Collaborative Responses to Challenging Times

Dr Rajbir Hazelwood

Dr Chris Wilson

Mike Bradburn

RBU partnership

CHALLENGE **PARTNERS**

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Foreword

Laura Lewis-Williams
Executive Director at Challenge Partners

Schools across the Challenge Partners' network returned to professional peer-led quality assurance as a powerful means of supporting continuous improvement in response to last year's challenging times.

This report distils headline themes that emerged from a fascinating collection of local approaches to the opportunities and challenges schools faced over this period. It is based on the analysis of over 330 quality assurance visits conducted in spring and summer 2022.

It is the second year we have commissioned a report – again generously funded by the Permira Foundation – to present the aggregate picture of what is going on across the education sector. Schools across the country have shown an exceptional commitment to the continual development of staff, to community and parental engagement, and to the wellbeing of pupils and staff, as well as to equality, diversity and inclusion priorities.

Since our last report, *Innovation in the Time of Covid*, we've also seen schools place a sharper focus on curriculum development. This new report features specific innovative and responsive actions, as well as highlighting the challenges schools continue to face. At Challenge Partners we want to capture and share effective practice across our vibrant and diverse network so that more schools, trusts, pupils and communities can benefit.

We hope the key themes and specific initiatives outlined here will be useful to practitioners and policy-makers alike.

A huge thank you to all the schools mentioned in this report and from whose Quality Assurance Review reports we have taken important excerpts with their permission. Quality Assurance Review reports remain confidential to Challenge Partners and the host schools. This ensures schools embrace the review as a developmental process, acting as a catalyst for their ongoing improvement. This will always be the primary purpose of the Quality Assurance Review. But this analysis demonstrates the additional value of a sector-wide overview, illustrated with real-life examples.

Looking ahead, schools face more tough challenges as the education sector emerges from the disruptions of Covid and the resilience of leaders, staff and students will continue to be tested. It is therefore more important than ever for schools to continue to support each other and share what works.

About Challenge Partners

Challenge Partners works with schools and trusts across the country to reduce educational inequality and improve the life chances of all children.

We do this through programmes and networks to facilitate school improvement and peer-led professional development, and share great practice.

We work with more than 550 schools and thousands of school leaders, covering 300,000 children.

Our mission is to reduce educational inequality and improve the life chances of all children.

Through collaboration, challenge and professional development, we are working to ensure every school community can benefit from the combined wisdom of the education system.

Introduction

This report is a thematic analysis of 336 Quality Assurance Review reports compiled by Challenge Partners' reviewers. These were conducted between mid-January and mid-July in 2022, when continued disruption from the Covid 19 pandemic became normal in our schools.

It is an attempt to distil some headline themes that emerged from a fascinating collection of local approaches to the opportunities and challenges that schools faced in this period where the exceptional became normal. For the first time, this analysis has been conducted for two consecutive years, allowing for year-on-year comparison.

In particular, it provides examples of best practice that might usefully be shared and discussed within Challenge Partners' unique network of schools.

Finally, it points to themes that Challenge Partners may want to explore further and recommends a series of measures that might make it easier to conduct such an analysis in the future.

The themes that emerged from the reports are strongly influenced by the unique circumstances of the year. They are dominated by discussions of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers, inclusion, approaches to complex deprivation, and curriculum development. We have also returned to some of the themes noted in last year's reports including staff and pupil wellbeing and education technology.

1.1 The Data

Challenge Partners' **Quality Assurance Review (QAR)** is a developmental three-day peer review, which focuses on quality of provision (curriculum and pedagogy) and outcomes, including shining a light on the experience of disadvantaged pupils and those with additional needs. It also looks at leadership at all levels, including the impact of governors, in our schools.

Each QAR is led by a Lead Reviewer, an experienced school improvement professional. The Lead Reviewer's focus is on providing coaching, guidance and challenge to ensure the review team does this well, based on robust evaluation and evidence. The peer reviewers are headteachers and senior leaders from the Challenge Partners' network. All reviewers are trained by Challenge Partners before going out on review.

In 2021/22, Lead Reviewers completed 336 QAR reports. Qualitative data from these reports was analysed thematically using a combination approach of deductive coding based on last year's analysis and thematic guidance from the Challenge Partners Executive Team.

This was supplemented through open inductive coding to identify emerging themes. Quantitative data, taken from the relevant programme activities in Challenge Partners' Salesforce was extracted and analysed via a spreadsheet-based tool. Analysis of these data sets has been used to establish the findings in this report.

1.2 The Schools

As part of this report we have done an initial analysis of the 336 schools that were reviewed this year:

Split by Phase
Of the schools that were reviewed:

- 179 (53%) were primary schools
- 55 (16%) were special schools
- 93 (28%) were secondary schools
- 1 (0.3%) were middle schools
- 5 (1.5%) were all-through schools
- 3 (0.9%) were alternative provision settings

Split by Region
Of the schools that were reviewed:

- 45 (13%) were in the East Midlands
- 21 (6%) were in the East of England
- 131 (39%) were in London
- 2 (1%) were in the North East of England
- 21 (6%) were in the North West of England
- 47 (14%) were in the South East of England
- 36 (11%) were in the South West of England
- 23 (7%) were in the West Midlands
- 10 (3%) were in Yorkshire and the Humber

Please note, during the disruption of the pandemic, Challenge Partners recognised that to be useful to school leaders, the QA Review needed to be adjusted. Challenge Partners introduced the option of a narrative only report, i.e. with no formal peer evaluation descriptors given.

