

Survival of the weakest: the differential improvement of schools causing concern in England

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Inspection and performance data show that the schools identified as least effective in England (in special measures) are more likely to sustain the improvement they make after inspection than those that are relatively more effective, although still causing concern (identified as having serious weaknesses). We compare the progress of these two categories of schools causing concern and discuss the role of school leadership in relation to their differential improvement trends. It is argued that special measures identification and support for improvement has made an important contribution to the policy goals of promoting educational inclusion and raising standards.

Introduction

The role of inspection in school improvement is receiving increasing international attention (van Bruggen 2000) although the intense focus in England is probably unique. The systematic identification of schools causing concern in England, and their subsequent performance, has provided a sharp focus on issues of school effectiveness and improvement over the last decade (see Hopkins *et al.*, 1994; Earley *et al.*, 1996; Ofsted 1997, Gray 2000). Since 1993, the relative effectiveness of all schools has been assessed and publicly reported (Ofsted 1993). This has been achieved through periodic inspections (external evaluations), now in their third cycle in England, and the annual publication of comparative school performance data, particularly test and examination results. The Education (Schools) Act 1992, created a new independent inspectorate to inspect all schools in England on a regular basis. This became known as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), a

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non-ministerial government department led by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England. Ofsted assimilated existing members of the former inspectorate, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), and created many new independent inspectors to deliver school inspections. School inspection and reporting of results reflected both a political desire to give parents greater information on which to exercise school choice, in the climate of 'open enrolment'—established from 1988—and the 'Parents' Charter' of 1991, and the perceived need for greater accountability of schools that are largely autonomous as a result of delegated financial management and weakening of the role of Local Education Authorities.

In establishing the inspection system, an implicit—but non-statutory—expectation of government was that the diagnosis provided by inspection, coupled with greater accountability and the mobilisation of informed parental interest, would promote school improvement. This was reflected in Ofsted's aspirational slogan: 'Improvement through Inspection'. The expectation has recently been articulated in the current government's policy for inspectorates (OPSR, 2003), which states that 'public service inspections should pursue the purpose of improvement'. By comparison, a responsibility for school improvement is a statutory part of the role of the Netherlands Inspectorate. Nevertheless, a recent evaluation of the impact of Ofsted on all the different sectors it inspects (Matthews & Sammons, 2004) found that the inspectorate has a positive impact on education across most areas of its work, notably in contributing to the improvement of the least effective schools.

Contracted-out inspection teams, which undertake the majority of school inspections in England, have a specific duty to consider whether a school is a cause for concern. Three categories of concern are defined by regulation: (i) schools which are failing, or are likely to fail, to provide an adequate education for their pupils and thus require special measures; (ii) schools in which education is generally satisfactory but which have one or more serious weaknesses; and (iii) under-achieving schools (Ofsted, 2003a). The latter include, for example, schools whose results are not as high as would be expected from the social backgrounds or prior attainment of their pupils. Where a school is found to require special measures, the judgement is corroborated by HMCI on the basis of scrutiny of the inspection evidence or, if the school wishes, a further visit, conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). This mechanism is intended to add to the reliability of the special measures classification (see (i) above).

We start by considering the relative improvement of schools in the two most populous categories of schools that cause concern (ineffective schools): schools that require special measures and those having serious weaknesses. Evidence suggests that special measures schools acquire or develop greater capacity to improve and to sustain improvement than schools whose performance is of relatively lesser concern (Matthews & Sammons, 2004). We explore the possible reasons for this tendency and argue for greater support, monitoring and stimulation of schools that are identified through inspection as having weaknesses but which may lack the capacity to be self-critical and the appropriate leadership to sustain the drive for self-improvement.

The Identification of Ineffective Schools

All schools in England experience external evaluation, termed 'section 10' or 'Ofsted inspection' (School Inspections Act 1996) at least once every six years. The inspection of school effectiveness in England requires, by law, reporting on: the quality of education provided at the school (especially teaching and learning, the curriculum, care and guidance, parental links and so on); the standards achieved by pupils at the school; the school's leadership and management; and the personal—that is to say, spiritual, moral, social and cultural—development of pupils at the school. These broad characteristics are interpreted by the criteria in a succession of inspection frameworks, the latest of which was introduced from September 2003.

The frameworks were derived from previous inspection practice and informed by school effectiveness research, particularly a research review conducted by Sammons *et al.* (1995), which grouped the main characteristics of effective schools. A separate review (Stoll & Fink, 1996) of studies of the characteristics of *ineffective* schools (which had received much less attention in comparison with studies of more effective schools) highlights four aspects which are recognisably the obverse of key effectiveness characteristics:

- Lack of vision;
- Unfocussed leadership;
- Dysfunctional staff relationships, and
- Ineffective classroom practices.

