

Chapter 2

Transforming Education for All: Tower Hamlets and Urban District Education Improvement



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Abstract This chapter explores a case study in area-based reform, using the example of the remarkable transformation of educational outcomes in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets between 1998 and 2012. Drawing on interviews and official data along with school performance material, we argue that the transformation of schooling in Tower Hamlets depended on a number of linked factors: committed political leadership; challenging professional leadership; a robust approach to selecting from, and then rigorously managing, external policy imperatives; the engagement of schools; and the judicious spending of generous levels of resourcing. We cannot answer counterfactual questions with precision, but it is our belief that whilst different approaches would still have seen improvement in some schools, the coherent, area-wide improvement which we saw in Tower Hamlets would not have been possible without the strong political and professional leadership which the Authority, its leaders, and its officers were able to exert. We set the experience of Tower Hamlets in the context of literature on sustained education reform and draw lessons for other communities.

2.1 Tower Hamlets in Context

Tower Hamlets is an administrative borough in east London covering eight square miles and is home to 206,000 people. It is bounded by the River Thames to the south, the River Lea to the east, the Borough of Hackney to the north, and the City of London to the west. It grew out of the jumble of medieval buildings around the walls of William the Conqueror's Tower of London. Its river frontage fostered ship

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building, which began to develop in the sixteenth century, and the Port of London stimulated associated trades: cheap inns, victualling, and chandlery. By the late eighteenth century, factories and rows of terraced houses consumed the once rural landscape. In the nineteenth century, the building of huge warehouses and docks and the arrival of central London railway termini displaced people from the city into the area, and it became known—pejoratively—as the “East End”. By the end of the nineteenth century, the area was synonymous with poverty, overcrowding, and disease. Wages were low and housing poor. During the mid-twentieth century, bombing during World War II devastated much of the area—24,000 homes and much of its industry were lost. The post-war period saw the decline of the traditional dock industries, leaving substantial areas of land and buildings derelict. As a result, part of the borough was designated as an economic development zone, and since 1980 there has been massive expansion of new industries and employment.

Due to its location on the fringe of the City of London, the borough has historically attracted new immigrant communities. In the Middle Ages, sailors and merchants from all over Europe and beyond established roots in Tower Hamlets. Since the eighteenth century, the Spitalfields area has been home to Huguenot and later Irish and Jewish communities who gradually moved to other areas as they grew in prosperity. Following this pattern, in the late twentieth century, people from Bangladesh and other Asian and African countries were attracted to this area, resulting in a richly diverse multi-cultural population.

In 2012, there were 65,269 children and young people in the borough, representing 26% of its total population. Of these, 89% were classified as belonging to an ethnic group other than White British, compared to 26% in England overall. Furthermore, English is an additional language for 74% of its pupils; meaning that English, Sylheti, and Bengali are the area’s most commonly recorded. Of those children and young people under 19 years, 55% come from a Bangladeshi background. What is more, data for 2006 show that 29,680 children—or 53% of all children in Tower Hamlets—were living in poverty, based on the proportion of children living in families in receipt of out-of-work benefits or tax credits, where the reported income was less than 60% median outcome. The borough’s high levels of poverty are also evident in the high proportion of children entitled to free school meals (FSM), which in 2011 stood at 57%. Press coverage and academic studies alike describe Tower Hamlets as one of the poorest boroughs in the United Kingdom.

Tower Hamlets’ children and young people have an exceptional range of additional needs. There were 1582 children and young people registered with the council as having a disability in February 2012. There were 6909 children—17% of a total 2011 school census population of 39,596—registered as requiring School Action or School Action Plus in response to their educational needs and a further 1392 (4%) with a statement of special educational needs (SEN). Finally, as of March 2012, there were 296 looked after children (LAC), 274 children with child protection plans, and 1,155 children-in-need cases. By any measure, this is a demanding population. There are 98 schools in the borough. Of these, 70 are primary and 15 secondary; there is a pupil referral unit and six special and short-stay schools. Early

years provision is delivered through more than 50 private and voluntary sector settings, and there are six Local Authority (LA) maintained nurseries.