This gives schools the flexibility to opt out of estimates depending on their school context whilst maintaining the integrity of the review.
The majority of schools in 20/21 and again in 21/22 chose to have a peer evaluation estimate.

The option of opting out of the peer review estimate process is discussed prior to the review taking place during pre-review discussions with the Lead Reviewer and the school's headteacher.

Depending on where the school is at in their school improvement journey, they may choose to opt out of estimates for a number of reasons particular to that school, their staff and what their focus is at the time of the review in order to leave the school in a better place.

Split by Overall Estimate
Of the schools that were reviewed:

- 35% were given a peer evaluation estimate of 'Leading' (up from 19% last year)
- 45% were 'Effective' (up from 22% last year)
- 6% were 'Working toward Effective' (up from 3% last year)
- 14% were 'NA / Elected not to have an estimate' (down from 57% last year)

On average, the schools in this study had 26% of pupils eligible for free school meals, compared to a national average of 20.8% (2021).

Schools receive a peer review evaluation estimate, which is collectively agreed by the review team. The agreed peer evaluation estimate can be:

- Leading
- Effective
- Working Towards Effective
- Ineffective

The estimate 'Leading' mirrors the Challenge Partners' ethos, where schools performing at an exceptional level lead the way by sharing their practice with others.

2. Themes

2.1 CPD for Teachers

2.1.1 The reports describe schools and teachers showing exceptional commitment to CPD, taking responsibility for their practice, and creating structures for reflection and challenge that help to embed cultures of consistent improvement.

The reports show schools creating an expectation of collaborative approaches to CPD (mentioned 99 times in reports). For example, schools are instigating open-door policies and structured time to develop practice.

At Heartlands High School, the reviewers recognised that early career teachers and initial teacher training (ITT) staff valued being able to observe colleagues through 'Open Door week' and informal learning walks.

At Court Lane Junior School, the introduction of learning evaluations, where staff visit each other's lessons, provides well-structured time for teachers to develop their practice.

Similar 'learning walks' in classrooms where best practice is explained and shared was credited for improvements in pedagogy by the reviewers at Hope Primary School.

At Chace Community School, the reviewers noted a coaching culture with teach meets, and an open-door policy, helping leaders at all levels to identify areas to support and best practice to share.

The reports paint a picture of senior leaders being thoughtful - and judicious - in their organisation of professional development.

At West Bridgford School, five clear priorities are set for each middle leader, based on the strands of the Early Career Teacher framework. Organising mixed-subject work groups, where previously some subject areas worked in isolation, has increased reflective practice across the school.

At Bosworth Academy, the success of CPD is underpinned by the organisation of the school's '3D Journey', which encourages teachers to complete mini research projects in their areas of interest.

The reviewers noted that the impact of this work at Bosworth ensures that professional learning is motivating and meaningful for all staff.

Reviewers identified how schools establish specific forums to support discovery, with teachers learning from each other at weekly 'butterfly' meetings at Heron Hall Academy, 'Finger on the Pulse' meetings at Hope Primary School, and 'Magpie Monday' at The Lancot School.

These forums allow for consistent and creative sharing across teachers and subject areas.

2.1.2 Schools are outward looking, investing in partnerships to learn from expertise beyond their own school walls.

The reports show school leaders make the most of being part of trust and federation networks. At Rockliffe Manor Primary School, expertise is shared across the trust to inform coaching and team teaching as well as ensure consistency. Good practice is also shared at teach meets which include other Greenwich schools.

At Brindishe Lee School, leaders regularly meet with colleagues from other settings within their federation to share best practice. The reviewers noted, for example, that teachers at Brindishe Lee have recently worked with colleagues from their partner schools to develop a progressive PE curriculum which provides clear assessment guidance for staff.

At Carr Lodge Academy, leaders work extensively with other schools within the Exceed Learning Partnership. This includes year group leaders from across the partnership working closely to collaborate on curriculum development and moderation procedures.

Reviewers identified schools being keen to build connections beyond existing partnerships to support teacher CPD. For example, at Kingsford Community School, leaders have required all subject areas to connect with high performing subject teams in other schools.

At St Michael's Church of England Combined School, teachers connect with new schools through a mathematics hub. During the QAR review, staff at Lancot School participated in CPD delivered by the renowned educationalist Chris Quigley.

There are examples in the reports of schools learning from community partnerships. For example, the Pioneering Partnerships Programme (led by Lancot School) is designed to bring together local cultural partnerships such as the Grove Theatre, Inspiring Music, Central Bedfordshire libraries and local schools.

This peer-to-peer professional development programme was enabling participants, as reported by the reviewers, to work in 'deep collaboration' with one another to improve the engagement of pupils in cultural activities.

2.1.3 An increasing number of primary schools are making significant commitments to coaching models, investing in CPD for teachers to learn and practice coaching strategies.

In the Leo Academy Trust, leaders at Cheam Park Farm Primary Academy, Cheam Common Infants' Academy and Cheam Common Junior Academy have completed the Olevi 'Power of Coaching' course.

At the Junior Academy, the model is part of the school's 'growing great people' strategy to ensure succession planning is in place with carefully structured mentoring, shadowing and professional development opportunities. The coaching model generates specific targets for all members of staff to work on, related to standards for their role. This model of instructional coaching to improve practice is also used at Heron Hall Academy.

The reports show that the Olevi approach is popular with primary school leaders, with investment in the accredited Power of Coaching programme in a number of schools.

