects of a ‘school system’ and a focus on the individual student. Achieving this balance, and appreciating the interconnectedness of the various strands of school improvement, may be the key to sustaining success. Despite the difficulties with this term, it is important to recognise the significance of interconnectedness. It is about the whole being more than the sum of its parts. The basic message from the interviewees was that the success of a school does not simply depend on putting in place a number of easily identifiable strategies or a checklist of required activities: there is no simple ‘recipe’ for success. There is a need to move from a ‘shopping list’ of success factors towards whole-school approaches, multiplicity of inputs, integrated vision and wider implementation. The headteachers at the case-study schools had to be multi-skilled and had to constantly keep in mind ‘the whole picture’. All the factors

listed above have to be pulled together into a coherent whole to produce an institution that *'buzzes'* with success.

**Whole-school Ethos** Sometimes the whole-school ethos is the 'glue' that brings about the interconnectedness described above. Our study found evidence that in high-performing schools there usually exists a positive, definable ethos that permeates the entire institution from top to bottom. This will involve things such as *'superb student – teacher relations'*, *'a shared sense of vision'* and *'genuine working together'*. Several respondents stressed linkages between the academic and the pastoral, and there were ways of doing things that were agreed at all levels of the school: for example, walking between lessons, writing down targets, talking to visitors and so on.

**Management Styles** This was, in some respects, not a particularly new finding, though some of the strategies being used by headteachers were definitely innovative. What does strong leadership actually mean in the context of a Specialist School? In the case-study schools, there generally appeared to be a democratic and facilitative kind of leadership. A very successful Specialist School has to have clear leadership, but also there must be a framework where teachers (and even students) can contribute new ideas. In particular there must be *'vision'* and what headteachers called *'spirit'* or *'energy'*. Some of the headteachers deliberately, and justifiably, presented themselves as being radical and innovative. Two principals, for example, described themselves as being *'maverick'* in their approach to leadership. One of these said that Specialist School managers *'should always be looking at what's on the horizon'*. Generally, these headteachers seemed to be particularly good at involving themselves in initiatives, at networking and at identifying what comes next and what is *'round the corner'* in terms of school improvement.

**Teachers 'Going the Extra Mile'** Without exception, the senior managers interviewed were positive about the quality and commitment of their teaching staff. It was not just that these schools had good-quality classroom teachers – they appeared to have teachers who were highly professional, vibrant, enthusiastic and inventive. Teachers, including, in some cases, Advanced Skills Teachers, demonstrated their enthusiasm by making themselves available to help students, by presenting lessons in a variety of ways (often using new technology) and by voluntarily devoting many extra hours to extra-curricular activities, revision classes, and so on. One senior interviewee said *'they don't just go the extra mile; they go for an extra three miles!'*

**Innovative Use of Staffing** In several schools, the skilful use of support staff was in evidence and was commented upon. Many of the administrative, preparatory and bureaucratic tasks of classroom work had been taken over by support and technical staff, *'leaving teachers free to teach'*. This contributed to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. The headteachers of schools where this was happening gave their support staff training and relatively high status. These staff were encouraged to make full contributions to, and to be fully involved in, the life of the school.

**Active Use of Performance Data** Sophisticated monitoring and evaluation systems were in place in all of the schools featured. These included, in most cases, the use of value-added data, generated by the school itself, by the LEA, or

as a 'bought in' package. Not only were systems in place, there was also a good deal of evidence to show that these were in active, regular use, and that monitoring was feeding directly into teaching and learning. Staff at a variety of levels were involved in these processes as, in many cases, were the students themselves. As a result of this, accountability became more prominent within these schools.

**A focus on the individual** The case studies included some of the largest schools in the country, and 12 of the schools featured had over a thousand pupils on roll. In this kind of environment it is very easy for students to be 'lost' to the system. In all the case-study schools, however, measures were in place to ensure that individual students did not become anonymous. These included academic and pastoral mentoring, regular consultations with staff, house systems and a variety of extra-curricular opportunities. The student discussions indicated that generally these young people felt that most, if not all, of their needs were being met by the school. Their teachers treated them with respect and acknowledged their individual needs.

**A Broad and Flexible Curriculum (and Extra-curriculum)** Several headteachers, and a number of other respondents, stressed the importance of giving students a wide range of learning experiences and of the need for flexibility in the curriculum. Flexibility and variety were manifested not just in the formal curriculum on offer, but also in the number of extra-curricular activities available and in the provision of additional subjects, such as GNVQ Information Technology, an extra language, music, drama, art or physical education. In some of the schools, ICT, in particular, was being used across the curriculum in very innovative ways. Having a range of activities enabled the students to develop their confidence levels and extend their interpersonal skills.

**Resources and Status** Many of the senior managers acknowledged the importance of extra funding, saying things along the lines of '*funding obviously helps*'. Often the extra money acquired through the achievement of Specialist status was for capital projects, such as the building of a sports hall, or the installation of an ICT network, but funding was also used for staffing – for example, for the employment of Advanced Skills Teachers, Sports Development Officers, extra technicians and so on. In addition, many respondents said that the new *status* was important. This was not just a case of having a plaque on the wall: it was about improving community standing, working with others and sharing best practice. Some respondents said that the community status of the school was even more important than the funding.

## Conclusion

These were some of the most important 'success' factors identified by Specialist School headteachers, staff and students. It must be stressed once more, however, as is now well established in school improvement research, that there are no easy solutions, no 'quick fixes' and no instant recipes for success, even for schools of this quality. One of the main ingredients of success in any school is the continued hard work of staff and students, and the interconnectedness of all these activities. Without these key ingredients, the other factors listed are unlikely to make any significant impact.

### ***A Note on Methodology***

A number of strategies were used to select the sample of 20 case-study schools and to identify the factors underlying their success. The starting point was the work of Jesson which showed that Specialist Schools were adding value at cohort level by achieving higher GCSE results than their key stage 3 results would predict (see Jesson and Taylor, 2000; 2001). Using a ranking exercise, **ten** of the highest-performing (i.e. those with the biggest increases in value-added scores) or fastest-improving schools were selected from the top end of Jesson's original list of 389 high-performing Specialist Schools and detailed fieldwork was carried out in these ten schools in June and July 2001. Then, in order to test out whether the results from this first stage of fieldwork were replicated in a broader range of Specialist Schools, particularly those which were located in less favourable circumstances (e.g. higher free school meal eligibility), a second ranked sample of **ten** further Specialist Schools was drawn from Jesson's list. These were visited by the NFER team in December 2001 and early January 2002.

The overall sample of 20 schools included 12 technology schools, three language schools, three sports colleges and two performing arts schools. The number of years that schools had had Specialist status varied, ranging from two to seven years. Fourteen of the 20 schools were designated as community schools, three were foundation schools, two were voluntary aided and one was a city technology college. Eighteen were mixed-sex schools and two were girls' schools.

A scrutiny of OFSTED inspection reports for these 20 schools was carried out and an exploratory telephone interview schedule was devised. Telephone interviews were conducted with ten of the headteachers, giving them an opportunity to talk about how the school had chosen its particular specialism, how this fitted with the local context, how the specialism was implemented across the school and what success factors they would identify. The final and major stage of the methodology was based on detailed case-study visits. Two researchers visited each of the 20 schools, usually spending an entire day in the school and carrying out between six and 12 in-depth, face-to-face interviews. In total, 149 adults were interviewed (in most cases individually), along with 172 students (in small discussion groups).



# 1. INTRODUCTION: HIGH-PERFORMING SPECIALIST SCHOOLS

## 1.1 Aims and Objectives of the Project

This report sets out the findings of an NFER project investigating the success factors underlying high performance in Specialist Schools. The study had the following main aims:

- ◆ the identification of those features of schools' practices and characteristics which appear to make a significant difference in terms of student performance gains, in a sample of high-performing and improving Specialist Schools;
- ◆ to apply the knowledge learned by providing ideas and recommendations that would be useful in further developing the 'tool kit' that the Technology Colleges Trust is currently devising for schools. The aim is that these ideas should help Specialist Schools to adopt effective strategies for raising and sustaining students' performance.

This report complements the work carried out by Jesson which has shown, through value-added analyses from key stage 3 to key stage 4, that Specialist Schools have made some of the strongest performance gains of all comprehensives (Jesson and Taylor, 2000; 2001). In addition, he has shown that Specialist Schools have similar intakes to (other) comprehensive schools, where intake ability has been assessed on the basis of key stage 2 test scores.

Jesson's work shows how much value these schools have been adding to their students' examination and test performance. It is also necessary, however, to investigate *how* these schools have achieved this level of success. Qualitative work is therefore necessary to 'get beyond' the quantitative profiles of these high-performing and improving schools and to elaborate on the factors behind their success.<sup>1</sup>

This project takes account of previous qualitative work carried out in this area, notably the work of Tooley and Howes (1999) and Gillmon (2000). These studies identified, respectively, 'the seven habits' of highly effective schools, and 11 'key characteristics' that impact upon teaching and learning in Specialist Schools.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The NFER team has worked closely with Professor David Jesson to ensure that the quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used in a mutually consistent way.

<sup>2</sup> The contributions of these authors are discussed in Section 4.1 and are related to the findings of this study at various points in Chapters 4 and 5.

This report builds upon the previous work, drawing upon interview evidence derived from detailed case-study work, and discusses the degree of overlap between the characteristics thus identified and those previously identified. The interviews were carried out in an objectively-selected sample of high-performing Specialist Schools, and NFER researchers went into these schools with an open agenda in an attempt to find out ‘what makes the difference’?

## 1.2 The Specialist Schools Programme

In recent months, Specialist Schools have received a good deal of attention from policy makers. The Green Paper, *Schools Building on Success* (DfEE, 2001) and the White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success* (England. Parliament. HoC, 2001) have signalled the Government’s intention to increase the number of Specialist Schools as a way of promoting diversity and raising standards in the secondary sector.

Shortly after the 2001 general election, the new Secretary of State for Education indicated that the expansion in the number of Specialist Schools ‘*emphasises our commitment to deliver a first rate secondary school system*’ (DfES, 2001).

At present (February 2002), there are 850 Specialist Schools, including 409 technology colleges, 141 language colleges, 141 sports colleges and 143 arts colleges.

There are plans to increase the number of Specialist Schools, by 2005, to 1,500. This is ‘*not a ceiling, so that over time all schools that are ready and wish to become Specialist Schools can do so*’ (DfES, 2001). The newly created Specialist Schools include many schools in *Excellence in Cities* areas and there are plans to link ‘struggling schools’ with neighbouring Specialist Schools, so that new types of partnerships can be forged and the benefits of Specialist status can be shared around (Garner, 2001).

Although the numbers of Specialist Schools are expanding rapidly, there are several criteria that have to be met before a school can take on this status. The school must have a detailed four-year development plan, with ‘*measurable targets in teaching and learning in the specialist subject area*’ – as well as in other subjects – and must be able to raise £50,000 sponsorship. In return, they receive a one-time £100,000 capital grant and £123 for each student per year (initially for four years). There are proposals for the introduction of four new specialisms (DfES, 2001):

- ◆ Business and Enterprise
- ◆ Science
- ◆ Engineering
- ◆ Mathematics and Computing.

The aims of Specialist Schools can be summarised as follows:

- ◆ to raise standards of teaching and learning in their particular specialism, as well as overall standards;
- ◆ to extend the range of opportunities available to students which best meets their needs;
- ◆ to benefit other schools in the area – schools have to show in their bids how they will develop existing links with local primary and secondary schools;
- ◆ to strengthen links with private and/or charitable sector sponsors – sponsors are not only to provide schools with cash or goods, but also to take an ongoing role in the development of the school;
- ◆ to develop a visible technology/arts/sports/languages/other specialist character;
- ◆ to ensure pupils and parents understand what a Specialist School education means;
- ◆ to develop a broad ethos in the specialism – using the specialism imaginatively to raise standards of teaching and learning in the related subjects;
- ◆ to be involved in national initiatives which are relevant to their specialism for their own pupils and those in partner schools;
- ◆ to develop and disseminate good practice to share with other schools and the wider community;
- ◆ to provide educational opportunities to explore and use a range of learning experiences for members of the wider community.

Nearly all Specialist Schools are comprehensives. However, they can select up to ten per cent of pupils by aptitude in the relevant specialism, as long as this process is not used to select on the basis of general academic ability. In practice, only a small proportion use this type of selection mechanism. Note, in addition, that Specialist Schools can also be involved in other initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.3 Structure of the Report

This report presents the findings from a progressively-focused study concerned to gain an insight into the major success factors of Specialist Schools and the ways in which these are related. It moves from the quantitative ranking of 50 high-performing Specialist Schools, to the selection of a sample of 20 schools for Phase One of the NFER investigations. It then provides information on the selection of ten high-performing schools and ten schools with high value-added scores and high levels of entitlement to free school meals. These were the basis of detailed, qualitative fieldwork investigations (Phases Two and Three). The study has been based on objective sampling of high-performing schools, the rigorous use of research techniques, and an ‘open’ approach that has allowed

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<sup>3</sup> For example, four of the ten case-study schools featured in the fieldwork phase of this project were also Beacon Schools.

those involved in Specialist Schools to make their own identifications and expressions of what they think has made their school successful.

The report is structured as follows. The next chapter briefly sets out the methodology of the project. Chapter 3 presents the detailed findings from Phase One of the study, which was based primarily on the analysis of OFSTED reports and telephone interviews with the headteachers of the first 20 selected schools. The main findings of Phases Two and Three, the detailed fieldwork phase of the study, are presented in Chapter 4, under a number of headings related to aspects of school development:

- ◆ teaching and teachers
- ◆ culture and ethos
- ◆ monitoring and evaluation
- ◆ leadership and management
- ◆ the curriculum
- ◆ extra-curricular activities
- ◆ resources.

The 'voices' of school staff and students are very strong in this chapter: their insights, based upon their day-to-day experiences of being a high-performing Specialist School, are central to this chapter. This layout enables the reader to look at particular areas of school activity and to examine the evidence in some detail. It also allows consideration of what these schools have always been doing well and what they are doing that is new in terms of school improvement and school effectiveness. Case studies based on particular schools are provided so that it is possible to have a picture of how the various school improvement activities 'came together' in particular school contexts. This chapter also includes discussion of the findings in the light of previous research.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, makes an overall assessment of the evidence and outlines the major success factors identified during the course of this project. It shows that there are a number of important positive factors that do not operate in isolation, but need to be pulled together, in an interconnected way, for the benefit of the whole school and the local community.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The starting point for this project was the work of Jesson (Jesson and Taylor, 2000; 2001) which shows that Specialist Schools are adding value by achieving higher GCSE results than their key stage 3 results would predict. He also examined the key stage 2 results of certain types of schools and found that the average key stage 2 test points per student for Specialist Schools were similar to those achieved by students entering all other comprehensive schools. This means that the better performance of Specialist Schools at GCSE, compared to that in other comprehensives, is not dependent upon Specialist Schools selecting more able cohorts. Specialist School staff and students were said to be achieving better examination outcomes than staff and students in other comprehensive schools, despite the students having the same broad levels of ability upon entry to secondary education at age 11.

As Jesson stated, although Specialist School designation was originally restricted to grant-maintained and voluntary schools, the extension of the programme in recent years has recruited schools from a wider range of contexts. Few Specialist Schools make use of the provision to select pupils by ability; and Specialist Schools have, over the years, become more representative of the national distribution of maintained comprehensive schools.

Jesson's specific findings included the following:

1. A number of inner-city Specialist Schools in disadvantaged areas with high free school meal eligibility performed well, with high value-added scores.
2. More than twice as many Specialist Schools achieved the highest (A\*) value-added Benchmark grades than all other comprehensive schools. Well over one-third of Specialist Schools were placed in the top two categories (A/A\*) of value-added performance compared with under a quarter for all other comprehensive schools.
3. Under half as many Specialist Schools were placed in the lowest (E\*) grade in the value-added Benchmark tables compared to all other comprehensive schools.

### 2.1 Strategy to Select the Case-study Schools

This subsection outlines the various phases used in selection of the case-study schools, which included:

- ◆ iterative scoring and ranking using David Jesson's value-added data
- ◆ analysis of OFSTED reports
- ◆ telephone interviews.

The first stage in the project methodology was to reduce Jesson's list of 389 high-performing Specialist Schools to a manageable number for more detailed investigations, to be carried out by the NFER team. To begin with, the 'top' 50 schools from Jesson's list were reduced to 20: these were a combination of the highest-performing schools (i.e. those with the biggest increases in value-added scores) or the fastest-improving schools. Full details of the **iterative selection process** are included in Appendix A.

A scrutiny of **OFSTED inspection reports** then took place. As a starting point, a number of categories, based on the OFSTED reports, were developed, so that a picture could be presented of the essential characteristics of these schools. These were not predetermined headings; rather they were 'emergent' categories – factors that stood out and appeared to be present in all, or the majority, of the 20 schools.

The following categories were used for the analysis of the OFSTED reports:<sup>4</sup>

- 1. Leadership and Management**
- 2. Teaching, Assessment and Curriculum**
- 3. Accommodation and Learning Resources**
- 4. Ethos**
- 5. Personal Development (pupil)**
- 6. Extra-curricular**
- 7. Community Links**

The analysis of the OFSTED reports was useful in terms of directing the research towards particular themes, and for highlighting patterns of activities across the 20 schools. However, the reports were somewhat limited in their detail, as they are designed for inspection purposes rather than as a mechanism for the detailed evaluation of the success factors of a particular school, as identified by school staff. On this basis, the research team set about conducting telephone interviews with the headteachers of these schools.

A **telephone interview** schedule was devised (see Appendix C) as the next stage of the investigation. The interviews themselves took between 15 and 35 minutes: the average length was about 20 to 25 minutes. These gave the headteacher or principal an opportunity to talk about how the school had chosen its particular specialism, how this fitted with the local context, how the specialism was implemented across the school and what success factors they would identify in terms of their own school.