Schools causing concern exhibit weaknesses, commonly including those above, that inhibit the educational progress of their pupils. These may be direct, such as a preponderance of ineffective teaching, or indirect, such as weaknesses in leadership or quality assurance. In its guidance for inspectors, Ofsted (2003b, p. 162) described schools that

... are failing to provide a satisfactory education and thus require special measures as being likely to have two or more of the following major weaknesses:

- Significant underachievement by a large proportion of pupils or groups of pupils;
- Unsatisfactory or poor teaching overall or in specific stages;
- Ineffective leadership or management;
- A breakdown of discipline or a situation in which pupils are at physical or emotional at risk from other pupils or adults;
- Significant levels of racial harassment.

Ofsted specifies other weaknesses that are likely to be present in such schools, including: the poor attendance of pupils; failure to implement the national curriculum; inefficient use of resources; an unsatisfactory ethos; high levels of exclusions; low morale among staff; lack of confidence in the head teacher, and poor provision for pupils' development. Special measures are also justified if schools are considered *likely to fail* to provide an acceptable standard of education owing to: lack of improvement since being judged previously to have serious weaknesses; rapid deterioration in important

areas such as the quality of teaching or standards achieved by pupils; and the inability of leaders and managers to check decline.

These criteria have grown organically, influenced not only by research, but also by the analysis of the growing body of inspection evidence and the experience of those HMI who monitored over 2000 schools identified as ineffective in the period 1993 to 2003. At the end of an inspection, inspectors make a judgement about whether a school falls into one of the categories of schools causing concern. The categories are that:

... the school:

- is failing, or likely to fail, to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and thus requires *special measures*;
- provides an acceptable standard of education, but has *serious weaknesses* in one or more areas of its work; or
- does not require special measures or have serious weaknesses, but is *underachieving*. (Ofsted, 2003b, p. 160)

A school has:

... an *inadequate sixth form* if:

- it is failing, or likely to fail, to give its pupils over compulsory school age an acceptable standard of education
- it has significant weaknesses in one or more areas of its activities for pupils over compulsory school age. (Ofsted, 2003b, p. 160)

At the end of 2003/2004, the numbers of schools in these categories were as shown in Table 1.

The evaluation of evidence concerning the impact of inspection supports the findings of earlier research that inspection has played an important role as a catalyst for change and improvement during the 10-year period 1993–2003, particularly for weaker schools (Matthews & Sammons, 2004). Over one million students were estimated to have benefited from improvements in the quality of education provided by schools which moved out of special measures and substantially larger numbers from improvements in schools in serious weaknesses during this period. Table 2 includes recent data for 2004 and gives details of the numbers of schools identified as requiring special measures since Ofsted was created. Overall almost 85% improved, with improvement being more common for primary schools (nearly 90%) but less

Table 1 Numbers of schools in different categories of schools causing concern in July 2004

	Primary	Secondary	Special	PRU*	Total
Special measures	201 (1.1%)	94 (2.8%)	22 (1.8%)	15 (3.3%)	332 (1.5%)
Serious weaknesses	246 (1.4%)	47 (1.4%)	15 (1.2%)	9 (2.0%)	317 (1.4%)
Underachieving schools	66 (0.4%)	12 (0.4%)	15 (1.2%)	9 (2.0%)	317 (1.4%)
Inadequate sixth forms	–	8 (0.5%)	–	–	8 (0.5%)

Note: * = Pupil referral units (PRU) make educational provision for disruptive pupils.

Table 2 Outcomes of ‘Special Measures’ (SM) over the 11 years, 1993–2004

	Primary		Secondary		Special		PRUs		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Removed from SM	899	89.4	186	76.5	123	75.0	23	60.5	1231	84.8
Closed	107	10.6	57	24.5	41	25.0	15	39.5	220	15.2
Total	1006	—	243	—	164	—	38	—	1451	—

common for the smaller category of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), where significant improvement was found for around 60% of institutions.

These outcomes should be viewed in the context of patterns of improvement for schools of all degrees of effectiveness. Evidence from successive inspections indicates that the majority of schools (two-thirds) inspected in 2002/2003 were judged to have made ‘good’ or ‘excellent/very good’ improvement since their previous inspection, as can be seen in Figure 1.

In terms of school processes reported on by inspectors, leadership and management are found to have improved more markedly than teaching in recent years (Ofsted, 2004a).

The evaluation of Ofsted’s impact suggests that there is differential effectiveness in schools’ responses to inspection, with the most and least effective schools making greater use of the external evaluation provided. Some of the reasons for this are likely to be associated with, on one hand, the pressure on special measures schools to improve and the greater support most receive in their efforts to do so, and on the other, the well-documented association between effective leadership and manage-