At the Ashton Keynes Church of England Primary School, the lead reviewer recognised coaching as a pivotal strength of the school, with the Olevi Power of Coaching course again used to ensure leaders are engaging with the latest guidance to enhance and extend their coaching and mentoring skills.

Leadership at Kestrel Mead Primary Academy has also made a significant commitment to coaching approaches within school, with senior leaders completing the Olevi training.

The reviewers noted that instructional coaching has enabled all teachers at Kestral Mead, including those at the start of their career, to reflect and improve their practice.

In fact six reviews mention instructional coaching in their reports, and Challenge Partners might usefully track the adoption of this method in future reports. Coaching was mentioned in 97 reports.

Other coaching programmes and training models are also popular (although we have less detail in the reviews about the nature of these).

For example, at Malvern Primary School four leaders are participating in a national coaching programme and are already implementing coaching strategies when supporting colleagues. At Christ Church C.E Primary School, the reviewers noted that all leaders received coaching training.

2.2 Year-on-year comparison: Mental health and well-being in our schools

Last year, the QAR reports demonstrated the level of commitment schools in the network had to the well-being of pupils during and after the lockdowns. They also reflected an increasing interest in approaches to staff wellbeing.

Challenge Partners is committed to tracking these themes over a number of years. This will likely involve a discussion of the way in which schools interact with other services as part of the non-teaching responsibilities they have to their local communities, the well-reported challenges with securing clinical mental health support for pupils, and the associated 'high-bar' for receiving that support.

This year, a number of reports highlight an increasing number of pupils presenting with social, emotional, mental and health (SEMH) problems due to the effects of the pandemic.

Over one hundred reports discuss the mental health of pupils. While there was less of an emphasis on staff well-being (only eight reports had explicit reference to staff well-being), there were a number of examples of good practice highlighted by reviewers.

At Great Clacton Church of England Junior School, the pandemic has led to an increase in the incidence of social, emotional and mental health issues in both pupils and their families.

A full-time learning mentor has been employed to support the social and emotional well-being of pupils. A children and families worker is working with families to support joined-up home/school pastoral intervention.

This has led to a reduction in the rate of persistent absence amongst pupils. Leaders have also created zones of regulation to help pupils to regulate their emotions. A well-being hub has been developed in the main school building. Additional break-out spaces provide pupils with flexibility and enable pupils to work on their own or as part of a group.

At Avanti House Primary School, pupils said that they enjoyed the 'Shapes of Tomorrow Club', where you 'think about things with your brain.' This club, led by a CAMHS specialist, focuses on building self-esteem, resilience and sharing emotions.

At Southfield Primary School, the reviewers noted the impact of the school's pastoral lead, which goes well beyond pupil mental health. Pupils' emotional and mental health is reviewed every term through 'Thrive' screening. Teachers meet with senior leaders, the pastoral lead, and a learning mentor, to plan support for individual pupils. This typically involves pupils being assisted in the 'Huddle' unit, which provides a welcoming and supportive space for them to self-regulate.

The reviewers described how the pastoral lead establishes close relationships with parents, sustaining these through the use of social media where appropriate. Parents have direct access to her by mobile phone and are increasingly confident to visit the school and discuss their concerns. The pastoral lead signposts additional support, such as that provided by 'Andy's Man Club' (a men's mental health charity).

At King's Farm Primary School, the reviewers detailed how leaders demonstrated their commitment to staff well-being. Nothing new is ever added to staff workload without removing something else.

An example of this is when phase leader meetings were reduced to allow for something new to be developed. Leaders later reintroduced them following a request from the staff well-being team. No staff are expected to run out-of-hours tuition but those who do are paid to do so.

At Nexus Foundation Special School, leaders have a strong commitment to positive mental health and well-being. Expectations are clear for all staff with explicit teaching and learning guarantees.

The reviewers described how leaders trial new initiatives with teachers. Mental health first aiders, an educational psychologist and a counsellor support with staff problems and issues. Staff are entitled to a Wellness Day. A buddy system between classes and pathways promotes collaborative planning, moderation and reduced workload.

At Kingsmead School and Sixth Form, the reviewers described how a focus on staff well-being is 'central to all aspects of the school's work'. The school encourages collaborative planning and verbal rather than written feedback. This has reduced workload and generated 'a culture of collaboration and trust between all staff'.

2.3 Inclusion

2.3.1 The reports show leaders committing to equality, diversity and inclusion priorities, with pupil participation and co-creation helping to drive change. This has been sustained in schools following the increase in activity reported last year.

The reports show some progress in anti-racism commitments, particularly through curriculum work. Far more referred to 'inclusive' policies and approaches.

At Patcham High School, where a commitment has been made to be an anti-racist school, the curriculum has been revised, with students' input. A learning for life curriculum at Aylesbury High School is used to create timetabled space for pupils to learn about anti-racism.

Leaders at the Lilian Baylis Technology School, where the headteacher has spoken at a national conference on anti-racism, have taken a whole-school approach, seeking to underpin the curriculum with a strong focus on decolonisation, anti-racism and anti-sexism.

Reviewers highlight schools creating opportunities for pupil participation. For example, at Kingsford Community School, pupils participate regularly in 'Form Time Thinks'. They discuss topics in the local, national and international news. These include issues such as racism, sexism and hatred, which were highlighted through Black Lives Matter and the murder of Sarah Everard.

Discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in summer 2021 took place amongst pupils in the school. At Tolworth Girls' School and Sixth Form, whole school 'Wonder Weeks' have covered themes including LGBTQ+ history and Black Lives Matter.