Despite all this, Tower Hamlets has a remarkable story of education improvement to tell. That story begins in September 1997 with the appointment of Christine Gilbert as the borough's new Director of Education. The educational "legacy" inherited by Gilbert was "dire". The previous year had seen the publication of *The Teaching of Reading in 45 London Primary Schools* by Ofsted (England's school inspectorate). Based on the results of 45 inspections in the London Boroughs of Islington, Southwark, and Tower Hamlets, the report found that reading standards in Tower Hamlets were poor and that the quality of teaching in many schools was also unsatisfactory. Earlier in 1997, the borough had also been positioned 149th out of 149 local education authorities (LEAs) in terms of its performance, and a damning Ofsted *Inspection of Tower Hamlets* followed in September 1998. The inspection report noted that only 26% of pupils gained five or more higher grade for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (the national qualification taken by 16-year-olds), compared to a national average of 43%; and only 47% of pupils achieved level four in the Key Stage two English tests (at age 11), compared with 63% nationally. These figures were:

unacceptable, because they represent lost potential and a denial of the legitimate aspirations of pupils and their parents.... They also represent a poor use of public money. The evidence does not suggest that the expenditure deployed to combat disadvantage in Tower Hamlets since its incorporation in 1990 has achieved its primary objective of raising standards. (Ofsted, 1998, para 8–9)

Returning to the borough 2 years later, however, Ofsted found that the LEA had achieved a great deal (Ofsted, 2000): Although pupil test results remained below the national average, the gap had started to narrow at each key stage, and there had been some significant achievements in raising standards. Data from Ofsted inspections showed an improvement in the proportion of schools judged to be "good" or "very good" and that there had been a decline in the proportion of schools requiring improvement. The report concluded that in a relatively short space of time, Tower Hamlets had gone from having significant weaknesses to delivering what was required of it at least satisfactorily and often well.

By 2005, the *Annual Performance Assessment of London Borough of Tower Hamlets Council's Education and Children's Social Care Services* (Ofsted, 2005) found *dramatic* improvements. Attainment at Key Stage one and two was well above that of statistical neighbours, as was the proportion of pupils gaining five A*–C grades at GCSE. Attainment gaps too were narrowing although still below national averages. Tower Hamlets was providing a service that "consistently delivered well above minimum requirements for users" and inspectors awarded the borough the highest grade possible. The last Annual Performance Assessment of Tower Hamlets was written in December 2008 before this system of monitoring was scrapped: the borough maintained its rating, along with the judgement that it "consistently delivered outstanding services for children and young people", illustrating a continuing improvement upon its previous best performance. In a space of less

than 10 years then, Tower Hamlets had moved from a position where it was heavily criticised for a lack of strategic planning and the poor management of its services to one in which it was being praised for its high-quality services, sustained improvement in education outcomes, excellent partnership work, and being highly ambitious for its children and young people.

Although there has been no overall inspection since December 2008, the story of improvement continues in the borough's school data, as well as in documents such as Council Education Committee minutes and reports from education officers to scrutiny panels. The 2012 performance data for its secondary schools, for example, illustrates that Tower Hamlets (in attaining an average of 61.4%) had exceeded the national average by over 2% in terms of pupils achieving five A*–C GCSE grades, including English and maths. Similarly, in terms of expected progress between Key Stage two to Key Stage four, the borough had exceeded the national average by 4% in English and by 5% in maths. Encouragingly, the most deprived pupils (those eligible for FSM) also performed very well: 54% achieving five A*–C GCSE grades including English and maths compared to 36% nationally, meaning that Tower Hamlets had reduced its achievement gap to only 7% compared to a national gap of 23%. In addition, and quite remarkably, by the spring of 2013, every secondary school in Tower Hamlets had been judged either “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted, with 7 out of 15 ranked as “outstanding”—over twice the national average (Ofsted, 2013). Tower Hamlet's primary schools also exceeded both London and national averages at Key Stage two and level four, with attainment in English at 89%, in maths at 86%, and in English and maths combined at 82%.