Whilst the analyses of the OFSTED reports had assisted in identifying some of the broad characteristics of these schools, the telephone interviews threw additional light on what headteachers believed to be the strengths of their schools. These were particularly interesting in that they provided glimpses of institutional contexts and the characteristics of individual schools, things that went beyond the broad 'national' characteristics used as OFSTED headings. It was clear that there

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<sup>4</sup> For further details of these and the sub-categories used see Appendix B.

was a need for detailed **qualitative research**, and, therefore, in-depth **fieldwork** was conducted with ten out of the 20 Specialist Schools. Appendix D provides details of the criteria for the selection of these ten.

In order to test out whether the results from this first stage of fieldwork were replicated in a broader range of Specialist Schools, particularly those which were located in less favourable circumstances (e.g. higher free school meal eligibility), **a second sample** of Specialist Schools was drawn from Professor Jesson's list of 389 top-performing schools. This exercise deliberately excluded all CTCs, all voluntary- aided schools, all foundation schools and all girls' schools.<sup>5</sup> Ten schools were then selected for further qualitative fieldwork to be conducted. As in the previous phases, OFSTED data was used to provide a picture of the broad characteristics of the school.

## 2.2 Conducting the Case-study Visits

For both fieldwork exercises, researchers telephoned the headteachers requesting a fieldwork visit to carry out a number of interviews with staff and students. The headteachers were very cooperative and, on the whole, readily agreed to these visits. The telephone contact was followed up with a letter of confirmation, which reaffirmed the details of the interviewees requested. The research team asked to interview the following people:

- ◆ the headteacher
- ◆ one or two school senior managers
- ◆ two heads of department
- ◆ a governor
- ◆ two classroom teachers
- ◆ one or two student discussion groups.

Researchers also requested that, ideally, the student discussion groups should be drawn from young people in Years 8, 10 or 12 and should comprise six to eight students, of mixed sex and ability. It was anticipated that each of the staff interviews and each of the student discussion groups would take about 30 to 40 minutes.

Two researchers were sent to each of the 20 schools, usually spending an entire day in the school and carrying out between six and 12 interviews. The schools were very accommodating, and their staff and students gave up considerable amounts of their time to assist with the study. There were separate interview schedules for the headteacher, for other staff (senior managers, heads of department, classroom teachers and governors), and for the student discussion groups (slightly adapted according to the age of the groups featured).<sup>6</sup> In total, **149 adults** were interviewed (in most cases individually), along with **172**

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix E for full details of the re-ranking exercise

<sup>6</sup> See Appendices G, H and I, respectively.

students (in small discussion groups).<sup>7</sup> The interviews took place in two phases: in June to July 2001 and December to early January 2002.

## 2.3 Profiling the Schools

A statistical profile based on publicly available data was constructed for each of the case-study schools (see Appendix F). The following section provides a synopsis of the profiles of the case-study schools.<sup>8</sup> It outlines the specialism of the schools, the management types and structure and the aggregated pupil profiles.

### 2.3.1 School specialism

The specialisms of the schools were as follows:

- ◆ 12 technology schools
- ◆ 3 language schools
- ◆ 2 performing arts school
- ◆ 3 sports colleges.

20

The number of years that schools have had Specialist status varied, ranging from two to 12 years.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.3.2 Management types

Fourteen of the 20 schools were designated as community schools, three were foundation schools, two were voluntary aided and one was a city technology college.<sup>10</sup> Eighteen out of the 20 were mixed-sex schools, with the remainder of the sample containing girls' schools.<sup>11</sup> The majority of the schools were large, with over a thousand students (12 out of the 20 were classified as such) and 11 out of the 20 had sixth forms. GNVQs were offered in 11 of the schools, seven of which offered GNVQ Part 1 at ages 14 to 16.

### 2.3.3 Aggregated pupil profiles

Few of the Specialist Schools in the sample had high levels of pupils with SEN. In all but three schools, the proportion of students who had statements of special

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix J for details of the number and post of interviewees.

<sup>8</sup> The Table in Appendix K incorporates the following information on each of the schools: specialism, length of time as a Specialist School, mixed or single-sex, size, SEN with statements, SEN without statements, FSM, EAL and legal status.

<sup>9</sup> The breakdown is as follows: 1989 – 1; 1994 – 3; 1995 – 1; 1996 – 5; 1997 – 1; 1998 – 7, 1999 – 2.

<sup>10</sup> All Phase Three schools were community schools.

<sup>11</sup> No boys' schools appeared in the top twenty schools in either ranking exercise.

educational needs (SEN) fell below or on the national average of three per cent, whilst the proportion of pupils with SEN, but who were not statemented, varied from three per cent to 61 per cent. However, while the proportion of students entitled to free school meals ranged widely from two per cent to 83 per cent, the average rate of entitlement was 26 per cent, which is higher than the national average for students in all secondary schools (17 per cent).

Schools with pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) were slightly over-represented in the sample of 20 schools. Nearly one in two of the schools (nine out of 20) had more than five per cent of pupils with English as an additional language. At a national level, approximately one in four schools has more than five per cent of EAL pupils.

A large proportion of students in the sample of Specialist Schools achieved five or more A\* to C GCSEs. The proportion of students achieving five or more A\* to C GCSEs in 2000 ranged from 27 per cent to 89 per cent. The average was 58.3 per cent, which is markedly higher than the national average figure of 49.2 per cent. However, it is important to note that eight of the ten Phase Three schools (those selected because of their relative level of socio-economic disadvantage) were below the national figure of 49.2 per cent. These schools, none the less, were adding value to pupil outcomes, as identified by Professor Jesson's quantitative study. The average point scores of 15-year-olds in the selected schools ranged from 27.4 to 61.1, with the average figure (42.4) above the national GCSE average of 38.9.

The proportion of unauthorised absences ranged from below one per cent to 4.7 per cent. The average proportion of unauthorised absences was 1.2 per cent, which was slightly higher than the national average of 0.7 per cent. The schools OFSTED reports showed that the highest proportion of pupils being excluded in any one year was 0.7 per cent. Since the OFSTED inspections in the sample were conducted in different years (between 1996 and 2000) and due to changes in policy and practice, it is difficult to make any comparisons with the national average exclusion rate (0.21 per cent).

## 3. MAPPING SUCCESS FACTORS

This chapter presents the findings from the OFSTED analysis carried out on the first and second samples of Specialist Schools. The aim was to get behind the quantitative profiles of these schools and start to consider those features and processes that appear to be contributing most to their performance gains.

### 3.1 OFSTED Inspection Data

The research team looked in depth at the schools' OFSTED inspection reports for 28 of the 30 schools in the study (OFSTED reports for two of the selected schools were not available online). It is important to note that the reports refer to OFSTED inspections conducted between 1996 and 2001 and so do not reflect a single point in time. This has some implications for the comparability of the findings – three of the schools did not have Specialist status at the time of their OFSTED report.

With this caveat in mind, however, a number of factors appeared to be particularly pertinent to the schools' successes.

#### 3.1.1 Ethos

OFSTED defines 'ethos' as '*the climate for learning: attitudes to work, relationships and the commitment to high standards*'. The reports provide evidence to suggest that all of the selected schools:

- ◆ **create an excellent climate for learning:** '*[a] positive atmosphere for learning' is created and 'pupils demonstrate very positive attitudes to work'*. One inspector noted: '*The school functions as a society...relationships amongst pupils, as well as between them and their teachers, are of a high quality.*'
- ◆ have **high expectations of what pupils can achieve and of their behaviour.** The emphasis placed on discipline results not only in good classroom behaviour, but good behaviour around the school in general.
- ◆ foster **positive relationships between pupils and teachers.** In some cases, this has been noted to have a positive impact on the quality of their education. In addition, the reports frequently commented on the level of respect pupils had for each other and their school environment.

### 3.1.2 Leadership and management

The majority<sup>12</sup> of the OFSTED reports emphasise leadership and management throughout the school as strengths of the school in question. The following statement is a typical example of the comments made: *'The overall leadership and management of the school are very good.'* The following people are identified as central in most cases:

- ◆ headteacher
- ◆ senior management team
- ◆ middle management
- ◆ governing body.

The headteachers were particularly praised for the clear vision they hold for the school.

### 3.1.3 Teaching, assessment and curriculum

All of the OFSTED reports emphasise teaching as a strength. The proportion of teaching classified as satisfactory or better is above 90 per cent in all but two of the schools.<sup>13</sup> One OFSTED inspector commented: *'Teaching has a direct, positive influence upon the pupils' attainment.'* The following factors were identified:

- ◆ **quality of teaching staff** (including the use of Advanced Skills Teachers)
- ◆ **monitoring and assessment of work.** In most cases, though to a lesser extent in the Phase Three schools, the use of monitoring and assessment was commended. The OFSTED inspection for one school, conducted in 2001, noted that *'from a wide range of baseline data, teachers set challenging targets for their classes and individual students'*. There were also references to the regular setting and marking of homework. One inspector wrote: *'Homework makes a significant contribution to achievement.'*
- ◆ **broad and balanced curriculum.** The following quotation is typical of the comments made: *'The school provides a broad and generally balanced curriculum for all its pupils which promotes well their intellectual, physical and personal development.'*
- ◆ **use of ICT.** It was noted in one school that ICT lessons were being delivered weekly for all key stage 3 pupils and that ICT was used in all subjects to enhance students' learning.

In addition, three of the OFSTED reports (from Phase Two schools) referred to the length of the school day being longer than the DfEE minimum recommendation, whilst four of the reports made reference to pupils being grouped by level of attainment. One inspector stressed: *'Setting by ability is a*

<sup>12</sup> In the case of one school the OFSTED inspection coincided with the appointment of a new headteacher and consequently the school was in the process of restructuring management.

<sup>13</sup> One of these schools did not have Specialist status at the time of inspection.

*positive feature because it enables teachers to pitch their lessons at an appropriate level.'*

### 3.1.4 Personal development (pupils)

The development of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is generally said to be as good throughout the selected schools. One inspector commented: *'As a result, pupils emerge as well-rounded individuals.'* The reports highlight:

- ◆ **the quality of welfare arrangements and pastoral care**
- ◆ **opportunities for students to take responsibility**, for example as representatives on the school council
- ◆ **good careers education programmes.**

### 3.1.5 Extra-curricular activities

All of the selected schools were said to provide a considerable range of extra-curricular activities, which include trips and excursions, clubs and societies, charitable activities and involvement in the Duke of Edinburgh of Award.<sup>14</sup> One inspector emphasised that taking part in such activities allowed *'pupils to learn how to play, work and live together, to respect one another, and to contribute to life in the community'*. Similarly, another inspector commented that *'the extra-curricular provision of the school increases the breadth of education on offer and has a positive impact on pupils' social development and attainment'*.

### 3.1.6 Community links

Strong community partnerships are a characteristic of all of the selected schools. The OFSTED report for one school, inspected in 1998, emphasised *'the impressive links with the local, county and wider communities and with business and commerce enrich the curriculum and have a very beneficial effect on pupils' attainment, progress and personal development'*. In several schools, the following were identified:

- ◆ **good relationships with feeder primary schools.** An OFSTED inspector commented: *'These very positive relationships are used well by the school to ensure continuity for the pupils as they move from one phase to another.'*
- ◆ **strong partnerships with parents.** Regularly informing parents of their child's progress and involving them in the life of the school were seen to have *'a positive impact on pupils' learning'*.
- ◆ **Commercial and industrial links.** Many of the schools had built relationships with local businesses and places of interest such as museums and theatres to enhance the curriculum and extra-curricular provision.

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<sup>14</sup> During the subsequent fieldwork, one of the selected schools was found to have less involvement in such extra-curricular activities than had been indicated in the Ofsted report.

## 3.2 Telephone Interviews

In order to ‘unpack’ further the question of what exactly makes the difference with regard to the performance gains in Specialist Schools, telephone interviews were conducted with the headteachers of the 20 selected schools from Phases One and Two.

For the telephone interviews headteachers were asked to reflect on:

- ◆ the reasons for becoming a Specialist School and why they had chosen a particular specialism
- ◆ what factors they felt had contributed to their success
- ◆ what advice they would give to schools who had just taken on Specialist status and what advice they would offer to other Specialist Schools with regard to raising and sustaining exam performance
- ◆ the challenges, if any, of being a Specialist School.

The headteachers’ comments are summarised in the four sections below.

### 3.2.1 Specialism and motivation

The motivation behind the schools becoming Specialist was essentially threefold:

- ◆ For some of the schools, the impetus to become a Specialist School was often linked to why they had chosen a **particular specialism** (discussed below).
- ◆ For others, there was the **financial incentive**. One headteacher commented: *‘Money, it would provide resources that we could not provide any other way.’*
- ◆ Some headteachers identified a rationale that was specifically related to **ethos**. One respondent, noting that Specialist status had *‘released energy into the school’*, said that his governing body had been *‘uneasy’* with the move toward Specialist status because they were *‘committed to the comprehensive ethos’*. He personally felt that becoming a Specialist School would be a positive step in that it would provide a *‘catalyst’* for focusing on academic achievement. Similarly, one headteacher emphasised the desire to develop an ethos that was different to a standard comprehensive, whilst another noted that the agenda of the Technology Colleges Trust had been similar to their own in terms of vocabulary and philosophy.

The rationale behind the schools choosing a particular specialism related to the following factors:

- ◆ **emphasising strengths**. For example, the head of one technology college noted that they had a *‘strength in science’*.
- ◆ **countering inequalities**. This was clearly evident in one school where the headteacher noted that money had been spent on other areas of the school, resulting in the language department being under-resourced.

- ◆ **raising subject profile.** The headteacher of a girls' school, for instance, emphasised that she had wanted to raise the profile of science and technology and move away from the traditional view of a girls' Catholic school.
- ◆ **building student self-esteem.** For example, the headteacher of a second girls' school had viewed the performing arts as a means by which to build the self-esteem of her students and widen their horizons.

Four of the schools, however, noted that technology was the only specialism offered at the time they were looking to gain Specialist status.

### 3.2.2 Reasons for success

**High-quality teaching** and a **sharp focus upon teaching and learning** were stressed as key to a school's success. Some of the headteachers indicated that they had made use of Advanced Skills Teachers, whilst others emphasised the hard work and commitment of their teaching staff. One head noted that '*staff always willing to go that extra mile*' was an important contributory factor to her school's success.

The **culture or ethos** of a school was noted as an important factor behind their success. One headteacher commented that culture is '*quite a nebulous idea*', but he felt that it had a lot of validity. Headteachers emphasised the importance of being part of a '**culture of improvement**'. One respondent commented: '*We're a school that doesn't rest on its laurels; we constantly want to improve.*' There were high expectations of both staff and students. One head noted that creating a '**culture of success**' was important – '*success leads to success*' – whilst another stressed that it is important to promote the ideal that '*it's cool to achieve*'. The concept that teachers, students and parents are '*stakeholders*' in a school was also emphasised by one interviewee as important.

The **monitoring and evaluation** of academic progress and performance also appeared to be important contributory factors for some of the schools. One respondent emphasised that they had a '*very sophisticated method of measuring value-added data*', which teachers were then in turn trained to interpret. The headteacher stressed: '*We do act very positively on the data.*' Similarly, another headteacher noted the emphasis placed on analysing results, commenting that they had a '*strong tracking system*'.

Another factor that headteachers noted as contributory to their success was **effective leadership and management**. One headteacher highlighted that OFSTED had identified this factor as instrumental in moving his school forward. The importance of strong senior and middle management teams was emphasised by another headteacher, who also outlined how they set aside time for managerial training and, for all year heads, pastoral training.

The majority of headteachers also noted the **curriculum** as an important contributory factor towards their success. One headteacher commented '*We continually look at this and change it to raise kids' attainment*', whilst another noted that students had access to the curriculum at all times via the school's website. One headteacher stressed the need for a broad curriculum as opposed to

the DfEE emphasis on numeracy and literacy. He noted *'the kids need variety...do it your own way'*.

**Extra-curricular activities** were also regarded as important by many of the headteachers. One interviewee felt that they *'encourage pupils to commit themselves to the school [and that they go] hand in hand with higher curricular achievement'*. In contrast, one headteacher noted, that as a school for pupils aged 14 to 18, they were more like an *'exam factory'*. Nevertheless, the school is in the process of developing sports opportunities, which the head feels might help motivation.

In addition, **resources**, including ICT facilities, were identified by some headteachers as contributory factors to their performance gains. One headteacher felt that boys prefer the *'private practice of languages'* and that the school's up-to-date technological language laboratory has provided the boys with this space. He emphasised that boys' performance in languages had therefore significantly improved. In contrast, however, other headteachers felt that resources were *'less important to success'*.

With regard to the extent to which headteachers felt that **external or community links** were contributory factors, opinion was mixed. One school noted that they had had to *'work on these'* and that they were *'labour intensive'*. In contrast, one headteacher noted a link with Microsoft and Compaq which provided the *'opportunity to compare best practice [and give them] ideas of new ways of working'*.

### 3.2.3 Raising and sustaining performance

On being asked what advice they had to offer schools that had just taken on Specialist School status, the headteachers interviewed had several pieces of advice to offer. First, they advised schools to **focus on teaching and learning** and, as one headteacher commented, *'not to throw the baby out with the bath water'*.

Second, they urged schools to be **realistic** in terms of what they felt they could achieve. For example, one headteacher felt it was important to keep **targets simple and manageable** and that schools should *'be realistic. It isn't as much money as you think'*. Similarly, another respondent emphasised that schools should not get too carried away with too many initiatives on the fringe. Another headteacher stressed that it was important *'not to try everything at once'*. However, headteachers also encouraged schools to *'try and be innovative in some small way'* and not to *'be afraid to take risks and be imaginative'*.

