Avoiding stereotypes

Introduction

— Just under one third (31 per cent) of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieved 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C in 2010. The highest performing local authority doubled that figure (62 per cent).

— Almost 40,000 students whose first language is not English reached Level 4 in Key Stage 2 (KS2) English in 2010. The figure would have been almost one fifth higher (almost 47,000) if the whole country had performed as well as the highest performing local authority.

— Girls’ attainment tends to be higher than boys but the one in six girls who do not reach Level 4 English at KS2 have done less well than the three-quarters of boys who do.

— More than 50 per cent of boys leave school with 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C (including English and maths) but more than 40 per cent of girls leave school with fewer than five.

Source: DfE, 2010a; 2010b

The figures above illustrate that averages are always confounded by personal and local variation. Trends within groups always obscure wide individual variation in outcomes and unknown variation in discarded potential. Treating any of the common groupings gender, ethnicity and class for example, as homogeneous would therefore be a misleading nonsense. When they are analysing performance, school leaders and teachers need to be constantly alert to the risks of stereotyping and self-fulfilling outcomes. Leaders who close gaps use data, information and judgement to create a deep analysis of local causes and effects. Without that evidence, teachers have opinions at best and sometimes only prejudices.

Simple misconceptions

There is a continuous thread of evidence that teachers can be prone to biased expectations about students based on simple, single characteristics including those related to gender, ethnicity or socio-economic background. This thread came to prominence in the iconic 1968 Pygmalion study (Rosenthal, 1968), one of the first to demonstrate that if teachers expected higher attainment from particular children then there was a tendency for that to happen. Recent research has continued to produce evidence of teachers’ biases. Deficit views of working-class children and their parents were deeply ingrained in one sample of teachers and trainee teachers who mostly lacked opportunities to reflect on these prejudices in their practice (Gazeley & Dunne, 2005). An analysis of national assessment data from more than 16,000 primary schools over 4 years, using standardised and teacher assessments at the core of their work, concluded that:

there are enduring and significant differences in teachers’ assessments of pupils from different ethnic groups. On average, Black Caribbean and Black African pupils are under-assessed relative to white pupils, and Indian, Chinese and mixed white-Asian pupils are over-assessed... When forming an assessment of a pupil’s likely progress, teachers use information on the past performance of members of that group in that school from previous years.

Burgess & Greaves, 2009:23
The organisation of schools around majority norms and cultures, increasing academic and vocational specialisation of the curriculum and stereotypical expectations may also be significant contributors to higher exclusion rates, lower exam attainment and disproportionate entry on vocational courses among black students (Gillborn, 2008).

The confusion around attitudes to gender and the consequent effects were neatly summarised in Professor Becky Francis’s article ‘Stereotypes about boys hurt both sexes’ which drew in part on a review prepared for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (DCSF, 2009). Francis argues that the discourse around boys’ underachievement ‘frequently held misogynist overtones, often blaming girls and female teachers for boys’ perceived “failure”’. She concludes that ‘many “boy friendly” strategies are actually detrimental to boys’ learning, and encourage the stereotypical productions of gender that contribute to underachievement’ (Francis, 2010).

For school leaders, trends are an important piece of the information jigsaw, helping them to create the picture against which they identify school priorities. But schools do not deal with general trends, they deal with individual boys and girls. None of those young women and young men is simply male or female, either rich or poor, just black or white. They are each and all of those things, a complex mixture of them and above all a unique person in their own right. Schools should never be surprised by individuality and diversity even when they need to keep some of the wider factors wealth, gender and ethnicity in focus.

**Complex misconceptions**

Other parts of this module will draw attention to the trends for particular groups of students to have lower attainment, on average, than other groups. Those trends are indicators of powerful factors at work in our system but they are unreliable tools for predicting the progress of an individual. In fact, they disguise complex connections between personal experiences, localities and learning opportunities. There are even trends within the trends which offer some clues as to how the contributory factors of socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity may be interacting. The lesson for school leaders is not to take national or even local headlines for granted and to analyse school-level data and knowledge diligently so that they acquire a deep understanding how the national factors are playing out locally.

**FSM with gender**

*Figure 1: Percentage of students with five GCSEs at grades A*-C by gender and FSM status*

Source: DCSF, 2008a
The overall FSM attainment gap at KS4 is more than three times the gender gap (27.6 per cent to 7.5 per cent in 2010).

The gap in attainment between boys and girls is relatively stable over time across FSM and non-FSM groups.

Boys not entitled to FSM have higher attainment on average than girls who are entitled.

Gender therefore appears to be a variable with its own impact, favouring girls but never completely overcoming the effect of economic background (Figure 1).

Gender with ethnicity

There is a gender gap in favour of girls across all ethnic groups but that gap is smaller than the gap in attainment between ethnic groups which means that on average boys in some groups tend to perform higher than girls in other groups. The gap between boys and girls is smallest for the two highest achieving groups, Chinese and Indian pupils, at both KS2 and KS4 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Pupils reaching Level 4 at KS2 by gender and ethnic group**

![Bar chart: Pupils reaching Level 4 at KS2 by gender and ethnic group](source: DfE, 2010b)
Ethnicity with FSM

FSM is more closely associated with lower attainment for White British boys and girls than for children from most other ethnic groups (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; DfES, 2007). In some neighbourhoods characterised by inner-city social housing, pupils do much better at GCSE than might be anticipated given the level of multiple deprivation. There might be a trend for those areas to be populated by poor but aspiring immigrant families (Webber & Butler, 2007).

Progress also varies across groups as the children grow older. Although underachievement is often attributed to lack of ambition and aspiration, the Youth Cohort Study reports that although four out of five of students from the occupation backgrounds ‘lower supervisory, routine and not classified’ wanted to stay on post-16 less than two-thirds do so (DCSF, 2008b). Students from most minority ethnic backgrounds (Black Caribbean being the exception) catch up with or exceed the performance of White British pupils during the later secondary years.

— All minority ethnic groups make greater progress on average than white students between the ages of 11 and 16.
— Much of this improvement occurs close to or in the high-stakes exams at the end of compulsory schooling.
— For most ethnic groups, this gain relative to white students happens in almost all schools in which these students are found.

Source: Strand, 2008; Wilson, Burgess & Briggs, 2006

Summary

The research reported in this section shows the danger in assuming that trends can be translated into predictions. Successful leaders analyse information very effectively, they do not depend on national averages or statistical families. They dig deep into their local data and then to upset the odds they add in their own judgement, the determination of their colleagues and the potential of individual young people.

Successful leaders use analysis to compare the performance of their student and staff groups with one another and with other schools. Data can provide powerful leverage and for successful leaders is a base on which to build, not an excuse on which to lean.
References

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