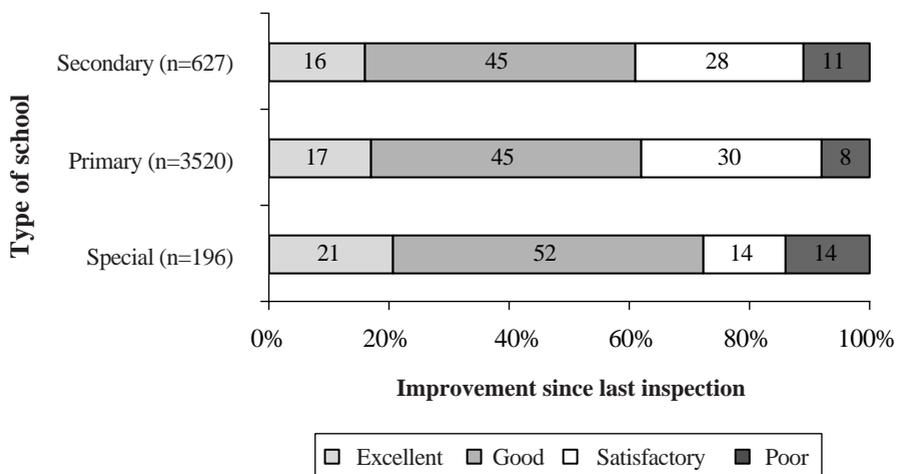


Figure 1. Judgements of extent of improvement of 4343 primary, secondary and special schools inspected in 2003–2004, since their last inspection (Ofsted 2005)

ment and capacity for improvement. It is against this pattern that we look more closely at the improvement of special measures (SM) schools, and the most similar group of schools that are not in special measures: those having serious weaknesses (SW).

The Consequences of Special Measures

A notional school's improvement after being designated as requiring special measures can be represented by the schematic illustration (Figure 2) below. A 'special measures' decision normally follows a long period of stasis or decline that has typically brought a school to the point represented by 'A' on the figure. The term 'performance' is used to represent a combination of quality of education, leadership and management, pupils' achievements and 'ethos' or school climate.

The initial judgement that a school requires special measures, which is corroborated by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, can appear devastating to a school and have consequences such as feelings of demoralisation, key staff leaving, parents considering the removal of their children and negative publicity in the press. Indeed some commentators have argued that such identification, often termed the policy of 'naming', leads to a 'spiral of decline', with the Secondary Heads Association, for example, stating 'It is our view that this public deficit model of inspection is antithetical to school improvement' (Memorandum submitted by the Secondary Heads Association published in the House of Commons Education & Skills Committee

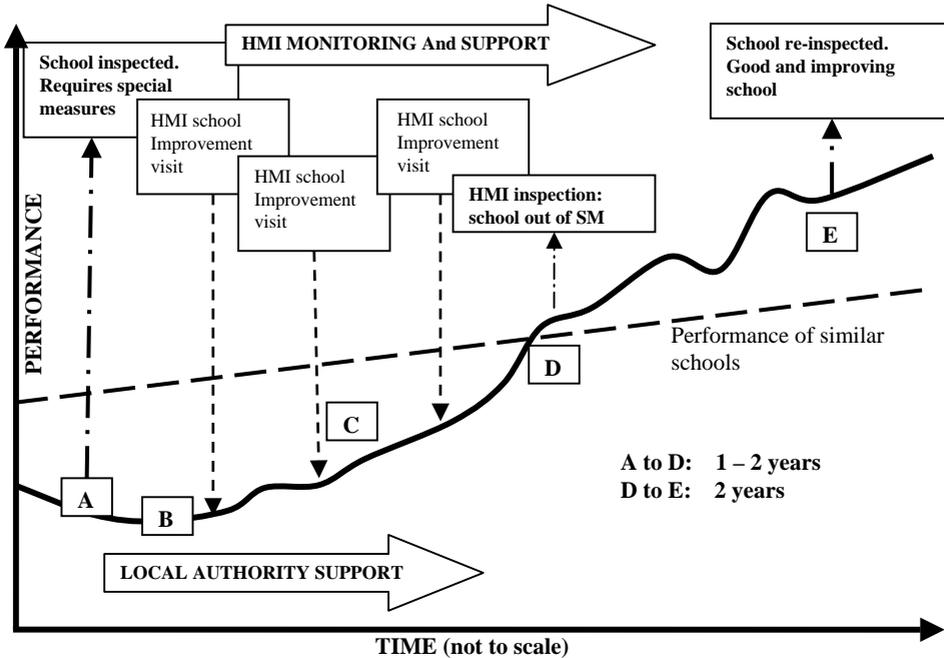


Figure 2. A typical improvement path of a school in special measures

evidence on the Work of Ofsted HC 1221-1 session 2003–2004, p. 33). The evaluation of inspection evidence and attainment data over the last 10 years, however, suggests that, while a further performance dip may occur in special measures schools this is swiftly followed by improvement in the majority of cases (over three quarters of secondary schools).