Schools were advised to adopt a **'whole-school'** approach to their Specialist School status. One respondent emphasised that schools should consider the impact of Specialist status on the whole school, commenting *'targets are demanding [so] ensure that all staff feel valued'*. Similarly, other headteachers stressed the need for a *'whole-school awareness of the initiative'*, making sure that all staff benefit in some way and that everyone is taken on board.

Several headteachers raised issues connected to **management**. One stressed the importance of having a clear strategy and vision, whilst another emphasised that the SMT needed to know the school *'inside out'*. Two headteachers suggested that having a senior manager who could take responsibility for the school's Specialist status was a good idea. The headteacher of one school, whose specialism was languages, advised that a linguist (or other relevant subject specialist) is needed on the SMT to provide specialist advice.

In addition, one interviewee advised *'you shouldn't compromise your values too much for this status; you need to believe in it'*, whilst another urged schools to use their Specialist status to enrich the curriculum as opposed to getting *'hung up'* on targets.

On being asked, the advice headteachers had to offer fellow Specialist Schools with regard to raising and sustaining student examination performance was as follows. Headteachers noted that a **culture of high expectations** was important: *'There's no magic formula; it's about high expectations. You should never be satisfied, always look for improvements.'* Similarly, another headteacher commented: *'The culture of achievement and aspiration must be there from day one.'* Schools should not underestimate the capacity of their pupils to *'take things on'*, said one respondent. He felt that it was about getting the **balance** right **between pressure and challenge**. He advised schools to talk to pupils: *'They often can do more than we give them credit for.'*

**Conducting reviews and assessing and monitoring pupils' progress** were also emphasised as important. One headteacher commented: *'If there's one aspect you're not reviewing you could become complacent.'* Another respondent urged schools to *'reconsider'* learning and ask *'how do other Specialist Schools enable students to learn?'* Knowing one's pupils well and adopting differentiated approaches to learning, in order to challenge children, were also emphasised as important.

In addition, being **focused** was highlighted as key by several headteachers. One emphasised the need to keep focused on standards in order to raise them, whilst another stressed that clarity of focus and vision comes before targets. Similarly, another commented: *'Make sure the leadership team focus on what's going on and where the school is going in three to five years time – clarity of focus, clarity of purpose.'*

### 3.2.4 Challenges of Specialist School status

The researchers asked headteachers to reflect on any challenges or issues related to being a Specialist School.

- ◆ **Attempting to bring the whole school on board** was highlighted as one. For example, one headteacher noted the lack of support from some departments for the school's Specialist status. Similarly, one respondent highlighted that other subject areas can *'feel left behind'*; whilst another noted the difficulty of ensuring that other departments feel valued.
- ◆ Several headteachers made reference to the **administrative aspect** of becoming (and being) a Specialist School as challenging. One headteacher

commented, *'a lot effort is needed to put together the bid'*, whilst others emphasised the *'bureaucracy'* of the whole process.

- ◆ Two headteachers felt that being a Specialist School was becoming **too prescriptive**. One headteacher felt that, as a school, they were being put in a *'strait jacket'*. He further commented: *'If you really want to develop, you need some room to sail.'*
- ◆ **Resentment from other schools** towards a school's Specialist status was also noted. One headteacher raised the perception that other schools had of them: *'[We are] seen as an elite school but we're in fact a run of the mill comprehensive with a bit of extra funding'*. Another respondent felt that promoting a specialism led people to believe that the school is not strong in other areas. He emphasised the need to get everyone on board, especially the new intake parents.
- ◆ Finally, the **requirements of being a Specialist School** were mentioned by several headteachers as challenging. One headteacher commented: *'[The] real challenge/problem is the community aspect of it, i.e. that we work with other schools. The resources are not sufficient and it is very difficult to have your staff sent out working with other schools. You find there is infinite demand so managing it is very hard.'* Similarly, another headteacher felt that there could be challenges to being a Specialist School *'if you allow the requirements of being a Specialist School to divert you from meeting the needs of all groups of pupils'*.

### 3.3 The Need for Further Investigation

One aim of the research was to progressively focus upon the success factors in these high-performing schools. The first phase of investigation raised questions for further exploration. The factors identified in the OFSTED reports were predominantly standard school improvement factors. The telephone interviews took the process further, giving headteachers the opportunity to elaborate on these success factors. The second phase of investigation, namely within-school research in 20 of the selected schools, focused on, and explored in more depth, these and further factors contributing to the schools' success.

## 4. DETAILED FIELDWORK FINDINGS

This chapter presents the detailed findings from the Phase Two and Phase Three fieldwork visits to 20 Specialist Schools under a series of broad headings. Before these are considered, Section 4.1 provides further information on how the success factors were identified.

### 4.1 Evidence for Identifying Success Factors

In terms of methodology, the study reported on here used interview schedules that featured open-ended questions asking respondents what they felt were the main success factors in their own schools. For example:

- ◆ headteachers were asked directly ‘what makes this school successful?’
- ◆ classroom teachers and governors were asked ‘what do you think are the reasons, in particular, for your school’s improved examination results?’ and ‘what, in your opinion, has been the main single factor in the overall success of your school?’
- ◆ students were asked, in the context of a discussion group, if they felt that their school was a good school, and to say what they based their opinions on.

In this way, and through the use of further questions, researchers were able to prompt thoughts from Specialist School staff themselves about what they felt were the major success factors in their own institution. NFER researchers were thus able to collect evidence from those who were directly experiencing the day-to-day culture and day-to-day activities of a Specialist School. Although broad areas for discussion were identified, the research team did not approach these schools with a preconceived list of what ‘worked’ for these institutions. This approach made it difficult to categorise and summarise the responses collected, but had the advantage of obtaining detailed, first-hand accounts and perceptions of what was positive about these schools (and what challenges there were). Although there was considerable variety in responses to the questions outlined above, there were also some areas of commonality.

The rest of this chapter presents the responses to these questions under the following broad headings:

- ◆ high-quality teachers and teaching
- ◆ school ethos and culture
- ◆ monitoring and evaluation
- ◆ leadership and management

- ◆ curriculum improvements
- ◆ extra-curricular activities
- ◆ resources.

## 4.2 High-quality Teachers and Teaching

A strong theme in many case-study schools was the importance of high-quality teachers and teaching to the achievement of whole-school success. This point was made by senior staff, students and teachers alike, whose comments suggested that dedicated teachers, carefully focused teaching strategies and (less commonly) changes to class size and composition can be influential upon performance gains. The interview data also suggested that improvements in teaching had been facilitated by certain organisational factors such as careful recruitment, quality assurance schemes, and support for teachers to focus on teaching and to share good practice.

### 4.2.1 Dedicated, motivated teachers

In talking about their schools, headteachers commonly referred to the extremely high levels of staff commitment and the hard work of their staff. The headteacher of a technology college, for example, was clear that a key reason behind his school's success was *'a first-class set of staff, who are extremely committed'*. This was echoed by the deputy, who felt that *'You couldn't ask anyone to work the way that our staff do'*.

A similar kind of picture emerged from several other case-study schools. The deputy head at a language college, for example, described how the teachers *'don't give up ...if the pupils need some help, then they will be helped'*. This concurred with remarks from a colleague in the English department who said: *'I have never worked in a school where the staff work as hard as here.'* Interviewees in other schools described staff as *'so generous with their time'*, *'working 60 to 70-hour weeks without being asked to'*, and going *'the extra mile'* to support their students.

This kind of commitment from staff did not go unnoticed by students. In the language college mentioned above, for example, students described how their teachers *'give up a lot of their spare time'*, and *'[if you need help] they'll gladly say "come at lunchtime and I'll go through the whole thing, or come after school"'*. Comments in several other schools highlighted the importance of effective support for learning: *'we can always ask a teacher for help; the teachers are approachable and helpful'*; *'the teachers take a genuine interest in how you are getting on'*.

The importance of these kinds of productive relationships between teachers and students was articulated by one Year 10 student in terms of *'trust and loyalty'*: *'We trust the teachers and we are loyal. They trust us; it's trust and loyalty with everyone. It gives you confidence.'*

However, a small minority of students were not so positive about their teachers. In one school in an area of socio-economic disadvantage, a group of sixth-formers indicated that they felt under too much pressure from their teachers to succeed: *'They are always on our case, sometimes too much.'*

#### 4.2.2 Carefully focused teaching strategies

Staff in several case-study schools highlighted ways in which practices related to classroom teaching and learning had improved. It was clear from these that, in addition to staff commitment and dedication, a concerted focus on the dynamics and quality of what goes on in the classroom had also been important to school improvement. One teacher interviewee emphasised: *'Remember that the only thing that matters is what goes on in the classroom.'* As one headteacher asserted: *'The proof is in the pudding ... if you're not delivering interesting lessons with clear objectives, you will not get the goods.'*

Some of the improvements reported by the case-study schools included:

- ◆ **more widespread and varied use of ICT** – the enhanced use of ICT across the curriculum of many technology colleges was reported to have helped diversify teaching strategies in many subject areas. It was also seen to have benefited students' learning, especially by boys: a languages teacher in one school described how in lessons using ICT the boys spend more time *'on task'* and respond well to working towards short-term goals.
- ◆ **increased cross-curricular initiatives** – there were several examples of schools using their specialism (such as arts, music or sport) to enrich the teaching of other curriculum subjects (see also Section 4.6). Developments of this kind were seen by several respondents as significant to raising and sustaining performance levels; one teacher commented that *'working with other departments is key – using the specialism to bring everybody together'*.
- ◆ **comprehensive academic support** – staff often identified various types of academic support as important in raising students' expectations and performance levels. The head of technology in one school, for example, mentioned interim marking of GCSE coursework, grade raiser sessions after school, and guide sheets on what is required for different grade levels. The deputy head in another school stated: *'We try to help everybody – catch up programmes for all different pupils, tutorials once a week and drop-in sessions for all subjects.'*
- ◆ **encouragement of independent learning** – this involved allowing students to take a very active part in lessons and solve problems for themselves. In one school, students were encouraged to work in pairs to conduct research, share ideas and take part in class discussions.

The message that underpins the above examples is that performance gains at a whole-school level were often associated with greater discussion about the quality of teaching and learning at departmental and classroom level. One teacher, for example, talked of how her department had become *'more diagnostic in terms of target setting, gender, teacher performance, C/D borderlines, and departmental performance'*. The head of science in another school stated that *'increased*

*discussion about teaching strategies amongst colleagues* had been crucial to success.

### 4.2.3 Changing class size and composition

There were some case-study schools in which changes in the organisation of teaching groups were seen to have been important in yielding success. For example, one school had implemented a maximum class size of 24 students. In the headteacher's (and OFSTED's) view, this had been critical in terms of reducing teachers' workloads and increasing the level of individual attention enjoyed by students. Teaching staff echoed this: one said that the money associated with Specialist School status had made a *'world of a difference because it has been used to keep class sizes small'*. Another school had decided to teach Year 9 science in single-sex classes for the highest-attaining students. The head of science felt that the brightest girls were not achieving their potential and needed positive role models. He reported that there had been an increase in the numbers of girls going on to take A-levels in science subjects since the introduction of this strategy.

### 4.2.4 Factors underpinning improvements in teachers and teaching

Interview data across the case-study schools suggests that high-quality teachers and teaching had been facilitated by certain organisational factors. These included:

- ◆ **careful teacher recruitment** – several headteachers stressed the importance of *'getting the very best teachers'* and reported that Specialist School status (along with other achievements such as being a Beacon School) was *'helpful in terms of recruitment'*.
- ◆ **staff development** – this was noted by several schools as central to the retention and motivation of staff. In one school, newly qualified teachers had the opportunity to take on greater levels of responsibility. For example, one NQT was deputy head of department within two years of qualifying. In another school, staff were continually encouraged to learn by participating in a student mentoring scheme with a local university.
- ◆ **enabling teachers to focus on teaching** – echoing arguments expressed in several schools, one headteacher stressed his aim of enabling teachers *'to do what they came into teaching to do – to teach'*. This meant minimising staff paperwork, increased use of support staff in many curriculum subjects, and avoiding unhelpful diversions that prevent teachers from *'putting their energy into the kids'*.
- ◆ **teacher monitoring and appraisal** – several schools had well-developed quality assurance systems. The system in one school involved lesson observation of all staff three times per year, with the target that 85 per cent of lessons viewed would be good or very good (using the OFSTED criteria). The headteacher saw this as creating *'an empowering process that holds people to account but in a supportive way'*. This was supported by the head

of science, who said it had *'been done very positively'* and *'increased discussion about teaching strategies amongst colleagues'*.

- ◆ **promoting the sharing of practice** – staff in several schools commented upon the importance of collaboration within, and between, departments. This manifested itself in one school in terms of the head of science having given a talk to the rest of the staff about *'Reasons for GCSE Success in Science'*, and the circulation of evaluation reports on recent student support initiatives. These were all cases where good practice was being recorded, reflected upon and shared within the school.

## 4.3 School Ethos and Culture

In asking the question 'How do schools raise standards?', Sir Cyril Taylor concluded that a *'focus on achievement is probably the single greatest reason for the success of Specialist Schools'* (2000, p.6). He commented: *'A general focus on achievement creates an ethos of high expectation and a huge pride in achievement.'* Similarly, Gillmon (2000, p.5) has emphasised that *'an ethos of achievement is a key feature of a successful school'*, and Wicksteed and Hagen have written a full chapter on *'developing a language college ethos'* (2001, pp. 33–48).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the OFSTED inspection reports for all 30 of the selected schools provided evidence to suggest that a common characteristic shared by the schools is a strong ethos or culture. The headteachers who took part in the telephone interviews emphasised school ethos or culture as an important factor behind their school's success. Case-study research provided the opportunity to further 'unpack' this success factor. The following section provides a discussion of the findings.

### 4.3.1 High expectations

In all 20 of the case-study schools, headteachers, members of staff and students emphasised that they worked and studied in schools where high expectations were present. In discussing the reasons for her school's improved results, one teacher stressed: *'I think it's probably the ethos of the school. Success is ingrained.'* Similarly, another teacher in a school in a disadvantaged area emphasised that an ethos of success was accepted by both students and parents, commenting: *'Students are comfortable with being successful now – they're not embarrassed anymore...the abuse between students – the swot bit – has gone.'*

It was apparent in the majority of the schools that the focus on achievement and high expectations was very much centred on the individual *per se*, but also on **all** students regardless of academic ability. As one school prospectus outlined, *'all girls and staff are encouraged and enabled to develop their skills, talents and potential to the full regardless of nationality, ethnicity, ability – both intellectually and physically – social circumstances, age, gender or religion'*.

### Case study: achievement for all

In one school, the headteacher emphasised that changing staff expectations of students was a very important factor behind their success. He noted that when he first arrived at the school there were certain students not entered for examinations. His aim was to change the culture of the school to one in which it is expected that every student could be entered for examinations. He stressed that the school's ethos was to convince students that they can and will achieve, and to share the student's aspirations. He commented: *'They seem to buy into that culture.'* A teacher at the school emphasised: *'There's an ethos of high standards...we expect everyone, whatever their ability, to do ten GCSEs, and they do!'*

The sense that everyone can succeed was reflected in the students' comments. For example, one student emphasised: *'If you're willing to work and you're motivated, then they'll help you get to where you want to go. Or if you want to do better in subjects, then they're willing to sit down [with you]. Even if you're not so well motivated, they'll still push you to your full potential; they won't let it lie.'* Similarly, another student highlighted: *'It's such a well-rounded school. If you're not good at an academic subject, you could be good at something else. Your teachers will push you to your potential in everything.'*

Similarly, another headteacher emphasised: *'I'm here for individual pupils.'* He noted that the school was attracting lower-ability students, which he anticipates will lead to raw results declining. He stressed, however, that at his school the focus is placed on adding value. At one school, the headteacher emphasised that when he arrived, *'the culture of the school was unclear'*. The vision that is now in place is based on two premises. First, every student has the right to realise their potential – *'we don't give up on anybody'* – and second, everyone is there to give their best.

Some headteachers felt that keeping expectations (and standards) high was one of the main challenges of being a Specialist School. For example, one member of staff commented: *'Standards are now so high failure is unacceptable.'* Similarly, another noted the issue of *'keeping our high pass rate!'* She also stressed: *'I don't think if we are truly a comprehensive (which we are), I don't think we can go much higher unless we start selection.'* A governor of one technology college also emphasised the challenge of maintaining high standards, fearing that once a school had reached a ceiling with regard to performance gains, despondency could set in.

A headteacher stressed that building students' confidence and self-esteem is key: *'Use it [Specialist status] as way of boosting self-esteem. A can-do, practical background to boost a sense of their own capabilities. That morale should spread...a background noise to raise the volume across the school.'*

In some instances, students were acutely aware of being part of high-achieving environments. One student commented: *'Because this school has been a successful school in the past, you look at what other people have done, and if it has been done already you know that you can achieve it yourself.'* Similarly, another emphasised: *'You try to keep up the standard. I think everyone in the school...even if they don't want to do as well, they still think "I've got to keep up the reputation".'*

Some students based their opinion of their school as a good school on being part of an *'atmosphere of high expectations'*. However, others were clearly feeling the pressure to achieve. In discussing individual target setting, one student commented: *'It's made it quite hard sometimes when I haven't done well. I thought "I am a failure", but I am getting over that now and I have started to think that if they've said that, then I can obviously do it.'*

The aim of continuing to raise standards was frequently mentioned by headteachers when they were discussing their vision for their school's future development. One headteacher commented: *'The vision is to preserve the ethos and maintain constant challenge. Maintenance of standards is a massive challenge.'* The headteacher of one language college, where an enriched curriculum was regarded as key to the school's success, commented that his vision was to try to *'make sure that every part of the learning experience in school is stimulating and fun'*.

On being asked what general advice members of staff would give to schools that had just taken on Specialist status, the need to adopt a whole-school approach was identified as key. One teacher stressed the importance of *'getting everybody on board. It can't be a bolt on'*. Another interviewee stressed that *'the underpinning philosophy should be that the whole school is important'*.

