

# [INSIGHTS]

## THE SECRETS OF SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOL SUCCESS

**Many minority ethnic pupils struggle in mainstream schools. Concern about these children's chronic underachievement led to this study of the 2,700 Saturday or supplementary<sup>1</sup> schools set up by their parents and communities. Usually free and run by volunteers, the schools aim to preserve a community's heritage and raise the attainment of its children. Not only are they succeeding, but their success is having a positive impact on their children's achievements in mainstream schools. So what is their secret?**

### KEY POINTS

- 1 Supplementary schools give pupils tremendous support thanks to their learning ethos, high expectations and small class sizes.
- 2 Parents believe that supplementary schools value parental involvement and help their children succeed academically and socially.
- 3 Supplementary schools do well with pupils who have been neglected by or excluded from mainstream schools.
- 4 Supplementary schools rely on the goodwill of dedicated, committed, often unpaid staff who work with few resources.

### MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

- 1 Policy-makers and mainstream schools should learn from the social, cultural and academic success of supplementary schools.
- 2 Supplementary schools' inclusive learning ethos and dedicated support indicates how minority ethnic pupils could be helped to flourish and achieve in mainstream schools.
- 3 Although voluntary organisations, some supplementary schools receive local authority funding. Future funding decisions should take into account the impact of these schools.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'supplementary school' usually refers to out-of-school-hours educational provision for children and young people of shared heritage. Some minority ethnic communities prefer to use the term 'complementary' as this better reflects the nature of the provision offered.

## THE RESEARCH

A survey of 1,136 supplementary schools in England was carried out, with 301 schools responding. About half of these (56 per cent) were more than 10 years old, indicating just how committed grassroots community organisations are to supporting their children.

The schools served a wide range of minority ethnic communities with 85 per cent concentrating on teaching culture and heritage, 79 per cent teaching one or more of 50 community languages and 68 per cent providing tuition in maths and English. Added to this, nearly three-quarters offered coaching for exams and tests. The importance placed on coaching, maths and English underlines the emphasis on achievement. It also supports earlier research which indicated that minority ethnic communities see

supplementary schools as helping children overcome weaknesses in their mainstream school.

In addition to the survey, 12 schools were studied in detail through visits, interviews and focus groups. The schools, located in the Midlands, London, Yorkshire and Humberside and the North-west, varied in size, in the subjects they taught and in the community/ies they served (see Table).

Most of the schools held three-hour classes on Saturday mornings, although four offered after-school classes during the week. They were staffed by teachers with UK and/or international teaching qualifications. Some staff had qualifications in engineering, accountancy, and other professions, while some were fluent in several languages.

The interviews and focus groups – with teachers, parents, pupils, local authority staff and five mainstream heads – explored what children gained from supplementary schooling, including any knock-on benefits for their mainstream education.

NC denotes National Curriculum – Source: Maylor et al., (2010)

**Table 1: Case studies**

| School size | Curriculum            | Communities served                                     |
|-------------|-----------------------|--|
| Medium      | NC/Culture            | Somali   |
| Small       | Culture & heritage/NC | African-Caribbean                                      |
| Medium      | Language              | Polish   |
| Large       | NC                    | Black & Minority Ethnic                                |
| Large       | Religious             | Islamic  |
| Small       | NC/Culture            | African & Asian  |
| Large       | Language/NC           | Punjabi  |
| Large       | NC/Culture            | African-Caribbean, Dual Caribbean heritage             |
| Large       | NC                    | Mainly Pakistani but also Somali, Indian & Bangladeshi |
| Small       | NC/Culture            | Mainly Black West African but also Polish & Turkish    |
| Medium      | NC/Religious          | Somali   |
| Large       | Language/NC           | Turkish  |

## THE FINDINGS

In schools that focused on teaching maths, English and science, parents reported that their children's academic knowledge and exam results improved. Behaviour, confidence, self-esteem and social skills, such as the ability to question and debate in lessons, had also been enhanced since attending supplementary school.

Black (African and African-Caribbean) parents were impressed by the early recognition of their children's academic potential. As a result, some children took their GCSE maths earlier than they were scheduled to in their mainstream school, and, importantly, achieved good grades.