Our approach included interviews with Tower Hamlets officials, including two former Tower Hamlets Directors of Children's Services and five senior LA staff in post since at least 1997. We also interviewed five long-serving borough head teachers, as well as surveyed the heads of all primary and secondary schools in the area. Documentary data was analysed, including minutes from the Authority's *Learning, Achievement and Leisure Scrutiny Panel (2002)*, a copy of the *Tower Hamlets Council Strategic Plan (2002)*, copies of *Strategic Plan for the Educational Service (2000, 2002a)*, and copies of the borough's *Educational Achievements and Progress Briefings (2012)*. We also scrutinised Ofsted reports, in particular the *Annual Performance Assessments* and their *Inspection[s] of Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority*. Our analysis of the turnaround led us to identify seven explanatory themes that drove the change in Tower Hamlets. These are ambitious leadership at all levels, very effective school improvement, high-quality teaching and learning, high levels of funding, external integrated services, community development and partnerships, and a resilient approach to external policies and pressure. These are now examined in detail.

2.2 Explaining Success

2.2.1 *Ambitious Leadership*

Tower Hamlets became an education authority in 1990, following the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority, at the same time as a corporate reorganisation of the council took effect, delegating decision-making and service delivery to the borough's seven neighbourhoods, a reorganisation which was said in the 1998 Ofsted report to have been a “disaster” (Ofsted, 1998, p. 11). Between 1990 and 1997, costs spiralled; the Authority became concerned with securing adequate numbers of school places in the face of a serious deficit and then, between 1994 and 1997, came largely to a standstill. The work of individual services was not given impetus and focus by clear leadership from the centre (Ofsted, 1998, p. 13). Despite this, the damning report ended with a note of optimism: the LEA understood the scale of the challenge and had appointed a new Director of Education, who had already put a new education development plan out for consultation. Hargreaves and Harris (2012) note Christine Gilbert, that:

She left her job in a leafy suburb to move to Tower Hamlets—then the worst-performing Local Authority in England—to become its Director of Education. Leaders who perform beyond expectations deliberately seek out acute challenges and exceptional crises. They move towards the danger. (p. 7)

Ofsted (1998, p. 6) remarked that “she [Gilbert] is unequivocal about the need to raise standards urgently, and has won the enthusiastic assent of head teachers to a more challenging and ambitious approach”. Collins, one of Gilbert's successors, says that it is “impossible to overstate her achievement”.

Gilbert set about implementing a challenging Strategic Plan for the LEA for the period 1998–2002. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that Gilbert combined “visionary” leadership with a concomitant strategy to raise performance by establishing goals (within this plan) that were deliberately designed to be just out of reach (Hargreaves & Harris, 2012). Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) note that this strategy rested on the philosophy that “it is better to have ambitious targets and just miss them than have more modest targets and meet them” (p. 67). Recognising these efforts, Ofsted (2000) attributed much of the initial improvement in Tower Hamlets' performance to Gilbert:

Much of the LEA's success in implementing the recommendations and improving its support to schools can be attributed to the high quality of leadership shown by the director and senior officers. Head teachers, governors and members all expressed their confidence in the management of the LEA. (p. 4)

Gilbert herself remembers that the plan allowed her to capture the ambitions of members and “to have a row with schools...once you have a plan and knew what you wanted to achieve, more falls in”.

Following Gilbert came Kevan Collins, who took up his post as Director of Children's Services in Tower Hamlets in 2005 when Gilbert had been appointed

Chief Executive. Collins' initial assessment was that primary schools had already closed the gap "dramatically" but that secondaries were still lagging, with GCSE performance across the borough at 30%. The secondaries, although improving after 1998, needed to see primary improvements in literacy feed through so that the secondaries could, as Collins puts it, "turn properly" in English and maths achievement. He argues that after 2005 the primary need for the LA was to "turn the screw", sending bespoke analytical letters about primary results, intervening strongly to agree programmes of work needed in Year 6 to secure targets, and, as he puts it, "establishing the rhythm" of expectations at the time when national strategies were stepping back. The borough developed an in-depth knowledge of both its schools and the communities they serve. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) note that the borough built trust with its schools and developed deep insight about what was happening (more so than could be gleaned simply from performance spread sheets). There were important significant early changes: not only was the advisory service restructured and brought closer to schools, but Christine Gilbert insisted on a separation between inspection and support. The result of these actions was the development of effective working partnerships with schools, based on tough decisions. Tower Hamlet's officers, head teachers, and advisers were trained in a rigorous and systematic way; and Ofsted (2000) suggests that this robust partnership represents a key feature of the LEA's leadership.