### **4.3.2 Changing perceptions of the school**

In some of the schools, it was not just a case of having high expectations of staff and students, but an issue of actually changing the whole ethos of the school. In one urban school, a deputy headteacher explained how the school had a very poor reputation in the late 1980s, and early 1990s but Specialist status had contributed to a turnaround in the perception of the school. The name of the school was changed and there is now a *'can do'* culture in the school. The reputation and improved attitude towards the school mean that pupils actually want to attend. In another school, the introduction of uniforms has been a central part of changing perceptions of the school and creating a new identity.

### **4.3.3 A family community**

To support high expectations of staff and student achievement, the case-study schools have generally attempted to create a family or a community-type environment. In one school, this was described as *'a very inclusive feeling'*, whilst in others it was referred to as a family ethos: *'[The school's] family ethos is frequently commented upon by pupils, parents, staff, governors and visitors.'* In discussing this inclusive feeling, one student commented: *'People who aren't prefects or can't get involved in things like that have other responsibilities. They are still given something to do; they are not left out.'*

### Case study: a family ethos

In one school, a family ethos manifested itself in the following ways:

- ◆ Mixed-ability teaching (with the exception of mathematics and modern foreign languages). This means that a student's tutor group is by and large the same as his or her teaching groups. The headteacher felt that this enabled '*greater group identity and means that there are no sink groups*'. The deputy headteacher emphasised that teaching students of mixed ability together increased the confidence and expectations of lower-ability students. He did, however, also stress that the majority of students within the school were of average ability and therefore differentiation by setting was not particularly necessary.
- ◆ A house system instead of a year group system. This means that students have the same house form tutor throughout their time at school.
- ◆ Mentoring by the following people:
  - headteacher (all Year 11 students meet the headteacher twice in their final year)
  - staff
  - governors (35 per cent of Year 11 students are mentored in this way)
  - senior students (some Year 10 students act as 'mentor prefects' for Year 7 pupils).

Intrinsic to this community environment is the quality of the relationships that pervade the schools. Relationships between staff and students were generally described as '*very good*' by both staff and students. One teacher emphasised that this factor has contributed to her school's success: '*We take an interest in them and they seem to respond to that.*' The governor of one school stressed that students are trusted and that this in turn contributes to student motivation. He noted that students are welcomed to governors' meetings so that they can learn about the management of the school. He emphasised: '*They are part of it.*'

In the main, students were very positive when discussing relationships with their teachers. One Year 10 student commented: '*There's a lot of respect both ways between pupils and teachers...there's a better working relationship because...you can talk to tutors about problems that might not be schooling and things like that.*' Similarly, another Year 10 student said: '*What it comes down to is that there is a really good teacher – pupil relationship and you don't really get that in other schools. The teachers are very friendly towards you, which is good, because it helps you communicate with them.*'

Students discussed both the friendship and trust they have with their teachers. However, it was evident that these qualities had not undermined the teachers' authority in any way, but rather strengthened it: '*The trust and loyalty means that we have to stay in line, because if we break the trust then that's it.*'

Students appreciate the work teachers undertake on their behalf: '*I talk to my friends at other schools and they say to me they can't believe my teachers stay behind after school and help me with things like my coursework.*' One student commented: '*You see how hard the teachers work so you think you should work hard as well.*'

It was evident that relationships between students were also good. Many students were confident that bullying or racism would not be accepted in their school. In one particular school, mixed-year student discussions took place; the students were confident, articulate and respectful of each other's views. One student emphasised that within her own school 'doing well' was not frowned upon, but celebrated: *'Your friends are proud of you. They encourage you to go for things...things like prefect, mediator.'*

Relationships between staff were also described in positive terms; members of staff in one school indicated their appreciation of having an approachable SMT. In another, a teacher emphasised: *'The key thing in the school's success is ethos, which is about values, a sense of belonging, group identity, support...I feel as a younger member of the department that I can fly. I feel valued.'* Commenting on relationships within a school, one headteacher pointed out: *'There's a lot of psychology in all of this. The reason a teacher trusts the head is the result of a thousand interactions. Creating the right climate is so much of it. Systems and admin. is nothing without the right climate.'*

## 4.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

Comments from the interviewees, especially from headteachers and senior managers in these 20 Specialist Schools, suggested that these institutions, without exception, were well advanced in terms of applying systems of monitoring and evaluation and in making active use of performance data. It is difficult to make generalisations because it has not been possible to make rigorous comparisons with the systems and processes used in non-specialist schools, but the NFER research team does have experience of looking in some detail at the use of data in other types of schools. What were these Specialist Schools doing differently from, or in addition to, the monitoring and evaluation work being carried out in secondary schools in general? The following case-study details provide a typical example of just how much was going on, in this respect, in the Specialist School context.

### Case study: an overview of how a school uses data

The information pack to parents, for one of the technology colleges featured in this research, states, ambitiously, that the school will achieve *'measurable improvements in all aspects of teaching in Technology, Science, Mathematics and Information and Communications Technology'*. The Headteacher's statement to OFSTED included the following paragraph:

*The table of CAT and YELLIS data for GCSE classes 1998 to 2005 demonstrates that consistently our intake included close to 60 % of students with a mean CAT score of more than or equal to 100 in the recent years taking GCSE. This is an indication that we have an intake profile with a positive skew of approximately 10 per cent.<sup>15</sup> However, our GCSE results, which for the last three years have been between 25 – 27 per cent above the National average, are therefore outstanding. We believe this is firm proof of the value we add to the performance of our students at our school.*

<sup>15</sup> This means that, in the headteacher's estimation, the students entering the school are about ten per cent better, in terms of prior measured ability, than the national average.

Monitoring was mentioned by a number of teachers as one of the school's 'success factors'. Given the school's size (over 1,500 students), this enables teachers to keep track of students' progress: *'It's a big school: we could lose individuals.'* The data are available to teachers on spreadsheets and are reviewed once a term: *'Every term all tutors have that data, we look for under-achievement and over-achievement...every summer there's an enormous post-mortem.'* The head of science said: *'Every single member of staff has a clear idea of targets for improvements. Even new staff have been well trained in using data. Exam performance has improved from what was a good basis anyway.'* Data is used to pick up issues, rather than as a 'stick': *'Data opens up debate...stops individuals falling off the track...we're on the case all the time.'*

The interview data, from this school and others in the sample, suggested that the following aspects of monitoring and evaluation were important:

- ◆ detailed use of value-added data
- ◆ data used and not just collected
- ◆ regularity in tracking student progress
- ◆ student involvement in data use
- ◆ monitoring and evaluation of staff and increased accountability.

There are plenty of non-specialist schools that do one or more of these things, but the 20 case-study schools were almost certainly more active in these aspects of monitoring and evaluation than the majority of secondary schools. The following paragraphs elaborate on this finding and give examples of how these schools were well advanced in their collection and use of performance data.

#### 4.4.1 Use of value-added data

It was to be expected that these schools would be more than competent in their use of value-added data. They have, after all, been identified in the earlier stages of this research as 'high-performing' schools in this respect and, in addition, they must specify improved standards of attainment in their development plans: but the in-depth fieldwork provided an opportunity to ask some detailed questions about the uses of data and how these were linked to teaching and learning.

Headteachers and other senior staff were keen to show how examination results were carefully analysed *'from many different angles'*. Value-added measures were frequently used to predict future success. All the schools made systematic use of key stage 2 and key stage 3 data, as well as GCSE results. Some of the schools used NFER-NELSON CAT scores, MidYIS, Yellis or Alis+<sup>16</sup>, all systems for looking at added value and for making predictions.

<sup>16</sup> CAT stands for Cognitive Ability Test. MidYIS stands for Middle Years Information System, a commercial service for schools offered by the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre at the University of Durham. The Centre provides other value-added services including Yellis (Year Eleven Information System) and Alis+ (A-level Information System plus GNVQs).

#### 4.4.2 Data used and not just collected

The senior managers of one of the schools stressed that the overriding developmental objective of the school is *'raising achievement for all students'* and one of the school's successes is the *'use of data to inform learning'*. A database is in place and the continuing aim of the SMT is to ensure that this *'informs teaching and learning and feeds directly into the streamlined reporting process'*. The headteacher at this school said that a major success factor was *'using data effectively, rather than having lots of data'*. A major plus is *'using the data non-judgmentally, in a non-threatening way'*.

#### 4.4.3 Regularity in tracking student progress

Another feature that seemed to extend across most, if not all, of the 20 schools featured in this research was regularity in student tracking. There were frequent meetings or assessments of student progress, often combining discussion of pastoral as well as academic progress. This fitted in with the *'every child is an individual'* ethos that was present in several of these schools. In some cases, students and tutors met once a term; and at least one of the schools included parents in these meetings. One teacher said that, in his view, the main single factor in his school's success was *'setting targets and tracking and monitoring progress towards targets'*.

Some respondents stressed that having whole-school access to data meant that student progress could be carefully tracked on a regular basis:

*We are very data rich in this school. Staff have access to the data on a daily basis and once the new computer systems are in place, they will have it at the touch of a button in their classrooms, where they can pull up records of their groups and individual children and in other subject areas.*

#### 4.4.4 Student involvement in data use

Linked with the previous finding is the importance, in these schools, of students' involvement in the use of monitoring data. One headteacher stressed that in his school, not only are staff aware of targets, but students are also constantly reminded of them through writing them down in homework diaries and, for the lower year groups, through charts displayed on classroom walls. In another school, students reported that they liked the fact that their targets were based on effort and not just on attainment. They knew their targets and could make written comments about them if they wished to. Where there have been difficulties, students have been given a *'target report'*. In each lesson, the teacher writes the details of three targets that have to be met in a report book.

In another school, there was a policy that all exercise books should be taken in once a week and each student should be given a clearly identifiable target: *'e.g. Target: check all written work for full stops... Telling kids they're working towards a C means nothing – giving them something they can achieve each week means a lot.'* Targets in this school are checked in a variety of ways and related to the merit system.

### Case study: involving teachers and students in target setting

Examples of monitoring and evaluation at one school visited included:

- ◆ **target setting for departments** – this began in the specialist departments (mathematics, science, Information and Communications Technology, and Design and Technology) as part of the technology college bid, but has become the norm in all departments now. As their document on value added asserts, '*...setting SMART targets and striving to meet them has become a normal part of life, especially since the granting of technology college status in 1997*'. The headteacher and deputy head spoke of how this had increased '*healthy competition*' between the departments, which was very important to the school's success.
- ◆ **target setting for students** – CAT scores are taken in Year 7 and '*used to predict KS3 test results and GCSE results*'... '*each pupil's progress is monitored against these predictions from the end of Y7 onwards*'.
- ◆ **effort grades** – The deputy head explained that '*we track efforts*' on the basis that '*success is about effort, not prior ability*'. The school makes a big point of this: in their report about value added it is stressed that '*it is made clear to pupils that their performance will depend far more on their motivation and commitment than their "ability"*'. The 1999 OFSTED report commented that '*through its own research, the school has established a greater correlation between effort and achievement than between pupils' prior attainment and achievement*'.

In another school, where there has been an attempt to use ICT across the curriculum, students can themselves access a database to monitor their own progress: parents can also access this database from their home computers.

#### 4.4.5 Monitoring and evaluation of staff: increased accountability

Several of the senior interviewees made the point that the detailed use of student data, along with evaluation or observation of teachers, had played an important part in increasing accountability within their schools. Lesson observation was used in several of the schools, and one headteacher stated that:

*Every spring term I have a personal interview with all staff. Teaching staff give me their set lists, with value-added scores and predicted grades for GCSE and Advanced-level. My preparation for each interview includes careful comparison of the predicted grades with the value-added scores, and I express concern if more than a handful of predictions are below these scores.*

A technology college in a rural setting provided a good example of how data is used at both teacher and student level:

### Case study: monitoring, evaluation, accountability and sharing good practice

In the eyes of the headteacher, deputy head and several staff, increased accountability has been key to the college's success. The headteacher felt that, when he arrived in 1995, *'the culture of the school was unclear'*. The vision and culture that has now been put in place includes a central premise that every child has the right to realise their potential – *'we don't give up on anybody'*. It was felt that this was especially important in a rural setting where, according to several staff, students and teachers can have low expectations and aspirations. This plays out in terms of two main structural changes that were made in the school after the acquisition of technology college status:

1. **The use of data as a diagnostic tool** – The headteacher has a strong background in the use of value-added data (he was seconded by the LEA for a year to work on value-added approaches generally, before joining this school). Performance data is analysed very carefully: the deputy headteacher explained how they had found that there was a 0.8 to 0.9 correlation between key stage 2 test results and GCSEs and, using this, they can work out which students will be grade C/D borderline. They then focus considerable attention on these students in terms of mentoring both internally (more academic, and always individual with headteacher or deputy headteacher as well as head of year) and externally (more social and pastoral, if necessary). They have found that this has brought about a general improvement because the staff tend to compensate for the increased attention on borderline pupils by focusing in lessons on the others.
2. **Focus on teaching and learning in the classroom** – A key part of the school's overall improvement strategy has been the introduction of a quality assurance process involving lesson observation of all staff three times per year. The school's target is that 85 per cent of lessons viewed should be good or very good (using the OFSTED criteria). The senior managers give feedback to staff. The headteacher feels that this *'focus on teaching and learning in the classroom'* is crucial and that it *'creates an empowering process that holds people to account, but in a supportive way'*. This was supported by the head of science, who described how the teacher observation had been crucial to the school's success, especially as it had *'been done very positively'* in her department.

Researchers visiting this school were provided with a report entitled *Science Borderline Evaluation*, which gave examples of recording data and the sharing of good practice within the school. This departmental evaluation aimed *'to formalise what has already been carried out between 1999 and 2000 [in terms of efforts] to maximise the chances of the borderline pupils in Years 10 and 11 in achieving a C grade at GCSE Science'*.

The new, clear structure of monitoring and evaluation introduced at this school, and the use of data and lesson observation in supportive and constructive ways, have led to increased teacher accountability and the creation of a culture in which the sharing of good practice is encouraged.

In another of the schools featured (see case study below), an emphasis was placed on the importance of having meetings to oversee student progress and to reinforce the accountability of teachers and heads of department.

### Case study: meetings, analysis and accountability

In this school, there was an emphasis on 'levelling', that is, on the regular comparison of students' actual level of work with their potential level of work, or with National Curriculum levels. The head of the art department described how they use their own test, made up of a creative potential test and a drawing test. Results from these are plotted in graphs, and the art teachers look at the difference between the two sets of results to see where students are not meeting their potential.

In general, said one interviewee in this school, *'The whole issue of levelling children regularly against the national curriculum and GCSE grading [is an important one]. We have innumerable meetings where this is discussed. Every department head has to stand up and analyse their results from last year. It's accountability.'*

From these examples and case studies it is clear that there is a high level of proficiency in the use of data by these schools. Data is used intelligently and strategically in ways which bring the staff and students 'on board'. Monitoring and evaluation can be carried out with this level of success in any type of school, but there seems to be no doubt that this particular group of schools has a firm handle on how data can be used to improve standards of attainment.

## 4.5 Leadership and Management

Effective leadership and management emerged as an important aspect in the success of the Specialist Schools taking part in this research from both their OFSTED reports and the telephone interviews which took place during the preliminary phase of the investigation (see Chapter 3). As part of the in-depth phases of investigation, which took place in 20 case-study schools, the research team attempted to 'unpack' what school managers and teachers meant when they talked about 'leadership' and 'management'. How do these aspects of the school function in practice? Is the headteacher's 'vision' for the school shared amongst staff? How transferable are these aspects of a successful school to institutions with different cultures, organisation and personalities?

The need for an effective approach to leadership and management was identified as an important aspect of success in all of the case-study schools. It emerged from the interviews that while there were different styles of leadership and management, they nevertheless shared many characteristics in these particular schools. The following discussion of the characteristics of these schools, in terms of leadership and management styles, has been organised under the following headings:

- ◆ style of leadership
- ◆ a shared vision
- ◆ management structures
- ◆ transferability.

### 4.5.1 Style of leadership

It was clear that that the schools visited displayed a variety of styles of leadership: in some, the headteacher was very visible in asserting the ethos of the school, whereas in others, headteachers were less conspicuous. Headteachers were described by their staff in a number of ways:

- ◆ all displayed **self-belief** in understanding how to improve their own schools – ‘*you’ve got to believe in yourself to start with*’;
- ◆ headteachers were very **focused** on their goals and **committed** to bringing about success (however that was measured) in their schools;
- ◆ more than half the headteachers featured were considered somewhat **unconventional** in their approach: ‘[He’s a] *risk taker...we spend five or six years gaining confidence, now we can take calculated risks.*’ In these schools, headteachers have taken advantage of opportunities to make significant changes to the curriculum or to try out new ways of deploying staff;
- ◆ a common feature was the **approachability** of headteachers – enabling new ideas, generated by management teams and teaching staff, to be taken on board;
- ◆ experience in **securing extra funding** for their schools, from a number of different sources including, for example, business links and Beacon School grants.

Whatever the style of leadership, there was an important shared characteristic in each of the schools: headteachers had a clear vision of the purpose of their school. It did not matter whether the school was urban or rural, in a deprived context or in a socially advantaged location, the vision of the headteacher appeared to be a critical factor in the school’s success. To a large degree, it was from this sense of vision that all else flowed, in particular the development of a school’s ethos and culture (see Section 4.3). It is important to reiterate, however, the importance of the interconnectedness of the various ‘success factors’ (see Chapter 5). As headteachers themselves stressed, the success of their schools depended particularly on the enthusiasm and drive of their management teams and teaching staff: one deputy head described the ‘*coherence*’ of the school as the critical factor in its success, with every aspect ‘*integrated*’.