Earley (1997) described the process of identification experienced by many of the early schools identified to need special measures, and their governing bodies, as going through a number of stages; 'shock; anger; rejection; acceptance; help', which were also recognised and addressed by Ofsted (1999). We represent this as a possible but usually temporary dip in performance, 'B' in the figure, while the school comes to terms with the outcome of inspection. In some cases this has been likened to a grieving process, although the special measures classification has also been welcomed by many LEAs, staff and governors for recognising and bringing long standing problems to public attention, and thus providing the impetus for change. The special measures judgement, while often painful, also triggers a range of actions designed to assist improvement. The school, with the help of the local education authority (LEA), has to produce an action plan to address weaknesses identified by inspectors for approval by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, and becomes eligible for extra funding.

The two main agents to have an ongoing link with special measures schools are HMI and LEA staff (see Figure 2). HMI visit and monitor all special measures schools, on average three times a year, to evaluate the progress of the school, and help the school to do the same for itself. There is evidence (Matthews & Sammons, 2004) that these HMI school improvement visits, represented by 'C' often provide considerable assistance to the school as it works to become more effective. A school is expected to be ready to emerge from special measures status within two years, and, in practice, most achieve removal from special measures earlier than this. The school is normally brought out of special measures by a small HMI-led inspection (point 'D' in the diagram) and then is reinspected by a section 10 inspection two years after coming out (point 'E'). Perhaps rather surprisingly given their history, almost 60% of the schools reinspected after coming out of special measures are judged to be:

... good, or even very good or outstanding. Successful and sometimes innovative practice has put some of these schools at the leading edge within their LEAs. (Ofsted, 2005, p. 51)

In 2002–2003, 108 schools (2.8% of all the schools inspected) were made subject to special measures through regular inspection. A further 52 schools required special measures as a result of inspections of schools causing concern led by Her Majesty's Inspectors. Thirty-eight of these schools already had serious weaknesses (34) or were underachieving schools (four); the rest were secondary schools known to be facing challenging circumstances. During the 2002–2003 year, 130 schools were removed from special measures, when HMI inspections (point E in Figure 1) decided that they were providing an adequate or better education, but 20 schools were closed.

In 2002–2003, the number of schools designated as having serious weaknesses was 163 (4% of all schools inspected). Over the year, 43 schools that had been designated previously to have serious weaknesses had not improved sufficiently and were found to require special measures. During the same year, 40 schools were identified as underachieving.

The progress of schools in all these categories is monitored both by the LEAs and by HMI, who focus particularly on special measures schools, but monitor serious weakness schools at less frequent intervals. HMI removed 130 schools from special measures during the year, *identifying improvements in their leadership as the main factor contributing to improvement*. In many cases such special measures schools had experienced a change in leadership. All but 34 of the 289 schools having serious weaknesses visited by inspectors were considered to be making sufficient progress as a result of taking action to raise standards. Of the 58 underachieving schools visited in 2002–2003, 46 were judged to have made at least satisfactory progress.

The Inverse Differential Improvement of Less Effective Schools

When examining the impact of Ofsted, Matthews and Sammons (2004) found that secondary schools that had been in special measures were more likely to sustain their improvement than the less ineffective group of schools classified as having serious weaknesses. This conclusion was based on several complementary sets of data, including:

- i. Trends in examination results;
- ii. Relative rates of improvement, decline or relapse;
- iii. The relatively higher proportion of special measures schools later identified as having become highly effective.

First, the results of secondary schools inspected in 2002–2003 that were placed in the special measures or serious weaknesses categories at the time of their last full inspection show greater improvement in the results of the special measures schools (Table 3) than those having serious weaknesses.

Table 3 Change in KS4 results of all secondary schools inspected in the 2002–2003 school year whose previous s10 inspection identified serious weaknesses or the need for special measures

Designation at previous inspection	Special measures (22 schools)		Serious weaknesses (39 schools)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Improved results	19	86%	27	69%
Worse results	3	14%	11	28%
No change	0	0%	1	3%

Table 4 Number of schools with serious weakness that re-entered serious weakness or special measures categories

Status	Number	Number of schools placed in SW overall (1997–2004)
Serious weakness to serious weakness	74	1916
Serious weakness to special measures	288	1916

Note: * = Schools that left and re-entered the same day or within days of the original identification were removed.

Secondly, there are differences in the relative regression of schools that have been in, and subsequently left, the serious weakness or special measures categories (Table 4).

These figures, particularly the 15% of schools with serious weaknesses that subsequently required special measures, contrast strongly with the 2% (31 schools) that have been placed in special measures twice, five of which subsequently closed. It must be a matter for concern that more than one school in seven of those identified as having serious weaknesses continued to decline and slid into the special measures category within a few years, despite the official attention drawn to their need for improvement.

Thirdly, evidence of the positive longer term consequences of special measures identification is found in the relative proportions of special measures schools to improve markedly and later be judged to have become highly effective. HMCI's annual reports identify particularly successful and significantly improved schools and colleges inspected during the previous year. Fourteen schools that were previously in special measures were highlighted as outstanding in the 2002/2003 Annual Report, representing 3.5% of the total. This compares with 10 (2.5%) of the much larger group of serious weaknesses schools.

