

EDITORIAL

Education in London: Challenges and opportunities for young people

London is Europe's largest city – a global city that presents both opportunities and challenges. An attractive aspect of London is its cultural diversity and an experience of how communities live, work, and study among one another that is unique in the UK.

Within education and research, policymakers and practitioners have become increasingly interested in the 'London effect' where, over recent years, London students in compulsory education have shown higher attainment and levels of progress than students from the rest of England (Baars *et al.*, 2014). This is particularly prominent in students' GCSE point scores that are much higher in London than in the rest of England. Concurrently, and perhaps surprisingly, a number of recent reports and research studies have found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds fare better in London schools. At present there is little consensus as to what has contributed to the 'London effect'. Burgess (2014) suggests it is a result of the ethnic composition of schools because students from some ethnic backgrounds have higher aspirations. Blanden *et al.* (2015), however, say it is down to the prior attainment of secondary-school students while others suggest the effect is due to the mix of school types found in London. In addition, various educational practices, policies, and interventions put in place – such as the London Challenge – have helped to boost student attainment and progress.

Despite these positive elements about education in London, significant challenges remain. London has a fast-growing population, and that has implications for job opportunities and on the costs of living, housing, and education (Mehta and Rutt, 2012). Although London schools perform better than the national average for education up to age 16, there is still a substantial number of young people who leave formal education without the basic skills in life to get a good job or to go into further and higher education or training. There is a growing concern about what happens to London students between the ages of 16 and 18. One of the priorities established by the former mayor, Boris Johnson, is better education and training opportunities for young Londoners, with a target that London should make its state schools among the best in the world by 2020, thereby enabling young Londoners to grasp job opportunities and compete with the talented migrants who also look to work in London. To help achieve these ends, there is an increased focus on encouraging students to study modern languages and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects, as well as ensuring that they apply for the most appropriate universities and for apprenticeships. The Education Panel was established by the Mayor's office to review and investigate the development and delivery of Boris Johnson's policies and strategies in relation to education. It will report its findings to the London Assembly's Oversight Committee and this will remain in place now that London has a new mayor, Sadiq Khan.

This special feature in the *London Review of Education* explores the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by young people and their educators in London. Three of the articles in the collection explore the diverse strategies being used in London schools, with a core focus on supporting teachers, reducing disaffection, and increasing subject knowledge for both students and teachers. **Pete Wright** unpacks findings from action research to show how innovative classroom activities can enhance students' engagement with mathematics, while **Alex Standish**

and colleagues demonstrate how 17 months of support for geography teachers – facilitated by links with university lecturers made by the London Geography Alliance – had a positive impact on their knowledge and teaching practices. Research into student transitions by **Chris Brown and colleagues** demonstrates how partnership-working can develop pedagogical approaches that help improve students' transitions to secondary school, but highlights that collaborative approaches are an iterative, evolving process.

The remaining three papers in this feature explore students' self-reporting of their education and how that relates to equity issues. The paper I have written with Michael Reiss (**Mujtaba and Reiss**) highlights that girls were less likely than boys to be encouraged by their families and teachers to continue studying mathematics beyond school, regardless of their aspirations, although those with high aspirations in mathematics perceived their education in the subject to be more equitable than that of girls elsewhere in the UK – tangible evidence for a 'London effect'. Considering an indicator of students' performance, quantitative approaches were used by **John Jerrim and Gill Wyness** to benchmark London in the PISA rankings. Finally, the research by **Cajic-Seigneur and Hodgson** focuses on how research in London can contribute to the structure of 14 to 19 education. While all the other contributions have tended to highlight the positive elements of the London education system, this paper discusses disadvantaged youth who become disengaged and alienated from school, and how changes to the structure of education can make a considerable difference to their educational outcomes.

This collection of papers highlights both the success of London schools and how changes to pedagogical approaches can have a positive influence on students and teachers. Together, the articles suggest that iterative approaches to making changes in education work best in the city given that London is continually growing and changing. The papers given an interesting insight into the sorts of pedagogical and practical changes that can help instigate positive changes. The London Challenge and the innovative approaches to teaching and learning discussed by papers in this issue play a part in London's success.

While we can build on what we are learning about London to improve London, there ought to be an element of how to benefit the rest of the country. I have had a number of conversations spanning a few years with the headteacher of a semi-rural school who astutely observed that the students in his school receive far less support than their London peers – at one point he calculated that his school received £3,000 less per student than schools in London. It is clear that London schools have a lot of financial aid injected into schools and while this has helped to produce positive educational trends and research findings it is creating an educational divide. Any changes to educational systems, funding, patterns, and types of schools in schools elsewhere in the country are unlikely to be swift. However, it would be well worth replicating the interventions and programmes used in London schools across England.

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