The reports show how pupils are helping to drive change. At The Charter School North Dulwich, community activity organised by Citizens UK with pupils led to the formation of an anti-racist manifesto for the school. Elsewhere, pupils are driving inclusion by building empathy through peer-to-peer support.

At Patcham High School, 'fempow' is a group which addresses peer-to-peer abuse and has spoken locally. There is also a peer support group for the LGBTQ+ community.

At Lavington School, the reviewers noted pastoral leaders commenting on how students have led their own well-attended 'LGBTQ support group'.

We see an increasing number of schools in this year's reports focus on LGBTQ+ inclusion. This has been a focus for Furze Platt Senior School, who celebrate Pride week, consider the use of preferred pro-nouns, and the reviewer noted 'listen to the views of the LGBTQ+ pupils'.

Stonewall recently identified West Bridgford School as a beacon of excellent practice. All subject areas at the school 'Fly the Flag' during LGBTQ+ month and promote inspirational LGBTQ+ role models.

The reviewers noted pupil reflections of West Bridgford as a safe place 'to be me', with those who question their identity doing so in a safe environment.

Mulberry Academy Shoreditch is notable in its approach to leveraging governance and staff training to advance equality, diversity and inclusion priorities, with all staff trained to be aware of unconscious bias and unique governor expertise and connections (including the BBC Head of Diversity and a diversity lead at Transport for London) on a 'diversity board'.

Leaders at Mulberry have also celebrated tolerance and difference by inviting in diverse speakers and performers, such as The Pink Singers, an LGBTQ+ choir and mentors from the Prince's Trust Mosaic Project.

North Mead Primary Academy is notable in its commitment to equity, with senior leaders believing in and promoting equity – the reviewers noted that staff give pupils and families what they need, rather than being guided by blanket policies.

The type of support provided by the school varies widely, with the reviewers noting help provided to families in completing forms, making appointments, furnishing houses, completing right to remain applications, and accessing clothing, food and vouchers.

This equitable approach at North Mead extends into the behaviour policy which identifies and provides a different approach for 'Plan B' children.

The reviewers noted that this focus on equity ensures that staff have a good knowledge of the community and its needs, as well as accurately pinpointing any barriers to learning.

Case Study:

Race Equity Programme at Invicta Primary School

At Invicta Primary School, in May 2020, following the death of George Floyd, leaders made a written commitment to the community to work with them to build on the momentum of global feeling with an actively anti-racist approach. At the same time, leaders wanted to establish ways to seize every opportunity to celebrate diversity.

In collaboration with an external partner with experience of promoting race equity in the corporate world, the executive headteacher developed and implemented a comprehensive plan which has facilitated a sustainable programme for race equity at Invicta. Some of the key actions implemented are as follows:

- Race equity has been a school development priority for the past two years, ensuring that the culture and curriculum of the school promotes race equity and actively challenges racism.

- There has been active development of the school's broad and balanced curriculum in collaboration with a leading lecturer in British Black History at Goldsmiths University.

- Staff committees are leading change on race equity within the areas of 'People, Processes and Systems', 'Achievement and Legacy' and 'Curriculum'.

- All staff have an appraisal target related to race equity.

- The school has a named link governor for race equity. Leaders give regular race equity updates to the full governing body (GB), and race equity is part of the GB's strategic plan.

- An active parent/carer advisory forum is in place to lend their voice to the work of each committee.

- Diversity Captains are an active pupil leadership presence.

The three committees are made up of staff from all areas of the school and have done some excellent work to drive progress in each area. For example, the 'Curriculum' committee has actively decolonised the curriculum, identified key resources, embedded race into learning plans and assessed age-appropriate content. The 'People, Processes and Systems' committee is focussing on improving black pupils' uptake of the after-school offer. The 'Achievement and Legacy' committee is making stronger links with local secondary schools.

Leaders can show evidence of impact within school and they are actively championing their model with other partners. They are now working directly with Greenwich's Senior Public Health Manager who also leads the schools' PSHE network. The executive headteacher also presented to some local authority groups focussing on anti-racism, which has resulted in a number of Greenwich schools visiting/contacting Invicta for support with their equalities work.

Comprehensive anti-racism training for all staff has led to an understanding of systemic racism and the impact of microaggressions, resulting in effective identification and management of racist incidents. There is evidence of a higher number of incidents being reported, which may not have been viewed as warranting a report in the past. Leaders view this as an extremely positive change. In order to judge impact, the school has undertaken a series of surveys of pupils, parents and staff. All these stakeholders report changing attitudes and a greater awareness of race equity issues.

2.3.2 Schools that work with pupils with particularly complex needs are proud to be recognised by external assurances such as the Inclusion Quality Mark.

The Inclusion Quality Mark provides schools with a nationally recognised framework to guide their inclusion journey. There are over 5,500 schools in the UK who have either received an IQM Inclusive School Award, or are actively working towards meeting the standard required. Eleven reports mentioned it.

At Churchmead Church of England School, the proportion of students with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) is double the national average, and the proportion of students with an education, health and care plan is more than double the national average. The school has been awarded an Inclusion Mark, as a school of choice.

The reviewers noted this is a school where all students are valued. For example, intervention and support for traveller children is personalised and inclusive. There is effective liaison and communication, meaning that students participate fully in school life.

At Cranford Primary School, the majority of families live in temporary housing, 70% of pupils speak English as an additional language (EAL) and there is an extremely high proportion of pupils who are supported through an education, health and care plan (EHCP). Most of these pupils have behaviour, emotional and social difficulties or speech, language and communication needs.

