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Pocket Watch – Improving schools

Introduction

This week has seen some interesting evidence emerge about what makes schools succeed and for a change it's not all come from the Government or Ofsted. That's not to say the Government has been silent; both it and the Opposition have made important pronouncements this week, the former on arrangements for parachuting top teachers into struggling schools, the latter on its plans for qualified teacher status in all state schools but it's three other contributors to this well-worn debate about standards that have caught the eye. They include in no particular order, a fascinating report from the Institute of Education's Chris Husbands and colleagues on how the London Borough of Tower Hamlets managed to turn things round, a commissioned report from Teach First on what makes a school exceptional and further observations from Professor Coe on that contentious area of lesson observations. Three different perspectives but with a refreshing focus on what works.

Transforming Tower Hamlets

In 1998 Tower Hamlets was ranked as the worst performing Borough yet by 2013 all its state secondary schools had been judged 'good' or outstanding; how did they do it? It's a transformation that has attracted national attention and clearly money played a part, *"its schools received almost 60% more per pupil resource than the national average"* but it hasn't all been about money. The Institute of Education [report](#) identifies six key factors which arguably provide as good a blueprint as any international role model, as follows:

- Strong Authority and Borough wide leadership with a clear vision and stickability
- Equally strong and committed community and local business buy-in
- Robust, targeted school improvement driven by forensic data intelligence
- Integrated services wrapped around the needs of the child
- High quality teaching and learning backed up by high-level professional development
- Making sure they were instruments of their own rather than Government destiny

Teach First looks at what makes schools exceptional

It's only a small survey (six exceptional schools and six around the national average, all Teach first schools) and perhaps nothing too dramatic emerges but this [report](#) also offers a useful reminder about what works in school improvement. Interestingly its four key features pretty much match those in the Tower Hamlets report and include: clear and visionary leadership prepared to invest in and nurture talent; high-quality teaching and learning with subject knowledge highly valued; a professional learning environment with an emphasis on sharing and mentoring; strong networks and inter-relationships with students, parents and the community.

Lesson Observations

Lesson observations or learning walks as they sometimes called have become widely adopted in schools as a way of raising standards in teaching and learning but as [Professor Coe](#) has been arguing for some time, they raise profound questions about the skills required of the observer, the validity of the evidence gathered and the impact the process can have on teacher performance. Is, for example, the fact that students are all busy evidence of an effective lesson or a poor proxy for learning? It's one of a number of challenging questions raised.

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