There was always a clear vision, though the substance or nature of this vision varied. Evidence from the interviews suggested two broad types of school: those which focused particularly on meeting students’ needs, with an emphasis on pastoral support, extra-curricular activities, and so on, in an effort to ensure that all pupils realise their potential; and those which were more academic in their approach.

### 4.5.2 A shared vision

Another strong message to come from the interviews was the finding that the vision of the headteacher was always shared amongst senior managers and teaching staff. This was also seen by headteachers to be an important aspect of

their school's success. One headteacher spoke of having *'a first-class set of staff, who are extremely committed and who share the vision as deeply as I do'*. Another talked, not about leadership on its own, but about *'a spirit of leadership'* which *'permeates'* through the whole school. Yet another talked about *'climate'*, rather than *'spirit'*. Teachers, as well as senior managers, talked about a feeling that *'success breeds success'* and a belief that *'success is ingrained in the school'*.

### Case study: sharing the vision I

In one school, it was clear that the vision of the headteacher was fundamental to carrying the school forward. She gave the impression that she would challenge convention where necessary and would do her own thing wherever this was perceived to be important for her students' success. The vision centred around achievement and success which would be delivered through high-quality teaching and a flexible curriculum: *'The big thing is not to have a curriculum in which kids are bound to fail, but to have a flexible curriculum in which they'll achieve.'* This headteacher had recruited a number of young, energetic teachers to fulfil their specialist remit. She, like other interviewees, felt that, firstly, rigorous recruitment was vital and that, secondly, efforts should be made to ensure that the vision was transmitted to, and shared, throughout the school community: *'As long as you can start [Specialist status] with a fresh staff...you need a narrative, you need to tell it to your teachers, your students, your parents.'*

### Case study: sharing the vision II

In another of the schools visited (a school in an urban context with about a quarter of students eligible for free school meals), all the respondents, including one of the student discussion groups, made mention of the headteacher's leadership skills and his passing on of a vision for the school: he *'leads from the front'*.

The introduction by this headteacher of the vision for the school started at SMT, was backed by the governors and then communicated to the staff. Once the staff were 'on board', a start was made in communicating the vision to the children, so as to ensure that everyone had ownership. The head is highly regarded by staff and students. He is said to keep the school at the forefront of initiatives and has a drive to bring extra funding into the school wherever possible.

According to teacher interviewees, he trusts the staff, recognises the quality of his staff, and has the ability to explain why decisions are made, why particular approaches are important. He ensures that the staff are involved in decision-making processes and that their opinions are valued. The SMT is said to be open and approachable.

This headteacher is well liked and respected by the students, who noted that he maintained a high profile around the school. Students feel that he knows all of them by name, which they appreciate. When asked what was good about the school, one student said: *'Mr X, our headteacher, he's the best, he's really influential.'*

Teachers in a majority of the schools reported that their headteacher and senior managers were approachable, and were open to new ideas and the sharing of good practice. In some schools, this was felt to empower teachers: *'There's no "us and them" divide...they're [SMT] very approachable and very forward looking and open to new ideas.'* This democratic style of management appeared, in some

institutions at least, to have reinforced the sense in which the whole staff were working towards the same goal. One headteacher has tried to *'create an empowering process that holds people to account, but in a supportive way'*. Another headteacher, echoing this view, was clear about his aim to both support and challenge his staff: *'You need to transmit the fact that things can improve throughout the staff, but you need to do this in a way that does not frighten them [teachers] to death...we try to light the fire within, not the fire below.'*

In several of the schools, discussions with students also highlighted the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging in the school. They often felt privileged to attend the school and proud of what they were achieving. A Year 10 student commented that *'there's a school council, we do get our say. We can say what the school can do to improve.'*

### 4.5.3 Management structures

In a number of the schools, the management system had been modified or restructured in an effort to encourage closer working relationships between the Senior Management Team and teachers. In one school each member of the management team had been allocated a department, with a remit to support and challenge both the academic and pastoral aspects of each department, as part of a more holistic approach. Common systems for monitoring and target setting had been developed as part of this 'flattening' of the management structure. This reorganisation also enabled teachers *'to have a voice on SMT'*.

It was also evident that meetings between senior managers, between SMT and departments, and with the Governing body were regular. A number of teachers stressed that the time spent in meetings was used well and time wasting was kept to a minimum by the use of timed agendas. As one headteacher commented: *'Vice-principals' time, in my view, is better spent on raising standards than on the servicing of governors' subcommittees.'* Another noted that: *'no time is wasted; we're making sure people are clear about what they do'*. In another school, the headteacher had ten-minute briefings four mornings a week with the whole staff.

### 4.5.4 Transferability

The extent to which the quality and nature of leadership in the case-study schools might be transferable was raised during the interviews. Would the school continue to improve its performance if the current headteacher was no longer in post? It was clear that rigorous recruitment was felt to be key in ensuring a continuity of vision and standards and that headteachers felt that the systems they had developed were embedded in the school to withstand changes in personnel. Some of the schools, despite the coming and going of new initiatives, clearly had a sense of continuity, and governors had been very skilful in appointing talented headteachers or principals who would continue to take the institution forward. A slightly different way of expressing the issue of transferability is to ask 'which came first' in a Specialist School: leadership (or the 'vision') or Specialist School status? This question encouraged a number of different responses from the interviewees. Basically, there seemed to be three kinds of response:

- ◆ firstly, a 'neutral' view, along the lines that *'it is hard to tell which came first'*, they go *'hand in hand'* – this view was expressed, for example, where a new headteacher was appointed at the same time as the school took on Specialist status:

#### **Case study: which came first – the vision or the status?**

The question of which came first was very pertinent to this school, which had both Beacon and Specialist status at the time of the fieldwork. The headteacher was clearly a very effective leader (he described himself as *'first among equals'*) and was himself a driving force for change. However, the governors had discussed the possibility of Specialist status before he had arrived. The headteacher said *'I brought a Specialist School mentality, a more business-like style of management'* (he had previously been headteacher of a Specialist technology college).

Interviews with other staff confirmed this view: the school would not have become Specialist without a push from the leadership. One teacher had the impression that, initially, the governors saw Specialist status as just another initiative. However, they have more recently recognised the importance and usefulness of this status and of having a rolling review programme (both for Beacon and for Specialist activities). The headteacher said that he now had *'massive support'* from the governors, and the teacher governor interviewed said that *'as a Governing body we totally support Specialist School status. [We have] a very forward-thinking head [and the SMT have] good vision.'*

There was also an interesting question of *'which specialism?'*: *'A process of elimination ruled out technology – and we didn't really have the strength or motivation in languages or science.'* Performing arts could have been an option, but sport was the final choice: this was an area that was already being developed. It may be harder to have sport as a specialism because it is very difficult to apply this across the curriculum. It was quite a bold decision to become a sports college, and the senior management of the school appear to have thought this through well.

- ◆ secondly, there was a view that *'the vision was already there'*, but Specialist status was needed to *'facilitate'* or to act as a *'catalyst'* for change. Some headteachers emphasised the importance of Specialist status as a vehicle for change. For example, one interviewee advised new Specialist Schools to recognise that *'Specialist School status is a tool, not an end in itself... use it to change culture. It can be a powerful way of enabling you to realise your aims, but it has to part of a broader vision.'* Similarly, another advised: *'Use the Specialist status as a vehicle to bring the school up.'*

### Case study: Specialist status as a catalyst for change

The headteacher of a performing arts college said: *'We went up another gear when we took up performing arts status... the arts department was always strong, but now we have huge productions. Our ambitions were raised when we got performing arts status.'*

Specialist status was the catalyst for creating confidence throughout the school. One teacher commented that she was sure that the *'spirit'* of the school and the confidence that came from becoming a Specialist School had been used across the curriculum to help those who may not have been so good at other, *'more academic'* subjects: *'Performing arts status makes the girls more confident and it makes them realise just because they are doing performing arts they do not let the academic side go.'*

- ◆ finally, there was a view that Specialist status had been the predominant factor in bringing about meaningful change, as illustrated in the following case study.

### Case study: Specialist status as the driving force behind change

The headteacher and deputy head were very clear in their belief that Specialist School status had been a useful means to bring about desired changes. They spoke of Specialist status as being *'a Trojan horse'*, *'a useful and vital tool'* for changing the school culture to one of *'accountability'* in terms of pupil outcomes, teaching quality, target setting and mentoring. As the headteacher stated, *'TC status made the introduction of all this easier as there was a feeling that "we'll all go along with this bloke because he's brought in the money"'*. The deputy head explained that *'becoming a Specialist School validates the SMT because you've won something, so it gives you a momentum which – a bit like just after becoming Prime Minister – provides a great opportunity for change'*. If the changes that are made then actually work and results improve, then it is validated again, and then the process becomes *'self-generating by its own success'*.

In practice, it is very difficult to disentangle the driving forces behind change in a school. Type of intake, prior attainment of an intake, and value-added progress between key stages are all important, in terms of examination improvements. More generally, not only do the relative impacts of the headteacher, the governors, the senior managers and the teaching staff, have to be separated, but there may also be more than one initiative going on in a school. What does seem certain, though, is that these headteachers were multi-skilled, they were willing to be unconventional where necessary, and they all had a sense of vision and direction which, on the whole, they were able to transmit to their staff and students.

## 4.6 Curriculum Improvements

Staff in several of the case-study schools saw curriculum improvements as an important factor behind their performance gains. Looking across these schools, there appear to be three kinds of curriculum improvements:

- ◆ provision of **new courses** beyond the existing curriculum (**curriculum extension**)
- ◆ introduction of **new cross-curricular dimensions** within the existing curriculum (**curriculum change**)
- ◆ modification of the existing curriculum for particular students' needs (**curriculum tailoring**).

Before discussing these, however, it is important to state also that curriculum improvements did not feature in all case-study schools; one headteacher explained: *'We tend to be cautious with curriculum innovation; we watch others take the plunge and observe developments.'*

#### **4.6.1 Provision of new courses beyond the existing curriculum**

In relation to improved performance, some of the case-study school staff described the ways in which they had introduced extra courses (often linked with their designated specialist area) alongside their existing curriculum. The headteacher in one school, for example, reported how *'our designation as a language college...has enabled us to expand the range of facilities and subjects we offer. French, German and Spanish are well established and new courses in Italian and Japanese have strengthened the provision.'*

Another example came from a technology college that had developed a number of *'fast-track courses'* in both (i) mainstream curriculum subjects (ICT, design and technology and mathematics) where pupils work faster than others and take their GCSE in Year 10; and (ii) extra-curricular subjects (music, human physiology and health, and pre-A-level science) taught outside the main school day. In the headteacher's view, these fast track courses had improved performance by helping to *'raise pupils' expectations of what they can achieve, which increases their confidence'*. The deputy head also explained that the success of these courses run by certain departments had increased other departments' expectations, which in turn had brought about more similar innovations.

In developing new courses, however, headteachers had to be careful to keep the whole school on board. Several interviewees stressed the need to keep *all* departments happy, to ensure that no department feels second rate. One teacher noted that *'uniting all staff behind language college status'* had been challenging. Moreover, staff emphasised not only the challenge of integrating the specialism across the curriculum, but also ensuring that the curriculum remained balanced: *'It's a question of emphasis. It shouldn't dominate or detract from the school providing a general education.'*

#### **4.6.2 Introduction of new cross-curricular dimensions**

Many of the case-study schools also reported how Specialist status had led to the introduction of new cross-curricular dimensions into their curriculum. The most common example was the introduction of ICT across the curriculum in technology colleges, but there were also examples related to music, dance and

drama, languages and sport. The case studies below present some illustrations of these kinds of curriculum development.

#### **Case study: ICT across the curriculum**

Senior staff in one technology college cited the enhancement of ICT in all curriculum areas as an important contributor to their success. This was supported by comments from staff in the English and geography departments. One of the English teachers described how *'the last 12 months have seen a real change with using ICT to deliver lessons, which has helped to change pupils' (particularly boys') perceptions of English'*. Similarly, the head of geography, who had included ICT in schemes of work for Years 7 and 8, reported that *'the technology used in geography has helped to make things fun for the students [...] it accelerates the majority of pupils' learning.'*

#### **Case study: languages across the curriculum**

Staff at a language college related their school's success to the development of an *'exciting learning environment'* and *'making coherent links across the curriculum'*. The head of languages spoke of providing a *'curriculum with an international flavour'*. This had led to, for example, the integration of languages and science in a project entitled Science Across Europe (involving students sending letters to schools in Europe). As a result of such developments, the head of science felt that the school was more united in terms of the curriculum, which enabled students and teachers to see that they were not learning in an isolated sense. The headteacher emphasised that their Specialist status had *'enabled them to think creatively and innovatively about the curriculum'*.

#### **Case study: arts across the curriculum**

One school had used its arts status to enrich the whole curriculum. In the words of the headteacher: *'The end game of an arts college is to enrich... my aim is not to produce dancers but to enrich the life of mathematicians and scientists.'* Music, drama and dance were well integrated into every department, reflecting the requirement for each department to have one cross-curricular project each year. Examples included using dance to help teach symmetry in maths, drama and role play to learn about topics in history, and music in an English project about radio plays. Teachers spoke positively about such collaborations: *'Now I've done it, I probably wouldn't teach it any other way. The kids have got more confidence, and it means that we're able to teach [maths] in a different way.'* Interviews with students suggested similarly that using arts had helped their learning by developing presentation skills and self-confidence: *'When you go into other lessons you're not afraid to express yourself.'*

### Case study: sport across the curriculum

In one of the inner-city schools, sport was used as a means of involving students in the life of the school. The ethos was one of inclusion or, as one teacher said, '*mass participation*'. There were opportunities for everyone to take part in something. For the headteacher, '*PE means social inclusion*'. Physical education was said to be a useful tool to involve young people: being involved helps students, including those from challenging circumstances, to stay engaged with school life. Taking a role in sport was believed to give them skills that they could apply to other subjects and in daily life.

The school uses PE to develop student skills and performance in all areas of the curriculum. Skills that are developed in PE – such as leadership, teamwork, cooperation and communication – can be translated into other subjects or departments. In addition, PE is sometimes combined with other, academic subjects. For example a joint PE/mathematics lesson was observed in which students had to do fitness time trials and then use computers to work out correlations and other statistics. Both the PE and mathematics teachers were present at the lesson, and both believed that this was a good way of getting the students involved in their lessons.

#### 4.6.3 Modification of the existing curriculum

A further type of curriculum improvement mentioned in some of the case-study schools was that of modifying the existing mainstream curriculum in order to make it more accessible for certain groups of students. The clearest example of this came from a technology college which placed a strong emphasis on having '*a flexible curriculum in which kids will achieve, [as opposed to one] in which they are bound to fail*'. The headteacher was critical of the inflexibility of the National Curriculum and argued that Specialist status had enabled her to implement changes in order to better meet the needs of her students. For example, in response to many of her students' needs as young people who had English as an Additional Language, she had made modern foreign languages optional as soon as she could. Her view was that '*we need to be creative [so that] if one thing doesn't work we try something else*'. She felt that, although '*bound by thousands of targets*', Specialist Schools were being given '*curriculum freedom*'.

Another example of more localised curriculum modification was in a technology college where the science and maths teachers set up a go-kart project to engage some of the more difficult Year 10 students. On the basis of these students' interest in cars and motorbikes, the teachers set up a visit to Brands Hatch. This was followed by the building of an engine powered go-kart in school as a way to learn some associated science and mathematics.

## 4.7 Extra-curricular Activities

This section explores the role of extra-curricular activities and community links in the improved performance of Specialist Schools. It was clear from interviews with school staff and students that many of the 20 case-study schools had well-

developed programmes of extra-curricular activities for their students to take part in. There were examples of activities that had been introduced as a result of schools receiving funding to support their specialism and also of pre-existing activities. In addition, the development of external links – for example, with feeder primary schools, local businesses and adult learners – had been a requirement of Specialist School status. Central to this research has been an attempt to uncover what the impact of such provision has been and might be – from the perspectives of those interviewed – on students’ academic performance.

### 4.7.1 Activities

The types of activities schools have made available to their students are wide ranging and take place before, during and after school hours. It was clear that whilst the majority of the schools visited offered a variety of opportunities to suit students’ needs and interests, before taking on Specialist School status, the new funding has enabled schools to develop and enhance the provision of activities in their particular specialism. As a result, technology colleges have paid particular attention to enhancing their technology-based activities and language schools have focused on extra-curricular language activities, and so on.

The most popular types of extra-curricular activities included the following:

- ◆ ICT-related activities
- ◆ the arts; drama, music and dance
- ◆ language clubs, trips and exchange programmes
- ◆ sports clubs and activities
- ◆ Duke of Edinburgh award scheme
- ◆ activity weeks
- ◆ revision classes and curriculum enhancement
- ◆ lunch-time classes
- ◆ master classes
- ◆ summer schools
- ◆ breakfast clubs
- ◆ homework clubs.<sup>17</sup>

In a number of schools, extra-curricular activities were not seen as ‘bolt-on’, but as an extension of their (Specialist) curriculum. As one school prospectus stated: *‘We seek to enhance the curriculum through a wide range of extra-curricular activities...providing a chance for the girls to engage in activities which draw upon the knowledge and skills they have acquired through the curriculum throughout the year.’*

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<sup>17</sup> Some of the Specialist Schools were in Excellence in Cities areas and it is likely that the extra-curricular activities include a number that have arisen as a result of implementing this policy.

### Case study: extending and enriching the curriculum

In one school, monies had almost exclusively been used to appoint new staff within the Specialist area, which had enabled the school to offer the students many more opportunities to participate in the arts, both before and after school. Facilities are available for students' use from 7.30 am to 5 pm. This was felt to be particularly important in this inner-city school which does not have playing fields and has a catchment area characterised by high levels of social deprivation. The headteacher stressed the importance of extra-curricular provision for '*kids who haven't got homes to go to*'.