The real achievement of Tower Hamlets was not that it secured improvement in some schools but that it raised achievement across all its schools—in 2013 every one of the borough's secondary schools was good or outstanding (Ofsted, 2013). Gilbert is clear that the politicians were "ambitious for education from the day I was appointed". What happened after 1998 was that effective professional and political leadership worked together to translate the high ambitions elected members had into achievable and practical strategies for improvement. Collins meanwhile locates the political impetus for change in Tower Hamlets as being deep rooted: he cites the election of a far-right councillor in 1984 as a dynamic for political cohesion, drawing Bengalis into politics in the following election, producing councillors with strong ambitions for education. There was a "collective responsibility" across the borough, which made it possible to mobilise resources and enthusiasm for change. For him, the location of Tower Hamlets "on the edge of the City" with the "inheritance of the East End" creates a strong mentality of place; and once professional leadership was properly aligned with political leadership, there was a strong determination to "show the rest of the world what we can achieve... Poverty became a spur to ambition, not an excuse".

School leadership is vital to school improvement, as Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) note: "to date, we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (p. 3). For Tower Hamlets, this is verified by examining the Ofsted performance data for 2005–2012, which suggests that the overall effectiveness of schools within the borough is highly correlated to the effectiveness of its school leaders and management in embedding their ambition to drive improvement ($r^2 = .912$); similarly, outcomes for individuals and groups of children within Tower Hamlets appears to

be strongly correlated to the effectiveness of the leadership of its schools and the management of teaching and learning ($r^2 = 0.999$). Over time, Ofsted inspections have seen a steady improvement in the grading awarded for the leadership of teaching and learning.

In terms of teaching and learning, data suggests that the focus of school leaders appears to very much be centred on maximising the achievement of the individual pupil. Specifically, this was achieved via a consistent and coherent approach to collecting and analysing assessment data, establishing processes to enable staff to take action on the basis of this data, and bespeaking resources to meet the needs of pupils. One respondent noted: “[we engage in] very close tracking of individual progress, so that children who are vulnerable to underachievement are identified early and interventions put in place”; another that “pupils have a personalised programme of support in their learning, the impact of which is monitored and altered as necessary”.

2.2.2 Very Effective School Improvement

The Ofsted Report of 1998 was critical of the performance of schools and the Inspection and Advisory Service. It reported that the service was poorly regarded by schools, with an overemphasis on monitoring and inconsistent levels of support. By 2000, Ofsted noted that a radically restructured advisory service had been put into place, with clear strategies for supporting and developing schools, and also monitoring and intervention where required. During this period, the number of schools in special measures and serious weaknesses was a major concern to the LA, and challenging targets were set to reduce this number. Over the next few years, schools causing concern were monitored and reviewed very closely with appropriate support as required. For primary schools, the highly focused implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies was paramount; and for all, schools’ leadership was under particular scrutiny. Where head teachers were found wanting, the Authority took decisive action, and it has continued to do so. Indeed the data demonstrates that between 1998 and 2012, out of 48 schools causing concern or in Ofsted categories, 42 Heads were replaced. Crucially, the Director of Children’s Services and Senior Officers have been closely involved with the appointment of new head teachers and have not hesitated to use their powers to prevent an appointment where they thought the governors’ recommendation was inappropriate. Certainly, the high quality of head teacher leadership as evident through Ofsted inspections has been a major factor in the rapid improvement of Tower Hamlet’s schools. In such a small borough, with less than 100 schools, the Authority knew its schools very well and has established a range of consultative forums to make sure that policies and support and challenge programmes are explained and that the views of Heads and other stakeholders can be taken into account. As well as direct input through the school improvement service, there are a range of officers who have everyday dealings with schools related to particular services and partnerships,

such as attendance, behaviour, special needs, and social inclusion. The shared intelligence about schools enables the Authority to support where it is required and challenge appropriately. Interviews and evidence from head teachers also indicate that there are generally positive relationships between the LA and its schools, which, despite some cutbacks, are still able to access a range of support services to support them in their endeavours to improve on their previous best performance.

