

In-school variation

Introduction

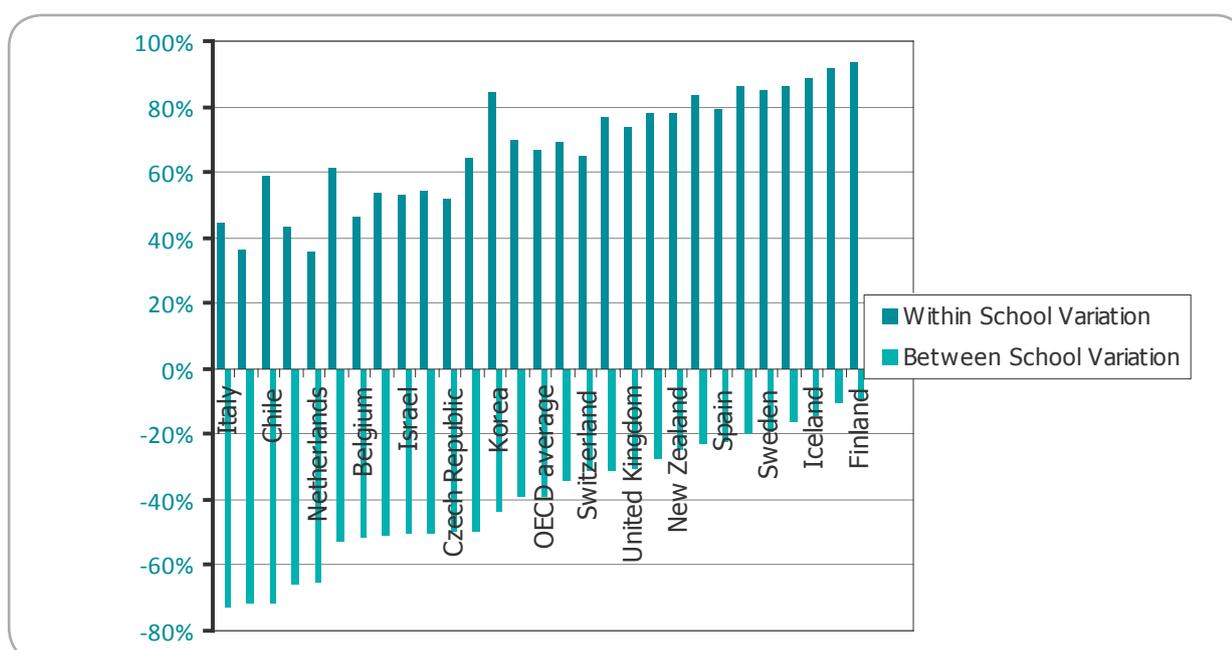
The landscape of educational attainment would be transformed if every school brought the average of its lowest performing pupil groups and lowest performing teaching areas up to the level of the best **in its own school**.

In England, the performance gaps **within schools** (often called in-school variation or ISV) overwhelm variation **between schools** as a factor in national outcomes. Studies report that the consequences of ISV are probably four times greater than the consequences of between-school variation – and possibly higher. The gaps in performance across the English system will not be closed by redesigning school organisation unless individual primary, secondary and special schools also resolve their internal variability. This critical area, ISV, is the area of performance over which school leaders can exercise their greatest influence and for which they therefore carry greatest responsibility.

Evidence about the extent of ISV in UK schools began to emerge from OECD studies in the early years of the last decade. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that across OECD countries, 67 per cent of the average difference in overall student performance could be accounted for by differences in the performance **within schools**, while about 34 per cent was accounted for by variation **between schools** (OECD, 2004). The OECD ratio of **within-school** effect to **between-school** effect was, on average, about 2:1. The ratio varied across the participating countries and the equivalent for the UK was about 4:1. A major contribution to this ratio was the very high effect of the UK's within-school variation, second only to New Zealand as the highest in the table.

A more recent OECD analysis for which some of the UK data did not meet 'sampling standards' nonetheless reported that 'between school' variation in the UK remained below OECD averages and 'within school' variation above. This is summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Comparison of between-school and within-school variation



Source: OECD, 2009

A DfES study based on 2003 data is reported to have claimed that **in-school** variation in England was even greater than the OECD had found (Hopkins et al, 2005). In value-added terms, in-school variance during Key Stage 2 (KS2) appeared to be five times greater than between-school variance. During KS3 the ratio was 11 times and for KS4 14 (yes, 14) times greater (ibid). A later study of performance in the 65–75 per cent of secondary schools where pupil progress in KS3 was roughly in line with national expectations, concluded that over a three-year period half of those schools had at least one subject where progress would put them in the top 20 per cent nationally for the subject and year concerned (Reynolds, 2008).

At least part of the national conversation about **school effectiveness** is therefore moving from general features of good leadership and management towards a more nuanced approach to **school improvement** focused on ISV and of relevance even to schools that appear to be comparatively successful.

It is a characteristic of successful leaders that they believe that what happens inside their school is within their 'locus of control', whatever happens around and beyond (Mongon & Chapman, 2008a; 2008b). In effect, they accept that the quality of what happens within the school is far more the direct product of their skills and far less the consequence of political initiatives or neighbourhood wealth. The emergence of ISV as a significant factor is an invitation for school leaders and their teams to build on that belief and to ensure that the best practice in their school permeates and becomes standard for everyone.