In those schools where extra-curricular activities were felt to be an important part of the life of the school and of the all-round development of students' interests and social skills, high levels of participation were encouraged. This was reflected in the student discussion groups. Students indicated that they were encouraged to take part in different activities, whatever their ability. One headteacher was clear about extending her ethos of inclusiveness beyond the curriculum, noting that if there were too many students wanting to join the choir, the school would simply set up another! This approach was also evident in a language school where staff responded positively to students' requests for new activities, such as the establishment of a rugby club; one student interviewee was very enthusiastic about the variety of opportunities made available: '*There's a club for everything!*' In some schools, there was reference to staff being paid for their additional work. One headteacher commented that the '*goodwill of teachers is rewarded not exploited*'.

It is worth noting that, in one school in particular, a school which the headteacher at one point described as an '*exam factory*', extra-curricular activity was identified as an area for development. At the time of this research, there were very few opportunities in this school for students to develop skills and relationships outside the curriculum. While there had been a resurgence of sports activities in recent months, students' participation was dependent on aptitude rather than interest and some facilities, such as the tennis courts, were not available for students' use outside of the school day. This was an aspect of their school that these students felt could be improved upon.

#### 4.7.2 Community links

It was clear from the interviews that a smaller proportion of the case-study schools had succeeded in developing external links when compared with the proportion that had extended their extra-curricular provision. However, one community college which specialised in technology offered up to 170 computer courses for adult learners. A number of other schools had concentrated their efforts on developing their relationships with feeder primary schools. For example, one language college had loaned language learning software to feeder schools and made their technician available to maintain loaned IT equipment. Another hosted a summer school for Year 6 pupils from their feeder primary schools. A technology college had also developed these links using ICT with the focus being on '*the sharing of good practice with our family of primary schools and providing greater access to the community of our excellent ICT resources. This includes the development of the school Intranet and access to school ICT and learning resources from home.*'

Links with local business, charities and other organisations had also been developed as a result of Specialist School funding. One school was taking part in the British Airways language learning 'Flag' scheme: *'These BA Flag awards, they really help with Spanish. It helps fantastically with your confidence.'* Another school was part of the European 'Comenius' project which links up schools and students across Europe, and another was working with three national computer companies.

#### **Case study: extending community links**

In one inner-city school, community links had been greatly strengthened since Specialist status had been granted. The community programme had been very successful in bringing a whole range of different groups into the school including:

- ◆ parents
- ◆ Asian women
- ◆ adults over 50
- ◆ teaching staff from primary schools
- ◆ teaching staff from secondary schools.

One member of staff discussed a particular Saturday when about 700 people had been in the school for various events. Similarly, a parent governor emphasised *'the place is packed, with mums and dads everywhere, every single Saturday'*.

#### **4.7.3 The impact of extra-curricular activities and community links on students' performance**

There was a consensus of opinion amongst teachers and students alike that taking part in extra-curricular activities has had a positive impact on students. In some cases, it was felt that these activities and links had had a positive impact on students' academic performance, but, as a number of teachers noted, it was difficult to provide quantitative evidence for this. Most frequently interviewees felt that taking part in activities outside the regular curriculum helped to:

- ◆ improve students' confidence and self-esteem
- ◆ motivate students and raise their expectations
- ◆ contribute to the ethos and culture of the school
- ◆ ease the transition from primary to secondary school.

**Improving students' confidence and self-esteem.** A strong message emanating from the interviews with both teachers and students was the belief that students' involvement with extra-curricular activities and work with external organisations could help to improve their confidence and self-esteem. This was frequently felt to have a positive 'knock on' effect on students' attitudes towards school and helped to raise their aspirations. It was clear that the majority of schools visited as part of this research were focused on developing 'the whole child' and not simply on academic success.

### Case study: extra-curricular work improving students' confidence

One headteacher felt strongly that the purpose of his school was much broader than meeting the demands of the National Curriculum: *'It's to do with how kids feel about themselves; you grow as a result of that.'* This school (a language school) had succeeded in developing a number of cross-curricular links, and a group of boys had written a rock opera on the basis of music work completed. They had performed their work during a trip to Germany. The headteacher of this school, who was committed to a comprehensive, inclusive ethos, felt that the students had grown in confidence as a result of their experience: *'These lads came back six inches taller!'*

### Case study: the advantages of a flexible curriculum

Teachers at a performing arts school felt that the emphasis on arts was particularly important in providing students with an alternative route to success – providing areas for them to excel at which are not academic: *'Girls struggling in lots of areas may still get on very well in music and drama. There are still areas where they're doing well.'* The headteacher also felt, however, that developing students' strengths in the arts also had a positive impact on their performance in other subjects: *'It gives them confidence in other areas.'*

The flexibility of the curriculum in this school enabled students to choose options which allowed them to pursue arts subjects (for example at the expense of a second language), if it best suited their needs, and the headteacher was clear that many were staying on to post-16 education as a result of choosing an 'arts-based' route.

**Motivation and raising expectations.** Related to the discussion of the impact of extra-curricular activities on students' confidence and self-esteem, interviewees also stressed that such participation can motivate students in ways which help to generate enthusiasm for work in the classroom. As one teacher commented: *'The performing arts enhance the children's creativity and motivation.'* Another teacher felt that *'it is good for students to do things they enjoy doing and it will encourage them to learn'*. Students in a number of schools echoed these thoughts. One said: *'They make you willing to learn'*; and another felt that *'they are something fun associated with school'*.

In some schools, teachers felt that the enhanced extra-curricular programmes put in place as a result of Specialist status had proved most beneficial for particular groups of students – perhaps underachieving boys, or middle- or high-ability students. For example, a technology college had introduced a scheme whereby high-achieving students could take part in additional courses such as physiology and health in their own time (and sit a GCSE at the end of the course), which helped *'raise pupils' expectations of what they can achieve'*. Other schools encouraged participation by all students, whatever their aptitude, and felt that all students had benefited equally in terms of the experience of learning new skills. In one school, the language clubs that had been set up have helped students learn *'accidentally'*, in a way that was more fun than lessons. This was also felt by a tutor to have been particularly important for older students who may have become *'switched off'* from languages.

Some schools had used their extra-curricular programmes and community links in a targeted way, to help overcome stereotypes or negative attitudes towards particular subjects. The headteacher of a girls' school was particularly interested in breaking down gender stereotypes and described how taking part in a language scheme run by British Airways could raise girls' career expectations: they visited British Airways thinking about becoming air stewardesses and returned to school considering careers as pilots! Another school was also using extra-curricular activities (a club for designing, making and testing rockets) to encourage students to develop a positive attitude towards maths and science.

**Ethos and culture.** In its broadest sense, the importance a school attached to its programme of extra-curricular activities reflected the nature of the school's vision and ethos. In the schools featured in this research, the emphasis was upon developing the whole student. School is not simply about ensuring that students achieve their full academic potential; it is also about enabling students and staff to contribute to the life of the school more generally: *'Extra-curricular activities are essential ingredients of a vibrant school. All of us need variety, need some escape from pressure sometimes, need to have fun together.'* Students also recognised the need to enjoy their school and to have opportunities to take a break from formal learning: *'It [extra-curricular activities] makes school really interesting and that's probably why people do better, because there's a lot of people enjoying what they do.'* As such, there was a sense in which teachers and students alike were active participants or 'stakeholders' in their school, a feeling that was enhanced by taking part in activities beyond meeting the requirements of the National Curriculum.

Building relationships outside the classroom appears to be a key element in helping to sustain and develop a school's culture. One school was committed to a comprehensive ethos, and the headteacher felt that extra-curricular activities encouraged those students *'on the fringe of the school'* to feel included and valued. Another teacher felt it was important to offer students opportunities to find things that they were good at in order to boost their confidence, but also noted that: *'It is an opportunity to get to see another side of the pupil and the opportunity for them to get to see another side of the teacher...the extra-curricular activities help enhance the curriculum a lot.'* Fostering relationships between staff and students, while enhancing the family atmosphere in some schools, was also felt by some to encourage students to seek support from teachers in lessons. One student reflected that *'you get to know your teacher. In your coursework, if you didn't know them, you might not want to tell her if you had a problem.'*

In addition, students' participation in extra-curricular activities also enhanced relationships between students. One student commented that, *'The ice-skating trip in Year 10 was really good'* because it had enabled people to get to know each other at the start of the GCSE courses. Students and teachers alike felt that activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme also helped to develop team-working and problem-solving and independent learning skills.

**Easing transitions.** A number of schools had used Specialist School funds to help enhance their links with local feeder primaries. Often this included providing primary schools with ICT equipment or technical support. For example, one technology college was sharing ICT equipment and providing

access to their Intranet for feeder primary school pupils. A governor and a teacher in this school stressed the importance of these links: *'When pupils come into the secondary school, they know the system already.'* A language school had developed a closer working relationship with its primary feeder school by introducing languages in Year 6. As a result of this work, students were introduced to a second language upon entry in Year 7.

## 4.8 Resources

This section of the report describes how Specialist School funding is used in schools for extra resources, and examples are provided to demonstrate some of the ways in which headteachers, members of staff and students thought the extra resources had impacted on performance. All the case-study schools visited by the research team had benefited from one or more of the following extra resources within the school.

- ◆ Construction and/or modification of new on-site buildings and facilities. These include ICT suites, maths and science blocks, sports halls and gymnasiums.
- ◆ Extra staffing and the ability to offer more competitive salaries for more experienced, qualified staff. In addition to teachers, this staffing included:
  - IT technicians responsible for the maintenance of ICT equipment and management of a school's website.
  - Technicians to assist class teachers within the science and technology curriculum.
- ◆ Provision of new ICT equipment, including PCs, laptops for teachers and students and new software.

### 4.8.1 School facilities and resources

The selected Specialist Schools have been able to use the extra funding to improve their facilities. It was reported, in some cases, that this has had a positive impact on students' attitudes. For example, staff in one school suggested that investment in a new mathematics block has raised the profile of the subject for both staff and students. The new building was an indication of the importance of the subject to students and had also improved staff morale. As a consequence, teaching has improved. At another school, a new sports hall and a City Learning Centre<sup>18</sup> (the bid was won on the strength of the school's sports college status) were to be opened in the next year.

Having extra resources to upgrade school facilities can also impact indirectly on success; it generates a positive spiral for fund raising for other parts of the school and as a consequence creates a conducive learning environment. In one school, the headteacher commented that raising funds to build new facilities had

<sup>18</sup> This school is in an Excellence in Cities partnership.

*'increased confidence to bid for money and find other sources'* for a library, science laboratory and English block. The headteacher of this school found that parents were more willing to give money to the school because they believed that the money would be spent directly on their children's education.

#### **4.8.2 Human resources**

Some schools had used the extra funding to employ more teachers and stressed that, as a consequence, additional activities could be offered. For example, extra staffing in one school had meant that all Year 7 students are able to have music lessons and there were generally more opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities. Emphasis was also placed on having good support staff who could free up teachers to teach and focus on the whole class, whilst individual students received help from the support staff. This contributes to the quality of teaching the students receive.

One headteacher had used the extra funding to create new staff roles related to the school's specialism. The school had employed a Sports Development Officer for each of six sports. This has led to a focus on the sports curriculum, and again helped with providing a more enhanced, quality learning experience for students.

Some schools have focused on employing technicians for science and design and technology. A teacher in one school stressed that good technicians are *'like gold dust'* and the extra money has made it possible to employ an experienced technician to support the design and technology curriculum. In another school the importance of technicians was stressed: *'Technician support is everything.'* ICT technicians were needed to maintain the computer networks and to let the teachers do their job without having to deal with software/hardware problems. One teacher commented that it was important to keep the computers working and running smoothly because, if problems occur, it *'knocks teachers' confidence when using IT in lessons'*. Teachers who have a good support network do not have to deal with ICT problems, thus allowing them to concentrate on using ICT effectively for teaching and learning.

#### **4.8.3 ICT resources**

The majority of the case-study schools visited had used Specialist School funding to invest in new ICT equipment. Teachers felt that technology offered students a variety of learning resources and made subject areas more interesting. In some instances, teachers made a direct link between utilising ICT during lessons and improved students' performance.

Generally teachers recognised that ICT enhanced students' learning and had a particular impact on boys, especially within the languages curriculum. One teacher's comment reflects the views of others: *'We've learnt about how students learn though the use of IT. They like the interaction with the computer. They can assume some responsibility and give them the chance to do things wrong.'* A teacher in another school identified extra resources as one of the most important factors in the school's success: *'ICT has been a big way of improving results.'*

Incorporating ICT into the curriculum and schemes of work has meant that teachers have been able to offer more interesting and interactive lessons for students. One geography teacher commented on the benefit of access to ICT equipment: *'The technology used in geography has helped to make things fun for the students... it accelerates the majority of pupils' learning.'* In another school, one interviewee commented that the use of an interactive white board made mathematics teaching more interesting and therefore further engaged the students, especially the boys.

ICT appears to have assisted particularly those students who require additional help or those who have special educational needs. For example, one Year 8 student commented: *'There is a programme on the computer called Successmaker and that helps people who have difficulty in maths and spelling. I go for maths, and [named student] goes for spelling and it helps us.'*

In some cases, schools have only funded the department related to their Specialist area. It was emphasised, however, that the benefit of the resources in one particular department cascaded throughout the whole school. For example, one teacher highlighted that although extra ICT resources were purchased only for use in the language department, this in turn had freed up existing computers to be used by other departments.

It is important to note, however, that students' initial enthusiasm towards learning with computers can decline, and members of staff saw it as a challenge to keep students interested: *'It's difficult to keep enthusiasm for using IT unless teachers have new ideas or new software.'* Some Year 10 students echoed this view: *'Some of the programmes are used from Year 7 to Year 11 and you are still using the same ones, some of them are very basic. Some of them [CD ROMS] are boring; they are good to start off with but then they get boring.'* It appears, therefore, that although the initial investment in computers and computer software enhances learning and enthusiasm, it is important to continue upgrading and improving ICT programmes to keep students engaged in using computers to learn.

The provision of ICT resources, then, along with the other factors identified in this chapter, was important to the success of these high performing schools. Implementing or providing each of these factors, however, was no guarantee of success. The factors had to be brought together into a coherent whole: the next chapter outlines and examines the processes by which these factors were brought together in the case-study schools.

## 5. WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

This chapter briefly outlines previous qualitative research on Specialist Schools and then focuses on the major findings of this project.

### 5.1 Previous Research on Specialist Schools

There has already been some work on the identification of the factors that make a Specialist School successful, most notably, the work of Tooley and Howes (1999) and Gillmon (2000). Mention should also be made of Jesson who, as noted earlier, has carried out influential work on the 'value-added' dimension in the test and examination results of Specialist Schools. (Jesson and Taylor, 2000; 2001). It is through his work that it has been possible to identify the highest-performing Specialist Schools: Jesson's research has shown that they were not only doing well in terms of 'raw' examination results, but were also adding value to their students' achievements. These students were, in general, achieving better results than would have been predicted on the basis of prior attainment (key stage 2 results) upon entry to the Specialist School. In other words, the success of these schools was not due simply to the fact that they had high-ability intakes. These schools were doing something exceptional: they were providing a context within which students were able to achieve beyond predicted expectations. Hence the need for further research that would try to identify, qualitatively, what these success factors are.

Tooley and Howes, in compiling *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Schools*, visited ten TCT schools which had made the most progress in terms of their value-added statistics in the previous year. At these case-study schools, they talked to headteachers, senior managers, governors and students (Tooley and Howes, 1999, p.3). These interviews enabled them to build up a picture from which they '*sought to distil elements of good practice*', and this, in turn, enabled them to identify seven headings, which they labelled '*the seven habits of highly effective schools*' (Tooley and Howes, 1999, p.38). These are as follows:

*Our sense is that an effective school will be one which has:*

- ◆ *A clear ethos, with high and consistent expectations of staff and pupils*
- ◆ *A visionary leader and competent management structures*
- ◆ *A clear focus on students' learning*
- ◆ *Use of innovation to promote its goals*
- ◆ *Quality control to ensure that aims and objectives are reached*
- ◆ *Organisational structures which are in empathy with the school ethos*
- ◆ *Strong parental and community links.*

Gillmon's work, *Best Practice in Technology Colleges*, provides guidance for schools with ambitions to take on Specialist status. She sets out a number of 'key characteristics', identified by successful Specialist Schools themselves, that were said to have had 'a significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning' (Gillmon, 2000, p.5). These factors are as follows:

- ◆ *A high investment in staff learning*
- ◆ *The use of adults other than teachers for pupil support*
- ◆ *Longer than average school days*
- ◆ *Additional teaching opportunities through Saturday and summer schools*
- ◆ *Rigorous monitoring of planning, teaching and assessment by the SMT*
- ◆ *Combined academic-pastoral monitoring of pupils*
- ◆ *The use of baseline testing of literacy and numeracy on entry*
- ◆ *Emphasis on improving literacy levels*
- ◆ *Involving pupils in self-assessment and target setting*
- ◆ *Flexible approaches to meeting individual pupil needs*
- ◆ *Extensive use of ICT as a tool to support learning.*

Some of these habits or characteristics resonate with what the NFER research team found as a result of fieldwork visits to 20 successful Specialist Schools – though the wording and the ways in which the success factors were expressed may vary. Some do not resonate, particularly 'longer than average school days', 'Saturday and summer schools', and an 'emphasis on improving literacy levels'. This may be because of changes in emphasis in policy, or because the schools have moved on to new approaches or strategies since the previous investigations. Or different responses may have been given simply because the latest set of school interviewees made different emphases or had different opinions to those previously visited. The degree of overlap between these previous findings (or factors) and those identified in the present study is discussed in subsequent sections in this chapter.