Of course, the drive for school improvement on the ground has been led by school leaders and staff in individual schools, and we refer to this more specifically under the themes of ambitious school leadership and high-quality teaching and learning. Determined and resilient leadership along with high expectations has built a sustained momentum for improvement. Expert data analysis, benchmarked against other local and similar schools, has provided the impetus for ambitious target setting. Where these targets were met and even exceeded, it provided the springboard for even more success. Where targets were not met at first, schools were quick to put into place a range of interventions personalising support for individuals and groups of children and young people. Opportunities for after-school and out-of-hours learning are considerable in Tower Hamlets, providing a further boost for attainment and achievement. Over time a spirit of “collaborative competition” seem to have developed successfully, with some schools spurring on other schools to do just as well. Schools have also been encouraged to work together, and at the moment there are two teaching school alliances. It has been suggested that schools and school leaders within the borough worked together “with an additional twist of friendly rivalry in order to promote the greater good of their communities” (Hargreaves & Harris, 2012).

2.2.3 High-Quality Teaching and Learning

As with school leadership, examining the Ofsted data for 2005–2012 indicates that the overall effectiveness of schools is highly correlated with the quality of teaching ($r^2 = .926$). The borough experienced a massive teacher shortage in the mid-1990s with the result that teachers were recruited from abroad. Successfully reversing this position and attracting and retaining high-quality teachers is cited as a major feature of Tower Hamlet’s approach to improving its educational performance (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Evidence of commitment to solving the problem is provided in the minutes of the borough’s *Learning, Achievement and Leisure Scrutiny Panel* (for Monday, 30 September 2002). The specific initiatives covered by the borough’s strategy include (i) recruiting and retaining high-quality staff, (ii) encouraging and supporting local people into education and maximising work-based routes to qualified teacher status, (iii) improving the recruitment of newly qualified teachers, (iv) improving access to housing for teachers, and (v) professional development of teachers.

Of particular note was the desire of the Education Directorate to find out what attracted people to Tower Hamlets, what encouraged them into teaching, and what

persuaded them to stay in the borough. The borough's recruitment and retention strategy was developed and executed in consultation with "head teachers, governors, trades unions, [and] with government and colleagues in other boroughs to assess the nature and scale of the problem and redefine its strategy". As a result, "a number of initiatives had been introduced to promote the borough as a first-class teaching environment and facilitate high quality, stable staffing". Importantly, the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Manager added that these developments were "particularly important as there was no evidence to suggest the national initiatives were having a significant effect in improving teacher recruitment and retention in inner London". As a result, over subsequent years, Tower Hamlets has pursued efforts in relation to five key issues: to recruiting and retaining high-quality staff, to encouraging and supporting local people into education by developing work-based routes into teaching, to improving the recruitment and retention of newly qualified teachers, to improving access to housing for teachers, and to developing the professional learning of serving teachers. Extensive work was also done on stressing the positive advantages of working in Tower Hamlets—of being part of radical change, so that working in and for Tower Hamlets was "the place to be" for those committed to urban education. Attraction packages often carried a requirement to stay in the borough for at least a defined period as a condition of accepting the packages, and they were underpinned by a high-quality continuing professional development offer, again, at all levels, and for ambitious and successful teachers, an explicit commitment to career development and promotion from within. The Authority ran a Master's programme in close partnership with a university and, whilst many councils were closing theirs, kept a Professional Development Centre.

Less high profile but just as important in building strong community cohesion was the intensive work which Tower Hamlets did on encouraging and supporting local people into education roles. It has always been the Education Directorate's intention to improve recruitment to, and participation in, initial teacher training initiatives within the borough and its travel to work area, particularly from members of ethnic communities and in sympathy with a "workforce to reflect the community". In the last decade, the council had developed an extensive programme with special courses for training teaching assistants. The ultimate aim was to develop a clear progression route into teaching for these staff, the vast majority of whom were local people. By providing professional development opportunities at all levels, those who lacked qualifications or confidence could be offered a range of options, which might eventually lead them to a career in teaching.

2.2.4 High Levels of Funding

No account of the education transformation in Tower Hamlets can overlook resource. Tower Hamlets was well-resourced, with almost 60% more resource per pupil than schools across England and with higher levels of resourcing than almost all other London boroughs. Christine Gilbert contrasted Tower Hamlets with her experience

as Director of Education in Harrow, where money was always tight. One head teacher, appointed from outside the Authority, said that “the very high levels of funding [within Tower Hamlets] are in marked contrast to my experience outside of the borough”; and another remarked that “budgets are huge compared to anywhere else I have worked”. Moreover, as schools in Tower Hamlets improved, so did the council’s willingness to invest in education: improvement drew in more resource. So it could perhaps be argued that the transformation of schooling in Tower Hamlets is simply a consequence of high levels of resource.