There is a high proportion of pupils on the autistic spectrum. The school has been awarded the Inclusion Mark as it achieves very successful holistic outcomes for these targeted groups.

The reviewers noted that senior leaders set the tone for inclusion and ensure that the vision is communicated and shared across the school.

A range of successful inclusion strategies are highlighted, including creating a robust system to identify the specific needs of vulnerable pupils, using the school's tracking system exceptionally well across the school, setting up a nurture unit for some of the SEND pupils who need specialist support, and employing additional SEND team staff.

At The Warriner School, the proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is above the national average due to the popularity of the school's specialist provision for students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) with parents.

Senior leaders have a clear vision and strong moral purpose for the school to be highly inclusive. The school has achieved the quality Inclusion Mark in recognition of its work. The most vulnerable students who require additional help are able to use the Warriner Learning Centre (WLC) for short-term support.

Students are able to access live mainstream lessons from the WLC so that their learning continues unabated. As a result, students are able to make a smooth return back into mainstream lessons.

2.3.3 The reports show leaders working to promote values in action across all aspects of school life, with many examples of values empowering staff and pupils to articulate inclusion and develop reflective practices.

During the Quality Assurance Review, reviewers witnessed the success of embedding values in daily life through pupil comments.

At Southfield Primary School, pupils demonstrated a deep understanding of the school's core values, evident in their explanations of ideals such as fairness, tolerance and respect, and in their sensitive reactions to questions raised in 'philosophy circles'.

One Year 6 pupil, for example, showed a mature grasp of issues in her written response to 'Is selective breeding morally correct?'. At The Lanes Primary School, where leaders have developed an inclusive school based around 12 values, the reviewers noted that older pupils were able to apply more complex values such as 'democracy' and 'responsibility' because of a carefully sequenced history curriculum and a well-crafted personal development programme.

At Bengeworth CE Academy, the reviewers found pupils were able to describe how school values permeate all aspects of school life, providing them with a framework with which to make the right choices at school and beyond.

The reports show that in most schools, staff and students together drive a values culture.

For example, Bengeworth CE Academy has a dedicated Culture and Ethos Lead to drive this work, and at The Lanes Primary School pupils worked with a local artist to design cartoon characters to represent their values.

At Bedgrove Infant School, where the school values are based on the premise that *'the world needs more purple people',* that is pupils who are confident and supportive of each other. Staff use school assemblies to reinforce values with pupils learning about famous people who espouse these same values. Pupils who demonstrate the school's values are rewarded with leadership roles in the form of pupil ambassadors.

They are identified by teachers each half-term and the reviewers noted that pupils take great pride in wearing the ambassador's badge on their jumpers.

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2.4 Disadvantage and deprivation

2.4.1 For schools in areas of deprivation, the reports find an explicit commitment to understanding and working with local communities, specifically investing in a range of parental engagement activity.

At the Mulberry School for Girls, where the school serves a community, that has significant material deprivation, with over half the students receiving pupil premium support, leaders have a real commitment to the community.

The reviewers noted there is an exceptional devotion to understanding the needs of families, supporting them, overcoming barriers and enabling all students to succeed, whatever their backgrounds or circumstances.

At Gorsefield Primary School, situated in an area of significant high deprivation, leaders demonstrate a strong understanding of the community demographic and the reviewers found they are tenacious in working with parents, for example, creating an 'Everything you need to know about attendance booklet' to help decrease persistent absence and raise attendance.

Termly meetings involve extended family members participating in live lessons, for example, in phonics. 'Learn alongside' and 'stay and play' sessions are reported as popular and useful. The community library allows parents to borrow books to support their children's learning.

At Hugh Myddelton Primary School, where half the pupils are disadvantaged, the report discusses how 'The Parent House' initiative helps parents to remove barriers to learning.

This school provision offers sessions for parents to share experiences, to have training and to seek further support bespoke to their child's needs. Examples include sleep training, anxiety workshops and referral support to Child and Adult Mental Health Support (CAMHS) services.

Leaders have also included parents and the wider community in decision making and in the implementation of schemes that help to improve school life for all pupils.

For example, a staff and parent behaviour working party reduced the amount of recorded behaviour incidents.

At Zaytouna Primary School, where most pupils come from inner city areas of high deprivation, the reviewers noted that parents are active partners in the school provision their children receive.

Regular events such as coffee mornings allow them to talk to professionals, network with other parents, and discuss their child in a supportive and non-threatening environment.

The school's provision to support vulnerable families and improve attendance is wide-ranging, including a school bus, a free breakfast club, home visits, phone calls and nudge texts.

2.4.2 Reviewers identified the considerable investment schools are making in careful progress tracking to understand each pupil, and to increase access and engagement of enrichment activities for disadvantaged pupils.

The reports show schools work hard to sharply monitor pupils, with meticulous tracking processes to understand each pupil and to allow for early intervention.

For example, teachers at Woodhill Primary School, meticulously track disadvantaged pupils' progress using a bespoke addition to the central assessment system. This system enables individual needs to be pinpointed.

Similarly, at The Grove School, a special school for 5 to 19-year-olds, leaders have developed a sophisticated approach to assessment. Reflecting the needs of its pupils, small step progress indicators have been developed that enable staff to identify improvements regularly.

The reviewers noted that this robust tracking informs subsequent lesson planning, leads to timely interventions to support pupils and informs the staff development programme.

Many schools allocate funding for disadvantaged pupils to access enrichment activities, trips and clubs, supporting equality of opportunity.