The following **key recurring success factors** were identified by our interviewees:

- ◆ Interconnectedness
- ◆ Whole-school ethos
- ◆ Management styles
- ◆ Teachers going the extra mile
- ◆ Innovative use of staffing
- ◆ Active use of performance data
- ◆ A focus on the individual
- ◆ A broad and flexible curriculum
- ◆ Resources and status.

Some of these factors, particularly teacher effort, the use of performance data and resource provision, can be seen to be closely related to 'success' defined in terms of test and examination results. For others, such as 'interconnectedness' and 'ethos', however, it is less easy to make this connection with examination success – but all of these were deemed by interviewees to be important ingredients in the general success of their schools. Whilst it is difficult to directly correlate qualities such as 'pastoral care', 'a positive ethos' or 'spirited leadership' to improved student examination performance, few would dispute the importance of the contribution of these types of qualities to the overall success of a school, and hence they have been included in this discussion.

## 5.2 Interconnectedness

The need for all the various essential factors to be implemented together, in a coherent and 'joined up' way, is, in itself, one of the most important requirements for a Specialist School to be successful. The managers of these schools have to achieve a balance between the broad aspects of a 'school system' and a focus on the individual student. Achieving this balance, and appreciating the interconnectedness of the various strands of school improvement, may be the key to sustaining success.

'Interconnectedness' as such has not been mentioned in previous research on the success factors of Specialist Schools. This was probably partly because it is a broad and difficult term to define, but also because previous work aimed to provide checklists for action, and this meant that the authors had to be practical and specific in terms of the good practice guidance identified. Despite the difficulties with this term, it is important to recognise the significance of interconnectedness. It is about the whole being more than the sum of its parts. The basic message from the interviewees was that the success of a school does not simply depend on putting in place a number of easily identifiable strategies or a checklist of required activities: there is no simple 'recipe' for success. Schools and classrooms are complex organisations in which many human interactions take place, and these, in turn, are located in a variety of societal contexts. Many schools can have the various elements or ingredients of success, but only a few actually implement them in an holistic way. On being asked what they felt had been the main single factor in the overall success of their school, the majority of respondents were unable to identify one single factor: *'it's a combination'*, *'it's impossible to say'*.

This view was mentioned by many of our interviewees. It is also a view that has been developed in the school improvement literature in the last few years, namely the move away from a 'shopping list' of key success factors towards whole-school approaches, multiplicity of inputs, integrated vision, broader goals and wider implementation. The headteachers at the case-study schools had to be multi-skilled and had to constantly keep in mind 'the whole picture'. For example, it was no good being superb academically if the social and pastoral needs of children were not being met. There is no benefit in collecting huge amounts of performance data if this data is not acted upon on a regular basis. All the factors listed here have to be pulled together into a coherent whole to produce an institution that *'buzzes'* with success. This can partly be done, for example,

through the use of a headteacher's vision, or via the creation of a whole-school ethos.

### 5.3 Whole-school Ethos

The importance of school ethos or 'culture' is another area that has attracted attention in recent school improvement literature. Sometimes the whole-school ethos is the 'glue' that brings about the interconnectedness described above. Our study found evidence that in high-performing schools there usually exists a positive, definable ethos that permeates the entire institution from top to bottom. This will involve things such as '*superb student – teacher relations*', '*a shared sense of vision*' and '*genuine working together*' to achieve '*common goals*'. In several of the schools, respondents stressed linkages between the academic and the pastoral: there were ways of doing things that were agreed at all levels of the school, for example, walking between lessons, writing down targets, talking to visitors (further examples of the importance of school ethos can be found in Section 4.3). Tooley and Howes also identified a 'focus on school ethos' as being important: '*The ethos reflects high and consistent expectations of children and staff*' (1999, p.8). Gillmon does not specify the importance of ethos as such, but she does mention the need to combine academic and pastoral monitoring, and also describes the need for a '*whole-school scientific and technological culture*' (2000, pp. 5, 10 –18).

### 5.4 Management Styles

This was, in some respects, not a particularly new finding, though some of the strategies being used by headteachers were definitely innovative. '*Strong leadership and management*' was identified as a successful habit by Tooley and Howes, and has also featured heavily in the school improvement literature: but what does strong leadership actually mean in the context of a Specialist School? In the case-study schools, there appeared to be a democratic and facilitative kind of leadership (though there was one possible exception to this general rule). A very successful Specialist School has to have clear leadership, but also there must be a framework where teachers (and even students) can contribute new ideas. In particular there must be '*vision*' and what headteachers called '*spirit*' or '*energy*'.

Some of the headteachers deliberately, and justifiably, presented themselves as being radical and innovative. Two principals, for example, described themselves as being '*maverick*' in their approach to leadership. One said that Specialist School managers '*should always be looking at what's on the horizon*'. These headteachers seemed to be particularly good at involving themselves in initiatives, at networking and at identifying what comes next and what is '*round the corner*' in terms of school improvement. They were not afraid of innovation and realised the importance of having the rest of the school on board, of having an '*ownership culture*'.

## 5.5 Teachers 'Going the Extra Mile'

Without exception, the senior managers interviewed were positive about the quality and commitment of their teaching staff. It was not just that these schools had good-quality classroom teachers – they appeared to have teachers who were highly professional, vibrant, enthusiastic and inventive. The student interviewees gave strong support to this view. Whilst some mentioned that there was a degree of variability in their teaching, the great majority spoke positively about their teachers, their approachability and the effort that they put into lessons and encouraging students.

Teachers, including, in some cases, Advanced Skills Teachers, demonstrated their enthusiasm by making themselves available to help students, by presenting lessons in a variety of ways (often using new technology) and by voluntarily devoting many extra hours to extra-curricular activities, revision classes, and so on. One senior interviewee said: *'They don't just go the extra mile; they go for an extra three miles!'*

## 5.6 Innovative Use of Staffing

In several schools, the skilful use of support staff was evident (and Gillmon has identified the use of adults other than teachers as a key characteristic of effective schools). Many of the administrative, preparatory and bureaucratic tasks of classroom work had been taken over by support and technical staff, *'leaving teachers free to teach'*. This undoubtedly contributed to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. The headteachers of schools where this was happening gave their support staff training and relatively high status, though, as one senior manager acknowledged, pay levels may still be an issue. These staff were encouraged to make full contributions to, and to be fully involved in, the life of the school: *'We're all in it together.'* Teachers and heads of department had great respect for the significant contribution support staff were making. One head of mathematics commented that their contribution was *'phenomenal'*.

## 5.7 Active Use of Performance Data

As can be seen from the more detailed discussion presented in Section 4.4, sophisticated monitoring and evaluation systems were in place in all of the schools featured. These included, in most cases, the use of value-added data, generated by the school itself, by the LEA, or as a 'bought-in' package, such as Yellis (Year Eleven Information System) or CAT scores (NFER-NELSON Cognitive Ability Tests). Not only were systems in place, there was also a good deal of evidence to show that these were in active, regular use, and that monitoring was feeding directly into teaching and learning: data is used and not just collected.

Staff at a variety of levels were involved in these processes, as in many cases, were the students themselves. As a result of this, accountability became more

prominent within these schools: *'Accountability definitely helps – that focuses people's minds.'* Everyone was aware of the targets they needed to meet and what they needed to do to achieve this. Previous research has noted the importance of *'involving pupils in self-assessment and target setting'* (Gillmon, 2000, p.5), *'quality control'* and the need for a *'data rich'* environment (Tooley and Howes, 1999, pp.28 – 30).

## 5.8 Focus on the Individual

The case studies included some of the largest schools in the country, and 12 of the schools featured had over a thousand pupils on roll. Some employed more than 100 teaching staff. In this kind of environment it is very easy for students to be 'lost' to the system: *'It's a big school; we could lose individuals.'* In all the case-study schools, however, measures were in place to ensure that individual students did not become anonymous. These included sixth form, academic and pastoral mentoring, regular consultations with staff, house systems and a variety of extra-curricular opportunities.

Even in Specialist Schools where there is a strong emphasis on development planning and school and departmental targets, strategies and structures are in place to ensure that the individual student is not ignored or left behind. The student discussions indicated that generally these young people felt that most, if not all, of their needs were being met by the school. Their teachers treated them with respect and acknowledged their individual needs. This is a factor that has been identified previously by Gillmon as *'flexible approaches to meeting individual pupil needs'* (2000, p.5): Tooley and Howes do not focus on individual students *per se*, but do stress the importance of a *'differentiated curriculum'*, *'inclusion'* and *'special needs'* (1999, pp.18 – 23).

## 5.9 A Broad and Flexible Curriculum (and Extra-curriculum)

Several headteachers, and a number of other respondents, stressed the importance of giving students a wide range of learning experiences and the need for flexibility in the curriculum. In some ways, this was a move away from a previous focus on numeracy and literacy (which, for example, Gillmon had identified as a key characteristic). Flexibility and variety were manifested not just in the formal curriculum on offer, but also in the number of extra-curricular activities available and in the provision of additional subjects, such as GNVQ Information Technology, an extra language, music, drama, art or physical education.

In some of the schools, ICT, in particular, was being used across the curriculum in very innovative ways. In one school, there were computer screens in all the buildings, providing information about room changes, where examinations were taking place, lunchtime clubs, and so on. All staff were trained in, and had access to, the new technology (*'keep 20 per cent of your ICT budget for training'*). In

another school all sixth-formers had palm-top computers on which to do their work. This school also stressed the importance of ICT across the curriculum. There were monitors and Powerpoint projectors in most classrooms, and students were confident in the use of all types of ICT.

In a sports college, all students took GCSE Physical Education, and a huge range of team and individual sports was available. These activities gave the students confidence, broadened their experiences and gave them valuable interpersonal skills. A similar process was occurring at a performing arts college, where art, music and drama were being used to increase the motivation and self-esteem of students across the full ability range.

### 5.10 Resources and Status

Many of the senior managers acknowledged the importance of extra funding, saying things along the lines of '*funding obviously helps*'. Often the extra money acquired through the achievement of Specialist status was for capital projects, such as the building of a sports hall, or the installation of an ICT network, but funding was also used for staffing – for example, for the employment of Advanced Skills Teachers, Sports Development Officers, extra technicians and so on.

In addition, many respondents said that the new *status* was important. This was not just a case of having a plaque on the wall: it was about improving community standing, working with others and sharing best practice. Some respondents said that the community status of the school was even more important than the funding. Although some of the student interviewees were unsure as to what Specialist status meant, they were, in the vast majority of cases, proud of their school and its achievements.

**In conclusion**, these were some of the most important 'success' factors identified by Specialist School headteachers, staff and students. It must be stressed once more, however, as is now well established in school improvement research, that there are no easy solutions, no 'quick fixes' and no instant recipes for success, even for schools of this quality. One of the main ingredients of success in any school is the continued hard work of staff and students, and the interconnectedness of all these activities. Without these key ingredients, the other factors listed are unlikely to make any significant impact.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Ranking exercise for first sample of Specialist Schools

The selection of high performing and improving schools was undertaken as follows:

- ◆ All schools were allocated a rank according to the value-added score assigned to them in Jesson's analysis (the level of improvement from key stage 3 to key stage 4).
- ◆ Schools were then re-sorted and re-ranked on an iterative basis, firstly by their percentage of five A\* to C grades, then by their percentage improvement between 1996 and 2000, and then by the second value-added score identified by Jesson (the difference between observed and predicted scores).
- ◆ The sum of all 4 ranks was then calculated and the schools were re-ranked accordingly.
- ◆ An initial sample, comprising the top 20 ranked schools, was then identified and additional school-level data obtained from the NFER's Register of Schools, in order to ascertain the extent to which they represented different geographic, socio-economic and structural criteria.
- ◆ Subsequently the sample was modified to incorporate more local authority maintained schools – the original sample had included five City Technology Colleges and six voluntary-aided schools. The sample for the telephone survey included schools ranked, as above, from one to 36.

During the telephone survey, further schools were added to the sample in cases where schools, for a variety of reasons were unable to take part in the study. The study obtained data from schools ranked from two to 43.

## Appendix B

### Analysis of OFSTED reports

The following categories have been formulated to provide a framework for conducting the analysis of the OFSTED reports:

#### **Leadership and Management**

- ◆ Finance
- ◆ Structure of Management
- ◆ Staffing and Professional Development
- ◆ Assessment

#### **Teaching, Assessment and Curriculum**

- ◆ Length of school day
- ◆ Quality of teaching
- ◆ What is delivered in the curriculum
- ◆ Assessment of pupils' work and reports to parents

#### **Accommodation and Learning Resources**

- ◆ ICT facilities
- ◆ Library facilities
- ◆ Provision for private study
- ◆ Size and quality of classrooms

#### **Ethos**

- ◆ Attitudes
- ◆ Behaviour and Discipline

#### **Personal Development (pupil)**

- ◆ Spiritual, Social and Moral
- ◆ Future Career

#### **Extra-Curricular**

#### **Community Links**

- ◆ Support from the school to the community  
(e.g. link to feeder primary schools)
- ◆ Support from the community to the school  
(e.g. funding for school from business)

## Appendix C

### Telephone Interview: data collection proforma



#### Performance Gains in Specialist Schools: What Makes the Difference?

#### Telephone Interview: Data Collection Proforma

**Introduction/Background.** Identify yourself and explain that we are working on a project for the Technology Colleges Trust. As part of this project 20 Specialist Schools/CTCs have been identified which are performing particularly well. Professor David Jesson has carried out some quantitative work which shows that these 20 schools have been performing well on both 'raw' examination results and in terms of 'value added' results. We are trying to find out what the factors are behind this success and we wondered if you could spare about 15 minutes to answer a few questions (on the telephone) about your school. Is it convenient to talk now or shall I ring again at a more appropriate time? Please note that neither you nor your school will be identified in any report produced as a result of this research.

**Interviewer:**

**Date:**

**School:**

**Interviewee/Job title:**

1. How would you describe your catchment area? [inner city/urban/mixed/rural]
2. [Approx.] What proportion of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals?
3. What type of Specialist School are you?/What are your entry policies?
4. Why did you choose this particular 'specialism'?
5. When did your school become a Specialist School?
6. What were your reasons for becoming a Specialist School?
7. What do you think are the reasons for your improved examination results?
8. In the last two or three years, what would you say has been the main single factor in the overall success of your school?
9. What other factors have contributed to your overall success? [e.g. pastoral policy, school culture/ethos]

10. [Optional: check that these possible factors have been covered] **To what extent have the following contributed to your success?** [select appropriate prompts]:
  - ◆ Leadership/management
  - ◆ Assessment and monitoring/use of data/self-evaluation
  - ◆ Quality of teaching/commitment of staff
  - ◆ Resources/accommodation/ICT facilities
  - ◆ School culture or ethos
  - ◆ Curriculum and extra-curricular activities
  - ◆ External/community links
11. **What general advice would you give to a school that has just taken on Specialist status?**
12. **Is there any specific advice you would give to other Specialist Schools about raising and sustaining students' examination performance?**
13. **To what extent has your Specialist status encouraged contact with other schools. In what ways have you been able to help other schools?**
14. [Optional: we may know this] **Are you involved in any other major initiatives apart from the Specialist Schools programme (e.g. Excellence in Cities)?**
15. **Are there any negative aspects of being a Specialist School? What are these?**
16. **We are hoping to be able to carry out more detailed fieldwork for this project. Would you be willing to have a researcher visit your school to interview two or three key staff and a small group of students? [If it seems appropriate to set a date/time, do so].**

## Appendix D

### Criteria for the selection of fieldwork case-study schools

The process for selecting the ten schools for detailed fieldwork involved the research team drawing up a list of potential schools on the basis of information obtained from the school's OFSTED reports, the School Performance Tables and telephone interview data. Advice from the project Steering Group about what criteria should be included was also taken into account. The criteria for selecting the case-study schools were as follows:

- ◆ **Type of specialism:** language, technology, performing arts or sport.
- ◆ **Geography**
- ◆ **Length of time as a Specialist School:** i.e. 'maturity' as a Specialist School.
- ◆ **Sex:** whether the schools were single sex or mixed.
- ◆ **Size of school:** less than 600 on roll = small; 600-1000 = medium; more than 1000 = large.
- ◆ **Type of catchment area:** defined as inner city, urban, mixed or rural (based upon headteacher's definition as given in the telephone interviews).
- ◆ **Age range:** whether the school was 11-16 or 11-18, i.e. did it have a sixth form?
- ◆ **School characteristics:** including the following<sup>28</sup>
  - school ethos
  - community links
  - quality of teaching and learning
  - staff development
  - leadership and management (including middle management)
  - tradition and innovation
  - the length of the school day
  - intake/LEA structures

<sup>28</sup> Information elicited from the telephone interviews provided some indication of the importance of these characteristics within particular schools.

## Appendix E

### Re-ranking exercise for second sample of schools

The second sample of schools were selected using the following criteria:

- ♦ Value added results from key stage 3 to key stage 4;
- ♦ Percentage improvement from 1996 – 2000;
- ♦ Proportion of students with free school meals, with preferential selection of schools with the highest figures.

Following three re-ranking exercises of all 389 schools, a sum of ranks on the above criteria was calculated and the schools were re-ranked. The top 20 schools were then examined and all schools previously included in Phase One were excluded. Also excluded were all CTC's, all voluntary-aided and foundation schools and all girls' schools. These exclusions were made in order to ensure that the combined schools sample from all phases of the study was representative of the overall Specialist School population. The top 10 schools that met the criteria were invited to participate in this phase of the study and half of these agreed. Five schools declined an invitation to take part as they were unable to accommodate a visit at that time. Those schools that were unable to participate were replaced successively with the next school that met the criteria. The tenth school that was visited for interviews in Phase Three was ranked in 30th place.