But this argument runs into some obvious flaws. If the performance of schools in Tower Hamlets were simply a consequence of funding, the 1998 Ofsted Report would never have been written. If the performance of schools in Tower Hamlets were simply a consequence of levels of funding, the Authority would not have recorded exceptionally low levels of examination success in the early 1990s. If the performance of schools in Tower Hamlets were simply a consequence of levels of funding, we would still need to explain rapid improvements throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is undeniable that Tower Hamlets’ schools were well-resourced—far better resourced than schools elsewhere—but money needs to be spent wisely, and survey respondents noted that interventions have to be of “quality”: “It’s easy to look as though you’re doing something by spending money on interventions, but the impact will be limited if the quality of the intervention is not good”. If the Tower Hamlets story makes a strong case for high levels of education spending, it also makes a case for targeting that spending intelligently, for linking investment with outcomes, for monitoring the impact of spending, and for building the case for investment.

2.2.5 Integrated Services

In 2006a, b, the Children and Young People’s Plans were introduced; the first from 2006 to 2009 and the second from 2009 to 2012. The annual performance assessments of services for children and young people conducted by Ofsted between 2005 and 2008 regularly reported that the council made an outstanding contribution towards improving outcomes in all five areas of its Children and Young People. The 2006 Report, for example, praised the Children and Young People’s Plan as having a clear strategic vision, being focused on clear performance indicators and outcomes for pupils within a context of support and challenge. The priorities were firmly rooted in a community planning process, which involved all key stakeholders including children and young people. The Authority’s use of benchmarking to review performance and to set challenging targets was identified as good practice and the Authority’s track record of successful partnership with other agencies identified as a clear strength.

In 2007, the Report meanwhile stated that “the Authority has a very good understanding of the needs of its communities and targets resources precisely to achieve good outcomes for young people, particularly in relation to their very low starting

points. High expectations and an ambition to excel, combined with purposeful and well-judged interventions, succeed in supporting children and young people to overcome significant social and economic barriers". The 2008 Report further commented that "excellent partnership work ensures a joined up, cohesive, multi-agency approach to service delivery. The determination to overcome considerable social and economic barriers, improve outcomes, and reduce inequalities, is shared by all with considerable success".

The council's services were often described as making an excellent or outstanding contribution to improving the health of children and young people—particularly vital in such an area of socio-economic deprivation. Joint multi-agency strategies were judged to be very effective with a strong emphasis on prevention and detailed needs analysis. By the end of 2007, the Authority had exceeded national targets for achieving Healthy Schools Status and was meeting ambitious local targets, with particular praise for services for children with disabilities and the very good performance for the health of looked after children. Similarly, during these years, the outcomes for the safety and care of children were described as outstanding, with very strong and clear systems for information sharing and cross-agency working, ensuring that the needs of vulnerable children were being met. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board operating since March 2006 had proved to be very effective. In terms of making a positive contribution, there were excellent contributions to improving outcomes in this area, enhanced by collaborative work with a number of partners including the youth offending team, the police, and the voluntary sector. Opportunities for young people to have a say were provided through Local Youth Partnerships, the Tower Hamlets Youth Partnership, and the Youth Parliament. Inspection evidence indicated that young people's contribution to their communities was mostly very good with many young people being trained as peer workers and mentors.

In terms of economic well-being, the Authority was very successful in making substantial reductions in the number of young people not involved in education, employment, or training, through targeted and innovative approaches, although the proportion of young people achieving level two and level three qualifications at age 19 was below the national average but increasing at a faster rate than nationally, with a 10% rise since 2004 compared to a national rise of approximately 5%. We have referred elsewhere to enjoying and achieving the sustained improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people at all key stages with standards improving at a much faster rate than nationally. A particular feature was the excellent outcomes for vulnerable children, including looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Further impressive outcomes were achieved in these years. There was a sustained reduction in the proportion of young people not in education, employment, or training, which is currently 4.9%. Young people were encouraged to stay in education through the introduction of the Tower Hamlets Mayor's Education Award, the first of its kind nationally, following the end of the Education Maintenance Allowance in England in 2011. Health outcomes also continued to improve, as did outcomes related to staying safe and attendance in schools.