For example, at Sudbury Primary School regular enrichment opportunities are provided for disadvantaged learners and those with additional needs, such as free dance clubs. Pupils' engagement with these opportunities is closely tracked by Pupil Premium Champions, and provision is amended as necessary.

A Year 6 pupil highlighted the importance of the school's enrichment offer stating, *'clubs provide us with opportunities we do not get anywhere else'.*

At Sarum Academy, where the proportion of disadvantaged students is well above the national average, a robust tracking system has also been established for the co-curriculum strategy to support the engagement of disadvantaged students.

The reports show how this work of monitoring, tracking, and co-curriculum activity is bought together by a range of different roles specifically designed to support disadvantaged pupils such as intervention coordinators, Pupil Premium liaison officers, coaches, and dedicated Careers Advisors.

At Tolworth Girls' School and Sixth Form, leaders have created a teaching responsibility post for each year group, with the single focus of supporting disadvantaged students. The whole school focus on developing confidence, resilience and organisation is tracked by those post-holders through subject performance and student voice.

As the reviewers noted, the impact of this work may understandably take more time to be fully realised but initial data shows that disadvantaged students are making more rapid progress in a number of subjects, such as English, relative to their peers. Disadvantaged students at the school made better progress than the national average for all students in 2019.

2.5 Year-on-year comparison: Edtech in our schools

Last year, many QAR reports detailed how quickly schools adopted education technology (edtech) that was new or unfamiliar during lockdown. The reports also showed how good implementation was central to maintaining continuity of provision over lockdown.

This year, although the reports continued to provide examples of how teachers were deploying platforms to support pupil learning, there were fewer descriptions of 'whole-school' approaches to edtech and in particular the implementation of integrated systems.

2.5.1 After last year's focus on edtech, reviewers continued to identify examples of schools using technology to support pupil learning.

Reviewers identified the effective use of subject-specific platforms and applications, some of which were popular before the pandemic, others which have seen increased adoption. In some cases, platforms have been used together and are generating data for the school to use.

At Halewood School, where attainment gaps in mathematics are closing rapidly, they have linked the Numeracy Ninjas programme to Hegarty Maths. The reviewers described this approach as 'highly successful' with data highlighting the progress of disadvantaged pupils.

Reviewers also detailed how schools were using digital solutions to ensure that children were not missing out. At Beechview Academy, a school serving an area of considerable deprivation, where most of the pupils have complex needs, the school has purchased Chromebooks for those who need additional support when working at home.

At Rowlatts Mead Primary Academy, pupils with visual impairment have digital resources which help them access the same learning as their classmates. Interventions are monitored by both subject leaders and the SEND coordinator, with adaptations made as required. As one subject leader said, 'there should be no child who misses out'.

In some cases, sophisticated approaches to technology are used for teacher development as well as for teaching. In Rockcliffe Manor, the reviewers noted how middle leaders construct digital scrapbooks of evidence so that they understand the impact they are having.

The reviewers noted that these middle leaders are making a 'significant impact on the curriculum across all nine schools'.

2.5.2 However, the pandemic does not seem to have led to the anticipated widespread adoption of 'whole-school' strategies for edtech. In many cases the technologies discussed are designed to enhance in-person teaching.

For example, reviewers commented on the use of visualisers in the classroom across a range of subjects.

At The Winstanley School, music lessons were enhanced by the effective use of a visualiser helped students to annotate a music score, at The Warriner School, the visualiser was used to exemplify the stages of polymerisation in science ('consequently', the reviewers noted, 'students were able to understand the processes and develop mastery'); at the John Madejski Academy, visualisers were used in English to help students understand inference; and at Southfield Primary School, a teaching assistant used a visualiser to read 'A Child Garden; a Story of Hope' by Michael Foreman with pupils.

A small number of reports reference the use of edtech in managing homework. At Maundene Primary School the reviewers described how pupils see the value of homework tasks and how they link to their learning in school, including readiness for SATs in Year 6: 'they enjoy working on Google Classroom and the autonomy of the 'homework menu'.

In contrast to last year, however, not a single report details the development of a 'whole-school strategy' for edtech in schools and – perhaps unsurprisingly – discussion of school IT systems (e.g. Microsoft Teams) has also disappeared after featuring heavily in last year's reports.

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Case Study:

Becoming an Apple Distinguished School at Prescot Primary School

Prescot Primary School is a larger than average sized primary school. The percentage of disadvantaged pupils at Prescot Primary is significantly above the national average. Most pupils are of white British heritage and few pupils speak English as an additional language. Children under five attend the 78-place nursery on a part-time basis.

The school is highly regarded as an Apple Distinguished School, a status first achieved in 2015. Prescot is one of only 470 schools world-wide to hold this accreditation. The school focus is on ensuring equality of provision in digital access. All pupils from Year 2 are provided with a 1:1 iPad that they keep as their own until Year 6. This allows them to access their personalised classrooms at school and at home, building independence and fostering strong communication with parents.

The school has integrated the use of Apple technology into its approach to teaching and learning and this underpins many programmes of work. These are having a significant impact on attainment and engagement, especially at Key Stage 2. The pandemic reinforced the importance of having a level playing field for digital access. The school was well placed to support remote learning. Pupils were familiar and skilled in using technology to learn, they were able to move relatively smoothly into using Google Classroom and learning at home.

The use of digital technologies has been particularly transformative for the school's approach to reading. The online Accelerated Reader system, led by a passionate and knowledgeable higher-level TA, ensures independent access to books and assessment processes that support reading at home and school. Pupils consistently comment that they enjoy their reading and are improving. One pupil commented, 'I get inspired by the vocabulary in the quizzes because I can use them in my writing'. The use of Accelerated Reader has ensured that pupils have access to high quality texts and in a manner that was familiar to them. Year 6 disadvantaged pupils are achieving higher than non-disadvantaged pupils in reading.