Taken together, this and other evidence points to a pattern of greater and more sustained improvement of special measures schools than the schools in which serious weaknesses have been identified, which started from a higher baseline of general effectiveness. This suggests that the capacity to improve and/or the mechanisms for supporting school improvement may be different in the two groups.

The Importance of Core Leadership in Improving and Sustaining the Progress of the Weakest Schools

One explanation for differential improvement is that schools in special measures, certainly in the early years of inspection, were the subject of more intensive monitoring and support, from HMI, LEAs and other agencies, than those having serious weaknesses. More recently, LEAs have been required to draw up a statement of action to show how they support schools in both special measures and serious weaknesses categories. A range of other initiatives and policies have also been applied, including the semi-privatisation of some local education departments, identification

of 'Schools facing challenging circumstances', and the development of 'City academies' and 'Specialist schools'. Changes in leadership are likely to have been particularly influential in such schools. The changes identified in special measures schools through a range of school improvement measures do not cease when they have left that category; most sustain their gains and make further progress.

The impact of support for schools causing concern is evaluated by HMI as they monitor their progress. External support is a vital element, which is usually but not confined to that provided by the LEA. The arrangements in many local authorities for supporting and improving ineffective schools have improved considerably since the first cycle of inspections of LEAs (Ofsted 2002). HMCI's 2005 Annual Report states that procedures for monitoring, challenge and intervention continue to improve but shows that more needs to be done. Of the 30 LEAs inspected in 2004/2005:

... sixteen have improved their identification of and intervention in underperforming schools and twelve have good or very good intervention strategies. Seven have remained static and seven have deteriorated. Where performance has deteriorated or remained unsatisfactory, the LEAs have too many schools in various categories of concern or have failed to reduce their number. (Ofsted, 2005, p. 79)

There is much evidence from inspection that the dominant factors in turning round a weak school lie within rather than outside the school and rest particularly with the quality of leadership. HMCI reports that:

... the impact of external support depends on the school's capacity to make the most of it. It is greatest when leadership is effective, important initiatives are given a high priority and parents, pupils, staff and governors are fully involved from an early stage. (Ofsted, 2005, p. 52)

In 1997, HMI identified the factors that help schools improve in the first cycle of inspections. Strong leadership by the head teacher was and remains:

... a characteristic feature of all schools that are making good progress with addressing the key issues in the action plan. (Ofsted, 1997, p. 10)

The report also commented that in all but a few cases, the head teacher is new to the school just before or just after the inspection.

The change of headteacher has given the school the impetus needed to develop and improve the quality of education provided for the pupils. (Ofsted, 1997, p. 10)

Twenty years earlier, HMI had identified the quality of leadership of the head teacher as being the most important single factor associated with the success of 'good schools' (HMI, 1977). There is much less research than inspection evidence on the improvement of schools in special measures or having serious weaknesses. Research findings are drawn mainly from a small number of case studies (see Gray & Wilcox, 1995; Mortimore & Stoll 1996; Stoll & Myers, 1998) in which leadership emerges as a critical factor. More generally, Hargreaves and Hopkins (1993) pointed out the need for leadership in implementing improvement plans. Sammons *et al.* (1995) drew attention to the importance of the head teacher's leadership as a

characteristic of more effective schools in a wide-ranging review of previous research. More recent school effectiveness studies have identified, for example, the desirability of corporate leadership, through an effective senior management team (Sammons *et al.*, 1997), shared leadership (Fullan, 2001) and learners as learners within schools that are professional learning communities (Hargreaves, 2003).

The characteristics of ineffective schools, however, generally reflect none of these higher order dimensions of leadership; all too often—as their inspection reports show—they relate to the inadequacy of leadership at the core.

It is with the importance of leadership in mind that we ask: could special measures and serious weaknesses schools have distinctive characteristics that influence their subsequent performance? Inspection evidence from HMCI's 2002/2003 Annual Report (Ofsted, 2004a) presents a picture of the processes in the two groups of schools inspected in that year.

Schools that require special measures usually have low standards and ineffective arrangements for ensuring improvement. Many have a high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching, often with inadequate curriculum planning that restricts pupils' progress. ... Most schools had begun to find ways of dealing with their difficulties. However, in some, improvement was frustrated by the loss of effective staff, slowness in embracing new ideas or difficulties in recruiting suitable experienced teachers. (p. 65)

The report continues:

A stumbling block to improvement in some schools is weak leadership that, in the initial stage of special measures, does not help staff to face up to the problems and results in delays in finding solutions. (p. 65)

This analysis, based on evidence from HMI visits to all schools in special measures, points to an unwillingness to accept the need for change and a lack of capacity to galvanise the action needed. Inspection evidence provides independent reinforcement for the characteristics of ineffective schools identified through research, some of which are not necessarily the diametric opposites to characteristics of effectiveness. Reynolds (1995), for example, identifies features in ineffective schools that resonate with inspectors' perceptions summarised here as:

- Non-rational approach to evidence.
- Fear of outsiders.
- Dread of change.
- Capacity for blaming external conditions.
- Set of internal cliques.
- Lack of competencies for improvement.