2.2.6 *Community Development and Partnerships*

As we have seen, Tower Hamlets experienced a powerful local identity shaped by history and experience. It was a sense of identity forged from the grinding poverty of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and shaped by political radicalism in the interwar years. The first Community Plan for Tower Hamlets was launched in May 2001 and produced by the local strategic partnership including the council, residents, public service providers, businesses, faith communities, and the voluntary and community sector. There were three strands to this partnership—local area partnerships, community plan action groups, and a partnership management group. Since that date, there has been a range of community plans and actions to sustain community participation and cohesion and for young people to achieve their full potential as active and responsible citizens. In both *Performing Beyond Expectations* (Hargreaves & Harris, 2012) and *The Fourth Way* (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), Andy Hargreaves, Dennis Shirley, and Alma Harris argue that community development is central to the success of Tower Hamlets as a “turned-around district”. They argue that whilst most local authorities had endeavoured to deliver more children’s services to the disadvantaged and other communities, Tower Hamlets had gone further and had worked hard to create new capacity to strengthen community relations and engagement. For example, it had worked with faith-based organisations and formal agreements with imams from the largely Muslim community to counter the effects of children taking several days holiday for religious festivities such as Eid and taking extended holidays in Bangladesh during term time. Another example was the development of some schools into community centres, establishing extended services and providing resources and recreation for children, young people, and adults. The Authority has also developed a number of Children and Families Partnerships working very hard to engage parents. In 2005, the LA undertook a study of the impact of long holidays on the attainment of pupils and found that underachievement was worse amongst those with lower prior attainment. The mosques backed the council in stating that extended absences would be treated as truancy because the educational achievement mattered greatly to the community (and ISAP statistics show that 100% of pupils now have 90% or above attendance after an ISAP intervention).

Particular features of community relations and engagement in Tower Hamlets are the school and community-based projects used very effectively to promote citizenship and community cohesion. Activities promoted through the interfaith forum promote community cohesion and interfaith understanding across schools. The youth service reaches very good numbers of young people through a range of community-based services, and the youth participation team ensures that children’s voices are heard. There are many opportunities for young people to engage in service development, and they are represented in many partnership groups, some attaining accreditation through their involvement. There is a Youth Parliament and a Youth Major Leads on the Youth Opportunities fund, which distributes funding for activities and facilities.

2.2.7 A Resilient Approach to External Government Policies and Pressure

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) also argue that a key factor in Tower Hamlets success was:

a resilient but not reckless approach to external government pressure and policy – accepting the importance of testing and targets but deciding to set their own targets and resisting the politically motivated pressure to build new high school academies since the Authority already had high-trust relationships with its schools that now performed very well. (p. 67)

During our interviews with LA officers, it was suggested that “what might work nationally might not always work in the Tower Hamlets context [in relation to culture, language, homogeneity of the population, etc.]” (Tower Hamlets official). However, there was also recognition from LA officers that Tower Hamlets had been determined to make government policies work for them and get the best out of them, and there had been many instances of effective partnerships working with the Department for Education and other government bodies. The low point in education outcomes in Tower Hamlets coincided with the coming to power of the Labour government in 1997. At the same time, Christine Gilbert became Director of Education, and one part of the new director’s and Tower Hamlets’ recovery strategy was to engage directly and positively with the government’s requirement for education development plans, implement the national literacy and numeracy strategies, and emphasise rigorous targets, pupil tracking, and testing. A strategic education plan, including a rigorous education development plan for school improvement with a set of ambitious targets within a new climate of high expectations, was developed. With regard to literacy and numeracy, Tower Hamlets became a pilot for some early initiatives at Key Stages two and three and then robustly implemented the National Strategies setting their own ambitious targets for improvement. There was also a robust approach to schools causing concern, with clear policies and plans towards targeted interventions. Collins put it like this:

We did not set out to be innovative or to reinvent education. We adopted the national secondary strategy. We adopted assessment for learning and we set out to be brilliant at implementation. Implementation was what we set out to be good at. We wanted to do basic, basic stuff and get it right.

2.3 Conclusion

The achievements of Tower Hamlets and its schools after 1998 were exceptional. Across the borough, all schools improved. Across the borough, the educational outcomes for all groups of pupils were substantially improved. And beyond this, the borough embedded a shared commitment to high standards and high expectations across the community, the council, and the schools. By any measure, the achievement is considerable. In this final section, we engage in speculation: What were the

key factors in Tower Hamlets' improvement? What are the lessons for policy and practice? And at a time when governments across the world continue to drive change in education, what are the implications for global educational practices?