While not every school is effective, all schools will have within themselves some practice that is relatively more effective than elsewhere in the school. Every school can therefore look for generally applicable good practice from within its own internal conditions.

Reynolds, 2008:18

Readers who want to explore this subject in more detail can find a wide-ranging set of resources, research reports and case studies from primary, secondary and special schools on the National College website (National College, 2011). This short paper summarises the key points from there.

Tackling ISV is not easy and the barriers to its reduction are a roll call of the key personnel and development challenges facing any school leader. They include those in the following (based on Reynolds, 2008:5):

- weak management
- false modesty on the part of effective people
- small staffing in which excellence is limited
- the micro-politics of a school's culture
- budget and time constraints limiting the space for sharing skills
- personal factors and people politics
- subject parochialism (in secondary schools)

There is an emerging body of evidence, drawn mainly from school-based, action-oriented learning that is beginning to describe how school leaders responding to ISV deal with those barriers. The five key areas summarised below are drawn from the National College and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) toolkit (National College & TDA, 2009) and resonate with the list of activities in the framework used at the core of this module.

Collection and use of data

The collection and use of data resonate with the description of **analysis** in the framework. This activity was described by schools in the national trial which informed the toolkit as one of the easiest areas in which to make progress (National College & TDA, 2009:11). The schools drew on both numerical and qualitative data, the latter including narrative accounts of staff and student experience. Staff development (**advocacy**) was critical and schools reported most success where staff were coached in compiling and using the data. Encouraging people to see information as a professional tool helped to overcome fears and increase confidence.

Role and effectiveness of middle leadership

Elements of **advocacy** and **action** from the framework are recognisable in what the school leaders reported about the development of middle leadership. Middle leaders needed to focus on maintaining momentum to improve targeted performance. They needed analytical skills, social skills and a capacity to collaborate. They are the key to building the collaborative culture on which the reduction of ISV depends. Support for them and their development is a vital component in the response to ISV.

Quality of teaching and learning

A relentless focus on the quality of teaching and learning, described as **application** in the framework, is a necessary key to reducing ISV. The impact of the difference in quality between teachers has been shown to have a potentially life-changing impact on attainment for young people (Slater, Davies & Burgess, 2009). Raising the quality requires systematic monitoring and recording of lessons using well-understood criteria. In turn that requires opportunities for staff to share and negotiate views about the criteria in smaller or larger, real or virtual groups. Central to the success of this activity is that it should be formative and not punitive. Schools that used lesson criteria and observation as part of workforce development culture reported greater success than those where the culture appeared to be more judgemental.

Listening and responding to student voice

Reflecting aspects of both **analysis** and **alignment** within the framework, the ISV toolkit confirms that 'Students are sometimes better than teachers at making comparisons across departments because it is something they do informally every day' National College & TDA, 2009:18. In a separate set of case studies (NCSL, 2006), four localities have described how they developed student voice to help address an issue contributing to a gap in their school. The issues, all of which were thought to be amenable to the shared influence of adults and students, included:

- effort and motivation
- primary-secondary transfer
- gender attitudes
- exclusions

Standardising procedures

Standardised procedures, in effect instructions on how to operate intended to promote uniformity of practice, are part of what is called **application** in the framework. They are predicated on the assumption that removing variations in key aspects of practice will reduce variations in outcomes. 'Key aspects' is an important qualification in this context. Some variation in procedures is necessary and some is even desirable. Not every subject area, not every teacher and not every pupil can be pressed into a single mould. Standardisation reportedly works best when it is applied to data and monitoring and some core aspects of lesson planning. The wider the shared understanding of the rationale, in particular across staff (**awareness** and **acceptance**) but also across students and parents, the more that a decision to standardise procedures will contribute to enhanced outcomes.

Across all the research and enquiry reported in the previous pages, one critical finding repeatedly surfaces. **The work that the adults in a school do with their pupils cannot transcend the work they do with one another.** The cultures that appear to work best are those that allow everyone of any status to:

- see the potential to learn from everyone else
- acknowledge mistakes and use them as opportunities for learning
- focus on the quality of what they can achieve
- share a sense of community

To reduce ISV, schools where the emphasis is on performance management and quality control (for staff and pupils) tend to have to do more work and tend to need smaller steps to starting than those where the emphasis is on personal development and quality assurance. One DCSF publication describes a review of school culture as a good starting point. Its accompanying toolkit includes resources to help with that (DCSF, 2009).

Summary

In-school variation, the range of performance across groups of student and staff within individual schools, has a much stronger impact on national averages in the UK than between-school variation does. An element of selection, by some schools, sometimes but not always intentional, contributes to between-school variation in England. Whether the selection is by ability or geography it has a strong correlation with the socio-economic background of the students. Although that is important in some contexts, it is not the dominant feature of the UK system. The dominant feature is in-school variation. If in every school, each group of students and staff attained the same standards as the best groups in that school, then national outcomes would be transformed. Schools that are moving in that direction are well led, use data effectively, provide for high-quality teaching and learning and are committed to the development of their adults as well as their students.

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