Inward-looking inertia appears so firmly embedded in some schools that only a strong external stimulus such as the jolt of a special measures judgement will shake it. To have an impact in such contexts any change must be radical change. That is what usually happens for, after identification, the spotlight falls on leadership, which has to adapt or be renewed. We have been unable to obtain accurate data about changes of head teacher in schools that emerge from special measures, but HMI estimate that

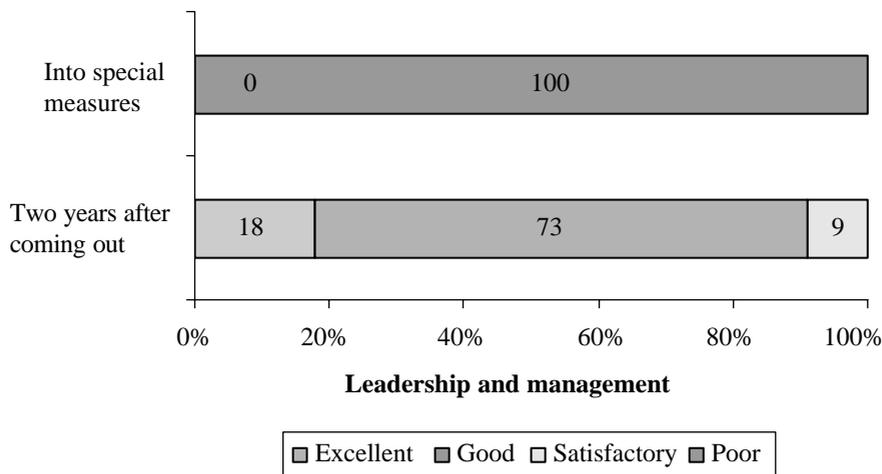


Figure 3 The improvement in the effectiveness of leadership and management in schools formerly in special measures, inspected in 2003/2004, two years after special measures had been removed

between two-thirds and three-quarters of schools have a different head teacher when they emerge from special measures than when they entered this category. This does not include head teachers who were new to the school shortly before the inspection that identified the need for special measures. The change in calibre of leadership and management are reflected in inspection judgements (Ofsted, 2005) shown in Figure 3.

We suggest that different barriers, not amounting to a blockage, may apply in some schools that do not merit the special measures classification. Having serious weaknesses carries a stigma, but to a lesser degree than for special measures because at least the school is not overall judged to be 'failing to provide an adequate education'. Since September 2000, HMI have visited schools with serious weaknesses within six to eight months of their inspection. They found that:

Schools that are providing an adequate education but which have serious weaknesses are likely to exhibit: unsatisfactory teaching or achievement in core subjects; under-achievement among particular groups of pupils; unsatisfactory leadership or management; poor behaviour or attendance; a narrow or unbalanced curriculum, or an ethos that inhibits pupils' personal development. (Ofsted, 2003b, p. 163)

These are the more classic opposites of effectiveness characteristics, resembling those listed by Stoll and Fink (1996). Of the 289 schools with serious weaknesses monitored by HMI in 2002/2003, 34 schools had not made sufficient progress and were made subject to special measures, the main reasons for their lack of progress were that:

- Head teachers, senior staff and governing bodies had not taken sufficient action to raise standards.
- The monitoring and evaluation of standards of work, the quality of teaching and the progress being made by pupils were insufficiently rigorous.

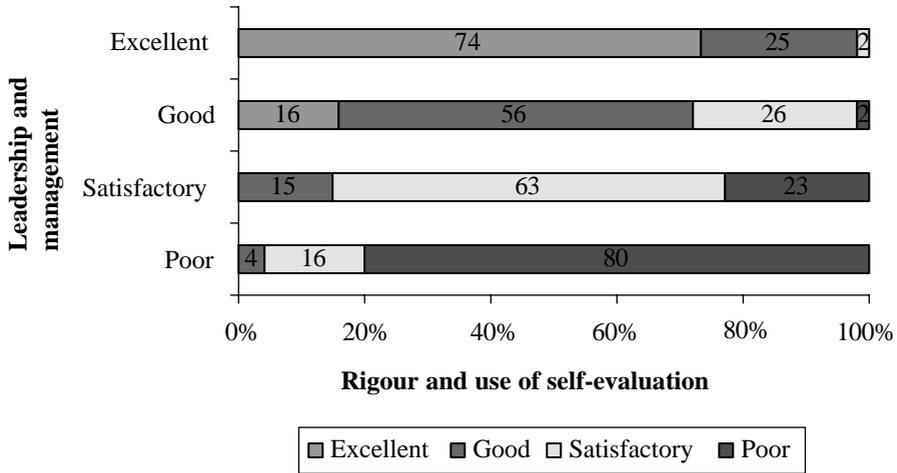


Figure 4 Rigour and use of self-evaluation by the effectiveness of leadership and management (percentage of 627 secondary schools inspected in 2003–2004)

- The action plan was not being implemented with sufficient thoroughness and urgency. (Ofsted, 2004a)

These observations seem to reflect greater lack of momentum than direction; in other words, it seems that the necessary determination—to take action to overcome weaknesses—may be lacking although there is some recognition of the need for change. The capacity of schools to know themselves is a key to the improvement of schools that are no better than adequate. Inspection findings reveal a close relationship between judgements of the quality of leadership and the quality of self-evaluation that takes place in secondary schools (Figure 4), although it should be recognised that the two judgements cannot be viewed as independent variables.