It has been our contention in this paper that the transformation of schooling in Tower Hamlets depended on a number of linked factors: committed political leadership; challenging professional leadership; a robust approach to selecting from, and then rigorously managing, external policy imperatives; the engagement of schools; and the judicious spending of generous levels of resourcing. We cannot answer counterfactual questions with precision, but it is our belief that whilst different approaches would still have seen improvement in some schools, the coherent, area-wide improvement which we saw in Tower Hamlets would not have been possible without the strong political and professional leadership which the Authority, its leaders, and its officers were able to exert.

Charles Payne's account of American school reform, *So Much Reform, So Little Change* (2008), is subtitled "the persistence of failure in urban schools". His account of the failure of repeated waves of school reform to bring about significant improvement in America's urban schools is compelling reading. Payne (2008) is dismissive of reform which is disconnected from the daily realities of urban schools and of grand theories of change; he concludes that "there is no one lever we can move which will give us the purchase we need" (p. 47). Payne (2008) argues that successful reform depends on what he calls "five fundamentals": instructional leadership, professional capacity, establishing a learning climate¹, family and community involvement, and the quality of instruction. Moreover, successful school reform is "comprehensive, sustained and intense". Payne's book ends with a coruscating denunciation of what he calls "liberal and conservative theories of school reform"—the one arguing that school reform is impossible without serious assaults on poverty and the circumstances which create failure and the other that circumstances do not matter and that incentive structures alone can drive change (Payne, 2008, pp. 192–193). Both, he argues, are extremely damaging to children. In practice, says Payne, we know a great deal about successful reform, and he concludes his book with a mantra for effective reform:

Give them teaching that is determined, energetic, and engaging. Hold them to high standards. Expose them to as much as you can, most especially the arts. Root the school in the community and take advantage of the culture the children bring with them. Pay attention to their social and ethical development. Recognise the reality of race, poverty and other social barriers but make children understand that barriers don't have to limit their lives...Above all, no matter where in the social structure children are coming from, act as if their possibilities are boundless. (Payne, 2008, pp. 211–212)

It is possible and useful to look at Tower Hamlets in the context of what we know about effective school improvement and reform across the world. For too long, the assumption of research and policy has been that effort must be focused on reforming and improving individual schools. But school reform at scale—successfully improv-

¹In the text which follows, Payne clearly means "learning climate" to "include[e]...the degree to which students perceive high expectations" (Payne, 2008, p. 46).

ing areas and districts—is more challenging. It is always possible for individual schools to improve by—either by accident or design—subtly altering their intake or shifting their relationships with neighbouring schools. In the long run, all this does is to move failure around the system. It is not a recipe for serious or sustained improvement.

Tower Hamlets is therefore important because of what it tells us about *area-based* reform. This is important for any number of reasons. If we can move our reform and improvement efforts from schools to areas, we have the prospect of improving the life chances for not subsets of children—important though this might be—but for all children and young people. If schools and their communities can bring about systemic improvement, then all benefit, not simply a fortunate few who have found their way into more successful schools. It is the achievement of Tower Hamlets that it has made significant progress on that score. The research is clear that there are some essential ingredients for school reform at scale. Heather Zavadsky's (2010) detailed study of five North American school districts (p. 272) is clear that the initial ingredient on which all else depends is “climate or culture”—the buzz, which leads to belief that success is possible and, eventually, establishes trust. Beyond this, “reform needs to look different” depending on the community, though standards and expectations need to be high and consistent. These were the lessons learnt in Tower Hamlets and—it is worth noting—learnt before Payne, Zavadsky, and Levin had synthesised their own understandings of the nature of successful urban reform.

The experience of Tower Hamlets since 1998 is inspirational. It shows that improvement is not only possible but achievable, that improvement in some schools does not need to be bought at the expense of others, and that improvement, once attained, can not only be sustained but surpassed. As a result, it is not unreasonable to argue that what Tower Hamlets has created are some of the best urban schools in the world. This is a genuinely exceptional achievement, worth celebrating, worth understanding, but above all, worth learning from.

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