In the language-focused schools, parents reported their children gaining fluency in their home language and being encouraged to take GCSEs in the language. Some supplementary school heads saw this as a way not only of raising attainment and developing multilingual competence, but also of widening career opportunities.

All the schools wanted to reinforce the children's cultural identities and raise their aspirations. Such desires were underscored by an understanding of the difficulties – racism, marginalisation, exclusion, low teacher expectations – that their pupils sometimes encounter in mainstream schools and society. Teachers wanted to give their pupils 'ammunition' to counteract these potential difficulties.

Research has shown that teachers' negative attitudes can deter parents from getting involved with their child's school. Nothing could be further from the truth in relation to supplementary-school parents. Many valued the 'keenness' and 'determination' of teachers to support their children, as well as the fact that they 'take time' to listen and explain their teaching approaches.

*"They understand the need to work with parents, listen to their concerns and understand that all children can achieve ... having high expectations of children, being willing to find ways to work with children as well, and that's not what we encounter in mainstream schools." (Parent)*

*"... what is nice is the approach they use; if they've got anything they need to tell us, whether it's concerns or how they're progressing, they will always ask to speak to us at the end of the session." (Parent)*

Supplementary-school teachers also said they had more opportunities than mainstream colleagues to be creative in their teaching and learning.

This study looked at the impact supplementary-school attendance can make on mainstream learning. But not everyone agrees about what counts as 'impact'.

The government and mainstream schools tend to view it in terms of exam and test results. For supplementary schools and parents, the definition is much broader and includes increased confidence, self-esteem and positive attitudes to learning.

Interviews with mainstream headteachers revealed tensions between the two sectors. Some described supplementary schools as 'not proper schools' and they all tended to assume, wrongly, that they were staffed by unqualified teachers. In fact, the dedication, passion and commitment of supplementary-school teachers was regarded by parents and pupils as a key reason for improved motivation and learning.

In conclusion, this study should help correct distorted views of minority ethnic communities, particularly Black families. It overturns stereotypes of children not being able to achieve highly, with parents who do not value education and are not committed to their children's learning.

## MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

The impact of supplementary schools, as revealed by this research, shows there is much to be learnt by educational policy-makers and mainstream schools. Obviously there are lessons in relation to enhancing minority ethnic mainstream attainment (particularly that of Somali, Pakistani and African-Caribbean children) and refocusing excluded or at-risk children. But there are also lessons in terms of advancing these children's cultural, social and linguistic capital.

However, policy-makers need to balance calls from supplementary-school staff for recognition of their work with, paradoxically, parents' desire that the government does not interfere with 'their' schools.

### IMPLICATION FOR MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

One of the most ethnically inclusive schools in the study catered for pupils from Polish, African, African-Caribbean and Turkish backgrounds. Such schools present



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opportunities for teachers and senior managers to learn how to create inclusive and supportive environments which boost self-esteem and motivate children by valuing their heritage, accepting them as individuals, and having high expectations. For this to happen, however, mainstream schools must acknowledge the existence of supplementary schools and recognise their staff as 'real' teachers.

The involvement of parents in supplementary schools suggests that mainstream schools may need to reconsider their attitudes to minority ethnic (especially Black) parents. Similarly, the achievements of supplementary-school staff underline

the need for more minority ethnic teachers in mainstream schools.

## FUNDING IMPLICATIONS

Many supplementary schools survive on a shoestring budget thanks to staff working for nothing. A few receive local authority funding, others get by on a combination of parental fees and community donations. The lack of money is a longstanding issue, but parents, even those on low incomes, are opposed to government funding because they prefer to keep control over 'their' schools. The level of financial support, even from more deprived families, is testament to their commitment to their children's learning. Their desire to determine the direction of 'their' schools should be respected in any discussion of local authority funding. ●

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Children and Young People's  
Services Supplementary  
Schools' Directory

The National Resource Centre  
for Supplementary Education  
([www.continyou.org.uk](http://www.continyou.org.uk))

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation  
([www.phf.org.uk](http://www.phf.org.uk))

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