Other studies show that differences of two grades between a school’s evaluation of key features and those of an inspection team tend to correlate with lower assessments (less than good) of leadership and management (Matthews & Sammons, 2004). Overall, only about half of all secondary schools inspected in a year rate their effectiveness the same as the inspection findings, the tendency where there is a discrepancy is for more positives self-evaluation ratings (Ofsted, 2005).

In policy terms, our analysis suggests, firstly, that in schools in which there is a breakdown of leadership (defined in terms such as those offered by Reynolds), a change of leadership is likely to offer the most likely route to rapid improvement. Hopkins (2001) pointed out that the headteachers of failing schools do not usually have the capacity to resurrect the school and are therefore potentially part of the problem. Harris (2002) also commented on such schools that lack of leadership resulted in a culture of fragmentation.

Likewise, Taggart and Sammons (1999) found in the Making Belfast Work evaluation of the Raising School Standards Initiative that staff and others perceived a

change of school leadership to be more directly related to subsequent improvement of individual schools than involvement in the RSS initiative itself. Secondly, the evaluation evidence supports the emphasis being placed on leadership development through agencies such as the National College for School Leadership, but points to the need for monitoring and self-evaluation of the school's performance to feature more conspicuously within leadership development programmes. Thirdly, the faltering progress of many schools in serious weaknesses suggests that improving the core leadership and management of these schools is fundamental to making them more effective in the short to mid term. This calls not only for access to leadership development, which is readily available, but also closer external monitoring, support and if necessary intervention in relation to these schools and others whose performance over time suggests limited capacity to improve.

The Contribution of Special Measures to Educational Inclusion

Special measures policy grew out of culture of 'zero tolerance of failure' developed in the early years of the New Labour Government from 1997. There is overwhelming evidence from inspection and also trends in national assessment and examination results that most schools improve markedly following a period of being subject to special measures and that the improvement is sustained in the great majority of cases. We have focussed mainly on leadership in this paper, but improvements in the fundamental outcome of standards achieved (Figure 5) are equally marked.

The extent of improvement in the quality of teaching observed in special measures schools, as assessed by inspectors, is likewise substantial (Figure 6). It should be noted that post-inspection action plans are strongly encouraged to focus on the quality of teaching and learning.

There is little doubt that the schools that successfully leave the special measures category (the great majority) give their pupils a better quality educational experience

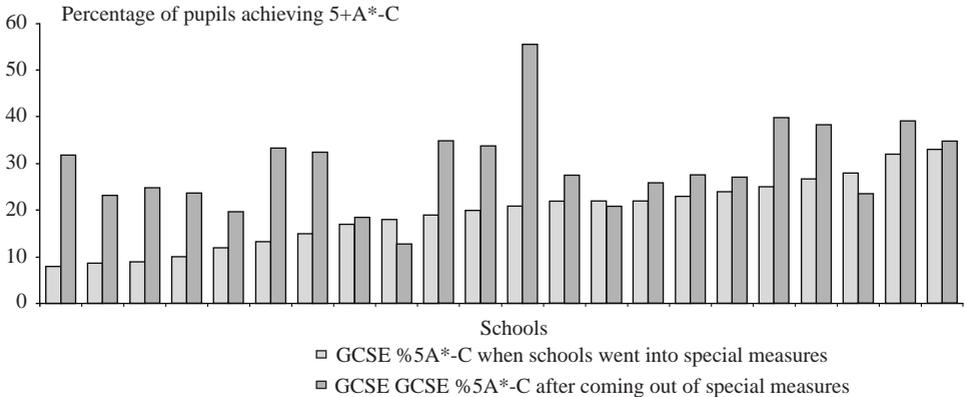


Figure 5 Percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades in GCSE when the school went into special measures and when they were inspected in 2002/2003, two years after coming out (some schools closed during this period)