This use of digital technology has made a difference beyond reading. The reviewers observed a Year 5 history lesson pupils collaborated to create online timelines and then edited and saved their own work. The school has used Google Classrooms to create their own virtual museum, collecting information from the local community.

Collectively, this commitment to digital technologies, has made pupils more confident and allowed them to have a greater voice in school affairs. For example, pupils are enthusiastic about the curriculum topic work which is enhanced by the digital access they enjoy at school at home.

One pupil said, '*iPads give us responsibility to be independent*', another Year 5 pupil commented, '*My iPad helps me to learn because I use it to research facts about the Egyptians and all different things. I've got maths and spelling apps that help me to learn in school, at home and anywhere I go*'.

Pupil voice surveys reveal that pupils feel in control of their own learning and appreciate the opportunities the iPad is giving them. They are proud of their roles as digital leaders. In parent surveys, parents comment that they have an increasing ability to be part of the learning process and appreciate the connection between home and school.

Digital technologies have also supported teachers to design strategies for disadvantaged pupils. For example, the use of the tracking and monitoring systems is providing a framework for identifying pupils' progress and needs.

The Pivats system enabled the highly capable SENDCo to drill down into information and identify clear next steps for learning which teachers used to identify interventions. Leaders using the Star tracking programme have acted on information to ensure timely support for disadvantaged pupils.

As a result, the impact of interventions has shown that disadvantaged children are achieving broadly in line in each year group. This contrasts with previous years where differences were more marked.

The school is proactive in its support of schools locally and leaders work closely with the Knowsley City Learning Centre to plan and lead digital leader conferences. Staff regularly present workshops at the university on teacher training courses.

They have produced six iBooks which have been published on the iBook's store and can be downloaded across the world.

2.6 Curriculum Development

2.6.1 As schools moved away from immediate reaction to lockdowns, there was a greater focus in the reports on curriculum development, including several examples of the implementation of innovative approaches.

At Harrowby Church of England Infant School and The National Church of England Junior School, there's a unique 'Find and Fix' dynamic intervention curriculum model. These interventions take place within the lesson itself or at least during that actual day.

For example, any misconceptions in phonics are revisited in the afternoon so that curriculum implementation can be fulfilled, and knowledge gaps closed.

At Fordwater School, the reviewers detailed how 'courageous leaders have developed a coherent, ambitious and imaginative curriculum offer'. They noted that leaders have invested time and energy in curriculum development, resulting in the 'Fordwater Aims Curriculum'. As part of this, there was an expectation that senior leaders were very visible around the school to allow for frequent opportunities to talk with colleagues about curriculum matters.

They see the value in developing a leadership–leadership model, as opposed to leadership–follower. Consequently, leaders ensure that staff engage in curriculum discussions and decision making at all stages.

Similarly, at Barbara Priestman Academy, staff involvement in curriculum design has been embedded and, as a result, the reviewers noted that 'staff understand the curriculum and deliver it well'.

Crucially, they understand the rationale for the curriculum. For example, 'they know that students will benefit from explicit instruction and being clear about what is expected'. Staff use their knowledge of the curriculum intent and design, coupled with knowledge about each student, to teach subjects well.

At Broom Leys School middle leaders are continuing to develop the broader curriculum by producing clear guidance on expectations for the progression of skills and knowledge for all subject areas. This work has been supported by the introduction of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which provide teachers with clear next steps to plan learning opportunities that maximise the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The positive impact of the school's curriculum development is exemplified by the use of regular moderation sessions, which enable teachers to manage transition between year groups.

2.6.2 Many schools have been adopting 'mastery' approaches, especially to mathematics. As they embed, reviewers have observed the positive impact of these programmes.

Lead reviewers detailed a large number of examples where schools have successfully implemented a maths mastery curriculum. Mastery approaches are mentioned over fifty times in the reports.

At Primrose Hill Primary School, the reviewers noted how the mathematics mastery approach embedded through the school is resulting in 'pupils' ability to reason and explain their thinking, which is evident in pupils' books'. Pupils' attitudes to mathematics are very enthusiastic, saying that 'the extended column method is so exciting!' and 'maths is great fun!'

At Longleaze Primary School, the school's EYFS and Key Stage 1 teams are part of the NCTEM Maths Mastery Project and contribute to regular discussions with colleagues from other schools. The reviewers noted that their consistent approach to teaching numbers from Reception to Year 2 is bearing fruit, with the pitch of work during lessons in line with the school's ambition that all pupils achieve mastery. The 'concrete, pictorial and abstract' sequence continues through Key Stage 2 and provides effective scaffolding to enable all pupils to engage in activities within age-related expectations for mathematics, including those in the mixed-age classes.

Where subject leaders encounter issues, they act quickly to address and adapt provision. For example, the programme on number mastery was revised promptly to ensure a sufficient level of challenge during lessons.

Reviewers noted that schools who established their mastery programmes a number of years ago are maturing them and seeing results. For example, at Hill Farm Academy the reviewers noted that leaders are now implementing the mastery approach more systematically. While the school has been using White Rose resources for several years, they are beginning to see the impact in terms of pupils' confidence and reasoning powers.

Similarly, at Knight's Temple Grove Primary Academy, as teachers are becoming more confident with the requirements of the mastery approach, pupils' mathematical skills are developing with a daily focus on fluency, reasoning, problem solving, and calculation.