## Appendix F

### Public' Indicators of school effectiveness: school summary table

<b>Name of School:</b>			
<b>Region/LEA</b>			
<i>(1) From the Secondary School Performance Tables (Year 11, 2000)</i>			
Comprehensive or selective (COMP, MOD, NON SEL, SEL)			
Mixed or single sex			
Type of Specialist School (A, L, S or T)			
Number of pupils on school roll			
Cohort* (from DJ's data)			
Percentage of pupils with SEN with statements			
Percentage of pupils with SEN without statements			
Authorised absence (%)			
Unauthorised absence (%)			
GCSE/GNVQ Results 2000			
% obtaining 5 or more A*-Cs (national average 49.2 %)			
% obtaining 5 or more A*-Gs (national average 88.9 %)			
% obtaining no passes (national average 5.6 %)			
Average point score per 15 year old (national average 38.9)			
Average Key Stage 3 Score* (from DJ's data)			
Value Added Score* (from DJ's data)			
Does the school offer GNVQs (at 14-16 or at 16-18)?			
Three Year progression (GCSE/GNVQ Results):	1998	1999	2000
% obtaining 5 or more A*-Cs			
% obtaining at least 1 pass (100%- % gaining no passes)			
<i>(2) From the School and College (16-18) Performance Tables (if applicable)</i>			
16-18 Year-old students on roll:			
Comb. A/AS/GNVQ average point score per student (nat. ave. 17.3)			
Comb. A/AS/GNVQ average point score per entry (nat. ave. 5.5)			
<i>(3) From Ofsted Reports Database:</i>			
Date of Inspection			
No of Exclusions (previous year): fixed			
No of Exclusions (previous year): permanent			
Quality of Teaching (three categories): Very good or better			
Satisfactory or better			
Less than satisfactory			
Pupil/Teacher Ratio:			
<i>(4) Data from Other Sources (NFER Register of Schools)</i>			
Catchment area/socio-econ. context (inner city/urban/mixed/rural)			
% Eligible for Free School Meals			
% English as an Additional Language (EAL)			
Length of time as a Specialist School/Affiliated to CTC Trust?			
Is it a Beacon School/Involved in other initiatives (e.g. EiC)?			

## Appendix G

### Guide to key issues for interviews with headteachers



#### *Guidance notes for researchers*

The purposes of this further interview are to explore how the characteristics and practices developed in the selected Specialist Schools help to raise student performance and, in addition, to identify what might be learned by other Specialist Schools in their quest to improve standards and student outcomes.

The headteacher in each of the schools has already been interviewed by telephone and it is anticipated that the face-to-face interviews will enable the research team to explore in greater detail the responses given during these interviews: these responses should be used as a starting point. It will therefore be necessary for researchers to be familiar with the information currently available for the schools they are visiting:

- a summary of the school's Ofsted report (where available)
- analysis of the Ofsted reports for all of the schools
- the transcript from the telephone interview with the headteacher
- analysis of all of the telephone interviews completed to date
- the school's quantitative/numerical data

This guide outlines the key research issues which should be addressed in each of the case-study schools. There will be additional questions or issues that you want to explore with individual schools.

Documentation to be collected;

- ◆ a copy of the prospectus
- ◆ any other information relevant to our research, particularly if it summarises specific initiatives which are felt to be having a positive impact on performance (eg. mentoring) or schemes the school has become involved in as a result of its Specialist status.

#### **Key Research Issues**

##### **The 'success factors' behind the school's improved student performance**

The headteacher may already have identified one or more of the following:

- ◆ focus on teaching and learning/quality of teaching
- ◆ school culture or ethos
- ◆ assessment and monitoring/use of performance data
- ◆ leadership and management/curriculum and extra-curricular activities
- ◆ resources/accommodation and ICT facilities
- ◆ external/community links.

*It will be important to explore the issues raised during the telephone interview in greater depth and to link these back to the impact they may have upon improving the school's academic performance.*

*Questions for researchers*

- 1 What makes this school successful? What does this 'look like' in the school? What do headteachers mean when they talk about 'culture' or 'management', how is performance monitored, by whom? What specific processes have been/are in place?
- 2 Is any one of the factors more important than the others? Or, is there a range of factors that are deemed to be of equal significance? How do each of the factors relate to one another?
- 3 How does a single factor or a combination of factors, contribute, in particular, to improved student test and examination performance?
- 4 Were exam results improving prior to the school receiving Specialist status? If not, what do you feel has changed within the school to bring about the improvement?
- 5 Have any particular groups of students benefited from your success (boys/girls, key stage 3/4, high/mixed/low) ability?
- 6 Are there any aspects of the school's current practice that hinder students' performance? In what ways? What strategies are in place to resolve these issues?
- 7 In what ways (if at all) has the school's specialism impacted upon performance in other areas of the school?
- 8 What contributions have (a) governors; (b) teaching staff; (c) support staff (such as classroom assistants) made to your school's success?
- 9 What extra resources have you been able to obtain as a result of being a Specialist School? How have you used these resources (e.g. extra staff, more accommodation, new facilities)?
- 10 How (if at all) have extra-curricular activities and the school's external links contributed to standards in the school?

The school's vision for the future

*Questions for researchers*

- 11 What is the headteacher's vision for the school's development in the coming years?
- 12 What areas for development have been identified? Why? What impact is it anticipated these will have on students' performance?
- 13 How is the school planning to sustain/continue to improve student outcomes? Can you provide any specific examples of planned strategies or systems related to sustaining improvement?

**Advice for other Specialist Schools**

*Questions for researchers*

- 14 What general advice about how to set up/manage a Specialist School would the headteacher offer to a school that has recently been awarded Specialist status?
- 15 Does the headteacher have any specific advice for schools about how to raise and sustain student performance? How transferable are the 'success factors' in your school to other Specialist Schools?
- 16 Finally, to what extent does the Head feel that the strategies identified as contributing to improved performance have developed as a result of becoming a Specialist School? Were they in place prior to becoming a Specialist School? If so, how has Specialist status impacted upon these strategies?

## Appendix H

### General staff interview schedule



NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

#### PERFORMANCE GAINS IN SPECIALIST SCHOOLS: WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

**General Staff Interview Schedule – For use with:  
Senior Managers, Heads of Department, Classroom Teachers, Governors**

**Background:** *Professor David Jesson has carried out quantitative work which shows that your school has been performing well in terms of both 'raw' examination results and 'value added' results. An NFER research team is now following this up (on behalf of the Technology Colleges Trust) by trying to identify, through the use of qualitative interviews, what the success factors are in high performing Specialist Schools. Telephone interviews have already been conducted with headteachers. We are now trying to find out from other members of staff what they think are the factors behind this success.*

*The first level of investigation (analysis of OFSTED reports and telephone interviews) has indicated that a number of factors are considered important. These are the usual things associated with school improvement such as leadership, quality of teaching and school ethos. The aim of the interviews is to 'unpack' these factors in order to provide information and insights which can contribute towards the development of a kind of 'tool kit' for school improvement. For example, if a member of staff emphasises 'management' as an important factor, we would like to try to find out what this term actually means in practice.*

**Interviewer:**

**Date:**

**School:**

**Interviewee/Job title:**

1. How (if at all) has being a Specialist School affected your own role and job description? What level of personal involvement have you had with the school's particular specialism?
2. Since the school has been awarded Specialist status, what changes have occurred that have helped to raise levels of student performance?
3. What do you think are the reasons, in particular, for your school's improved examination results?

4. In the last two or three years, what, in your opinion, has been the main single factor in the overall success of your school?
5. Are there any other factors that have contributed to your school's overall success? e.g.
  - ◆ leadership/management
  - ◆ assessment and monitoring/use of data/self-evaluation
  - ◆ quality of teaching/commitment of staff
  - ◆ resources/accommodation/ICT facilities
  - ◆ school culture or ethos
  - ◆ curriculum and extra-curricular activities
  - ◆ external/community links
6. Have all groups/types of students benefited from the process of being a Specialist School? Are there any aspects of the school's current practice that hinder students' performance? In what ways? What strategies are in place to resolve these issues?
7. What contributions have (a) senior management; (b) governors; (c) teaching staff; (d) support staff (such as classroom assistants) made to your school's success?
8. In what ways (if at all) has the school's specialism impacted upon performance in other areas of the school?
9. To what extent have extra-curricular activities and the school's external links impacted on standards in the school?
10. What general advice would you give to a school that has just taken on Specialist status?
11. Is there any specific advice you would give to other Specialist Schools about raising and sustaining students' examination performance?
12. What are the challenges of being a Specialist School?
13. In what ways could you improve your examination performance even further in the future? Do you have any plans to implement these new strategies?

## Appendix I

### Student discussion groups: interview schedule



NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

**PERFORMANCE GAINS IN SPECIALIST SCHOOLS:  
WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?  
Student Discussion Groups  
Interview Schedule**

*Guidance for researchers:*

- ◆ Give a brief overview of the project (that it is a research project looking at what Specialist Schools do to improve students' performance that may be different from other types of schools).
- ◆ Explain to them why they are there; that we have talked to teachers and now we want to find out what students think about their schools and what helps their learning.
- ◆ Tell them we will be asking them about their general views on their school and about the ways in which their school helps them to achieve to the best of their ability.
- ◆ Reassure them that nothing they say as individuals will be reported to their teachers and that the discussion will be summarised and completely anonymous.

**Questions to explore with students**

This list gives a suggested common core of questions for all students, however, there may well be additional questions or issues that you may want to explore at a local level in relation to individual schools.

**Overall views of their school**

- 1 Do they think it's a good school? What do they base their opinions on? (exam results, teachers, facilities, etc.)
- 2 In general, what do they feel about the teachers in their school? Are they helpful, is there a climate of praise, are they fair?
- 3 Do you think resources are good in this school? Do you have enough textbook, computer facilities, buildings and so on?

**Curricular and extra-curricular activities**

- 4 What do you think about technology/arts/languages/sports in your school? How (if at all) is your school's specialism used in other subjects to help your learning?
- 5 What types of extra-curricular activities are available/have the students taken part in? Do students feel that these have helped to improve their learning and/or exam performance.

**Help and support**

Beyond their general impressions, we need to gain a picture of the extent to which the students think that the school's teaching and support mechanisms have helped them to learn and to develop a clear understanding of their abilities. In particular, try to get an idea of what they think about;

- 6 What is the extent and variety of teaching and learning methods used in school? Which ones do they most enjoy or find most helpful? Do teachers always teach them as a whole class, do they do pair work, work in groups, do their own individual work?
- 7 What support is available to help students do their best? Are they given help on how to work (study skills), to set themselves targets, etc., (this might include tutorial support, target-setting, mentoring)? Do all types of students receive the support that they need?
- 8 To what extent do they feel they are expected to take responsibility for their learning?

**[Additional areas for discussion with Year 12 students]**

- [10] Reasons for students continuing into the sixth form at the school; any links with the school's specialism/extra-curricular activities, etc.
- [11] The extent to which subject choices have been influenced by the school's specialist area.

**Finally**

- 9 If they had a chance, is there anything they would change about their school which would help them to improve their learning?

## Appendix J

### Details of interviewees

<b>Role in school</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
Headteachers	20
Senior managers	39
Heads of department	35
Governors/Teacher Governors	9
Class teachers	46
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF STAFF INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>149</b>
Year 8 students	62 (in 16 groups)
Year 10 students	55 (in 14 groups)
Year 11 students	8 (in 1 group)
Year 12 students	35 (in 6 groups)
Year 8/10/12 students combined	12 (in 2 groups)
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>172</b>

## Appendix K

### Profile of schools

#### A. Case-Study Schools selected for field work visits

SCHOOL	Specialism	Year designated as Specialist School	Mixed/single-sex	Size of school	SEN with statements	SEN without statements	FSM (new data-David Jesson only)	EAL	Legal status
					%	%	%	%	
A	T	1999	M	M	1.8	27.9	76	41	C
B	T	1996	M	L	1	3	3	32	C
C	T	1997	M	M	2	15	6	<5	C
D	T	1996	M	M	3	13.1	27	16	C
E	T	1994	M	L	1.3	16.3	11	1.4	F
F	T	1996	M	L	1.7	28.2	37	20	C
G	T	1994*	M	L	<1	11	26	11	CTC
H	T	1995	M	M	0.7	14.1	25	0	C
I	T	1994	M	L	1	6	8	0	F
J	T	1994	M	L	2	14	3	1	F
K	T	1998	M	M	3.2	33.8	83	89**	C
L	T	1996	M	L	2	4	5	0	C
M	L	1998	M	L	<1	14	2	<5	C
N	L	1996	S (Girls)	L	0	14	4	<5	C
O	L	1998	M	M	1.4	60.9	38	44	C
P	PA	1998	M	L	2.1	47.5	49	41	C
Q	PA	1998	S (Girls)	M	1	10	18	63	VA
R	S	1998	M	M	4.9	14.9	55	0	C
S	S	1999	M	L	<1	6	3	2	VA
T	S	1998	M	L	4.7	23.8	45	65	C

\* A City Technology College since 1989

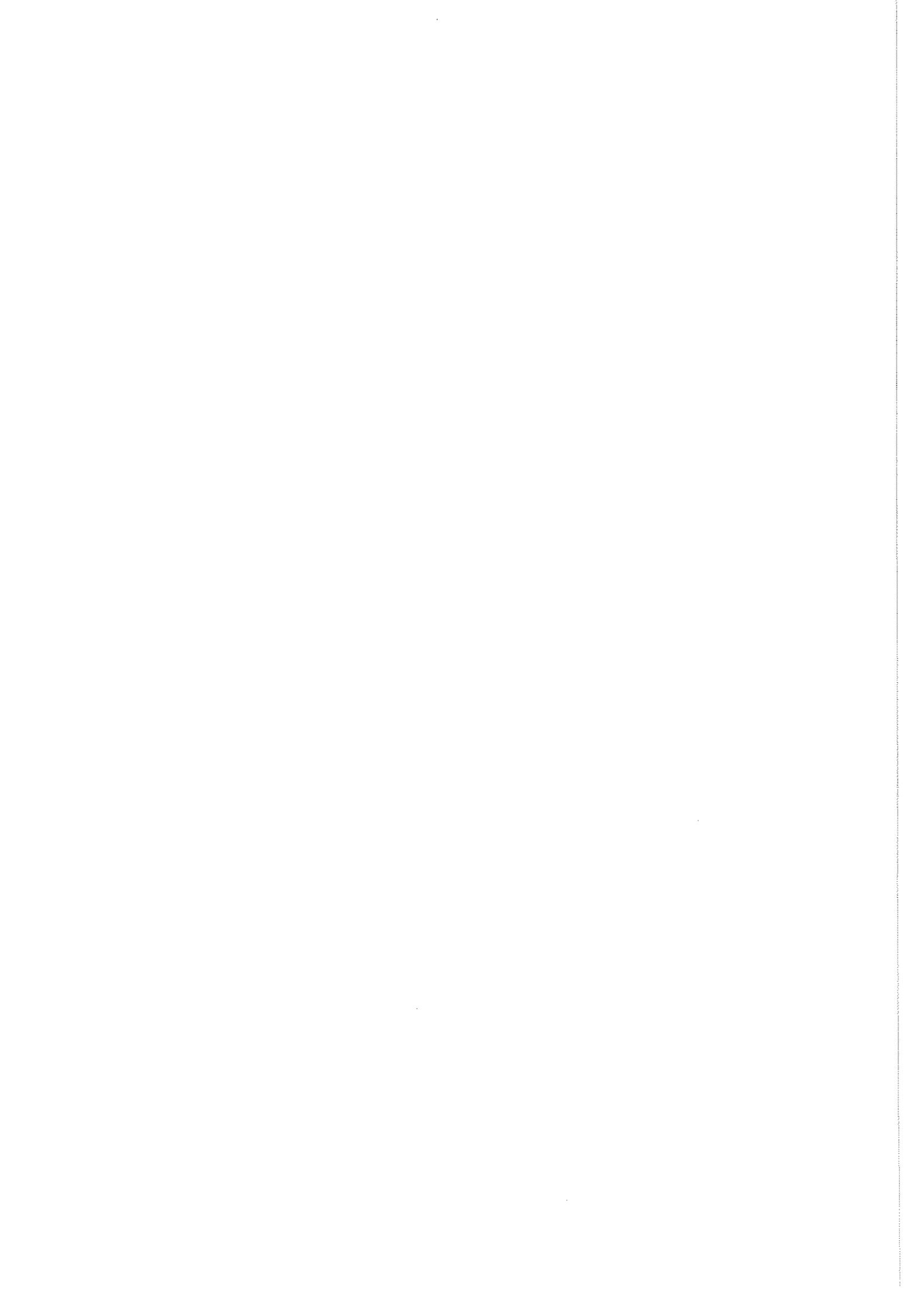
\*\* Figure for 1999/2000. Figure for 2000/2001 not available.

## B. Phase One schools not visited for Qualitative fieldwork

SCHOOL	Specialism	Year designated as Specialist School	Mixed/single-sex	Size of school	SEN with statements	SEN without statements	FSM (new data-David Jesson only)	EAL	Legal status
					%	%	%	%	
A	T	1996	M	L	2	15	8	8	F
B	T	1999	M	M	2	12	7	<5	C
C	T	1994	M	L	2	20	4	<5	F
D	T	1994	M	L	1	7	3	6	VA
E	T	1997	S (Girls)	L	1	7	4	6	F
F	T	1995	M	L	<1	10	3	2	C
G	T	1996	M	M	1	6	1	6	F
H	L	1998	S (Girls)	L	1	7	1	<5	C
I	L	1996	M	L	<1	7	0	<5	C
J	L	1996	S (Girls)	L	<1	4	3	<5	C

### Notes:

Specialism	T = Technology L = Languages PA = Performing Arts S = Sport
Mixed/single sex	M = Mixed sex S = Single sex
Size of school	Small = <600 Medium = 600 – 1000 Large = >1000
SEN	Special Educational Needs
FSM	Free School Meals
EAL	English as an Additional Language
Legal Status	C = Community School F = Foundation School VA = Voluntary Aided School CTC = City Technology College



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