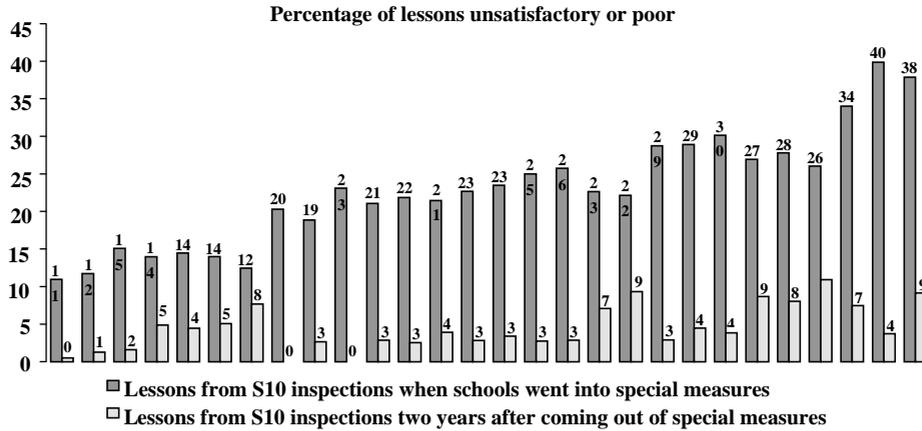


Figure 6 Percentage of unsatisfactory or poor teaching in lessons in secondary schools at the time of going into special measures and their inspection in 2002/2003, two years after coming out

and a better chance of making academic progress. Improvements in the teaching and behavioural climate and in attendance patterns are important in their own right because they are associated with pupil motivation and engagement. While the majority of schools serving disadvantaged pupil intakes are not placed in special measures, proportionately more special measures schools have high percentages of pupils on free school meals. Given this, the level of improvement seen in both primary and secondary special measures schools is striking. Elsewhere we have drawn attention to the equity implications of special measures designation, arguing that the improvement of such schools is likely to have benefited disadvantaged pupil groups in particular, since they are over-represented in such schools (Sammons, 2004). It is interesting that while the proportion of schools inspected in each free school meal band increases in line with the proportion of free school meals in the primary schools inspected in 2003/2004, this is not true of secondary schools, where a slightly smaller proportion of schools serving the most disadvantaged pupils required special measures than those in the next band. We do not have data to explore why this might be the case and further research on this aspect is desirable (Table 5).

Table 5 Schools inspected in each free school meal band made subject to special measures in 2003/2004

	Primary	Secondary
Up to 8% pupils eligible for free school meals	2%	2%
8% or more and less than 20%	4%	10%
20% or more and less than 35%	5%	21%
35% or more	7%	18%

This pattern is replicated in judgements of the quality of leadership and management of secondary schools inspected in 2003–2004, which are significantly better in the most challenging schools. This supports the view that schools serving the most disadvantaged intakes of pupils have, over time, acquired or developed more effective leadership than the next group of high FSM schools. So-called ‘super heads’ are often linked with high profile inner city schools. There are examples of cases where their leadership is reported to have galvanised parents, pupils and staff into believing that they can achieve ‘despite the odds’. Such schools may also receive greater resources and extra support from their LEAs and through other initiatives (for example, Excellence in Cities, Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant, etc). The real challenge, and where it is probably more difficult to attract the most effective head teachers, is in those schools that are not high profile, where socio-economic circumstances are not good and making progress is just as hard. It is these schools, often having serious weaknesses, that need focused attention in future in order to promote inclusion through improvements in leadership and management and better quality of teaching and learning and enhanced outcomes for disadvantaged pupil groups.

Overall, the inspection evidence suggests that the special measures policy can be seen as a powerful tool in combating social exclusion through improving the quality of education provided by schools serving some of the most vulnerable groups of pupils, contrasting with the prognosis for schools having serious weaknesses. One common problem of the second group appears to be a lack of clear focus in addressing weaknesses. To address this it is important that inspectors are absolutely explicit about the weaknesses that need to be remedied. In its proposals for a new inspection framework from September 2005, Ofsted intends to abolish the ‘serious weaknesses category’ but make the improvements required of weak—but not failing—schools more explicit.

Inspectors must consider before the end of an inspection whether the provision is inadequate and is failing to give learners an acceptable standard of education. If they believe this to be the case, they must state this clearly in the report. They must also make a judgement on the capacity for improvement and whether a school which is providing an acceptable standard of education is not performing as well as it should be in one or more areas (which might include the quality of the sixth form). It is proposed that there should be two categories of schools causing concern:

- schools which require special measures because they are failing to provide an acceptable standard of education and show insufficient capacity to improve
- those which require significant improvement in one or more areas of activity, which should be served with an *Improvement Notice*. (Ofsted, 2004b, p. 14)

The replacement of the underachieving and serious weaknesses categories of schools by the issue of improvement notices that may do something to help prevent such schools slipping into special measures. But for many schools that need them, the issue of such notices will not be enough on its own. The injection or development of greater leadership capacity, together with support, monitoring and—if necessary—intervention will be needed if they are to show the same level of improvement achieved by the majority of special measures schools. While this paper has focused

on the differential impact on schools, evidence in further education also suggests that the publicity and pressure associated with an adverse inspection result can bring significant benefits, what Sir George Sweeney, Principal of a further education college described as a 'fantastic catalyst for change' (Sweeney, 2005).

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