2.6.3 Schools are demonstrating an explicit commitment to building oracy into their curriculum.

At Claremont High School Academy, they work to the mantra of 'say it before you write it'. Individual departments are tasked with developing strategies to enhance students' oracy skills. This is leading to an increase in the number of student-led presentations pupils enjoy.

The reviewers observed a Year 10 English lesson, where students diligently engaged in a series of paired talk activities: *'Attentively, they listened to each other's contribution, learning new ideas and ways of presenting their thoughts'.* In geography, students are expected to use mini-whiteboards to record their thoughts and observations. They use these as a prompt to respond to any questions. This gives them the confidence to speak in front of the whole class.

At St Clement Danes School, promoting oracy is a focus for the school. The reviewers observed this across a range of subjects and age groups: Year 9 English students discussed the hidden meanings behind the words that were being used in *Romeo and Juliet* in small groups. They were given particular roles, stretching the most able students. In Year 13 psychology there was an emphasis on explaining research methods clearly.

A number of schools have observed that disadvantaged students are less assured with speaking and listening activities. Tolworth Girls' School and Sixth Form, undertook their own research into this, which showed that weaker oracy had a limiting impact on their ability with written expression. They are prioritising the development of a formal and consistent approach to whole school oracy practice.

Case Study:

Maths Mastery at St Augustine's Catholic Primary School

St Augustine's committed to developing a mastery approach to mathematics in 2017. The mathematics leader – a Key Stage 2 teacher and Assistant Head – worked with colleagues to ensure that understanding of the five 'big ideas' of maths mastery was secure and cohesive across the school. They offered development opportunities and training to teaching and support staff, placing the emphasis on developing language, speaking skills and enhancing vocabulary to enable pupils to speak with greater articulation and confidence.

To ensure that maths mastery was introduced sustainably to the school, the mathematics leader piloted and trialled ideas before bringing them to the whole school. The approach was underpinned by a survey with pupils, conducted before the design of provision, which revealed that pupil attitudes to mathematics and confidence were low.

Rather than re-inventing the wheel, the mathematics leader worked with existing mastery programmes and resources including White Rose and accessed NRICH training and developed the use of key resources such as Abacus. A follow-up survey after implementation showed a significant improvement in pupils' attitudes and confidence in mathematics, in particular their ability to articulate their understanding and to use appropriate vocabulary.

Data from 2019 shows that the school was achieving considerable success with this initiative, with Key Stage 2 progress and attainment significantly above national averages and in the highest 20% of all schools.

During the lockdown, the mathematics leader continued to strengthen the mastery curriculum. In September 2021 they identified a number of priority areas to work on across the school. This has ensured good staff subject knowledge and a timely response to pupil learning needs.

Leaders have accessed training and development work, including membership of a teacher research group. The mathematics leader leads the Challenge Partners South East London mathematics hub, organising half termly sessions to support networking. The school is currently supporting a local school within the cluster.

3. Concluding Remarks

The QAR reports offer a unique opportunity to learn more about the challenges and opportunities facing our schools in a year of significant disruption. From evidencing the incredible commitment of our teachers to continually improve, to the diversity of solutions to tackle problems big and small, what is revealed is a resilient and innovative profession not content on standing still.

The increasing number of pupils presenting with social, emotional, mental and health problems due to the effects of the pandemic, along with increases in complex deprivation noted in these reports, is of increased concern in light of the current and upcoming impact of the cost-of-living challenge facing so many families. The examples we see from schools in these reports of working with local communities, understanding the specific needs of families and providing a variety of wraparound support for parents, are encouraging models of what is possible for all senior leaders.

We can also take inspiration from the examples across these reports of young people advocating for and supporting the work of diversity and inclusion. Pupil voice is driving social justice learning and action in schools, and school leaders are finding ways to take on the challenge of creating inclusive environments for all.

Together, the reports illustrate the challenges facing schools across the Challenge Partners network while also illustrating why there is much to celebrate and feel hopeful about.

About the Authors

Dr Rajbir Hazelwood is a director at the Responsible Business Unit. She is a researcher and diversity and inclusion expert who has worked in the education sector for over 10 years. She has been commissioned by universities and third sector organisations to complete research on student access and success, most recently on technology and student motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr Chris Wilson is the founder and director of the Responsible Business Unit and an executive director at ImpactEd. In these roles he has supported multi-academy trusts and education charities with strategy development, including Star Academies, the National Institute of Teaching and the Education Endowment Fund (EEF). He is the former CEO of The Brilliant Club.

Mike Bradburn is a director at the Responsible Business Unit. He has worked in the Management Consulting industry since 2000, during which time he has worked with most of the leading UK financial institutions, specialising in Project and Programme Management. This year, Mike has worked with Harris Federation, Oasis Community Learning and Outwood Grange Academies Trust, and the Education Partnerships Group, an Ark Venture.

The Responsible Business Unit exists to support mission-driven organisations deliver on their potential by leveraging a unique mixture of sector experience and technical expertise to support with strategy design and implementation.

Challenge Partners works with schools and trusts across the country to reduce educational inequality and improve the life chances of all children. We do this through programmes and networks to facilitate school improvement and peer-led professional development, and share great practice. We work with more than 550 schools and thousands of school leaders, covering 300,000 children.

Through collaboration, challenge and professional development, we are working to ensure every school community can benefit from the combined wisdom of the education system.

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John Keats Primary School,
391 Rotherhithe New Road, SE16 3FN, London
United Kingdom

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