

# Not everyone is Sir Alex Ferguson: systemic constraints, not just individual leadership, are responsible for persistent differences in school standards

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*Research demonstrates that running a successful school is not just down to having an inspirational headteacher and staff. **Ruth Lupton** writes that the additional struggles faced by disadvantaged schools in retaining excellent teachers and dealing with a wide range of learning needs, social problems and a challenging emotional environment constitute real challenges to organisational capacity and improvement. These must be acknowledged if Government is to achieve its goal of closing the performance gap between schools in richer and poorer areas.*



Can all schools be equally successful? The idea that good schools are simply the products of good leaders and teachers was challenged back in 1998 in a [paper by Sharon Gewirtz](#) in the Oxford Review of Education. She showed that schools in disadvantaged areas, especially those at the bottom of the local choice hierarchy, face challenges way beyond that encountered by the average school. While exceptional headteachers can sometimes turn such schools around, the obstacles they face have to be taken very seriously. At a system-wide level, the persistent differential between the standards of middle class schools and those in more disadvantaged areas cannot all be put down to individual leadership.

Yet politicians continue to tell us otherwise. January 2012 was a particularly busy month: Michael Gove launched an [attack](#) on the “bigoted backward bankrupt ideology” of people “who say that you can’t get the same results in the inner cities as the leafy suburbs so it’s wrong to stigmatise these schools”.

Then the new Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, argued that taking social factors into account when assessing schools encourages mediocrity. He summed up the core argument very nicely. All schools can do just as well as the best because;

*“the essential truths are that a poor leader runs a poor school; a good leader runs a good school. A good teacher can make a difference in a classroom; a poor teacher makes little or no difference. I think we know what makes a good school. We just need to make sure it happens on the ground now.”*

A few days later, Minister for Schools, [Nick Gibb](#) responded to new school league tables by arguing that because some schools in disadvantaged areas can be successful, all schools can. All of this sounds remarkably similar to the comments of Labour ministers, and the then Chief Inspector, Sir Chris Woodhead, in 1997, except that this time the threat of privatisation lurks more immediately for failing schools in disadvantaged areas.

One part of the argument is hard to take issue with – children from the most disadvantaged homes need the very best from the state education system or their talent will be wasted. It is a double injustice when the least advantaged kids are in the worst schools. But the claim that all schools can be immediately transformed to be just like the best, within their current resources and taking account of the competition they face, is a bit like saying that all football teams can play as well as Manchester United. Of course they can’t: there are systemic differences in the capacity of football clubs to perform well.

My research (for examples click [here](#) and [here](#)) shows that the same goes for schools. Schools in many disadvantaged areas find it hard to recruit and (importantly) retain excellent heads and teachers because the environment is much tougher. And on a day-to-day basis, dealing with all of the issues associated with socio-economic disadvantage changes the way that schools operate as organisations. Staff can find themselves spending more time liaising with parents, social services and other agencies and less time marking, monitoring, preparing and planning.

Learning needs can be very wide, demanding the most skilled teaching and differentiation in planning and pedagogy. Classrooms can be emotionally challenging and unpredictable, so that teachers can find themselves slipping into pedagogies of control rather than inspiration. And on top of this, many of these schools are under extreme pressure and criticism, which can make for a demoralising environment in which to work, and a tendency to focus on the very short term. There can be high turnover in leadership as well as staff.

This doesn't mean that it is impossible to run a good school in a tough area. Local factors matter, as Gewirtz's paper showed. Even among schools with high levels of Free School Meals, some schools are more stable, face less competition, and have less challenging intakes than others. Most importantly, some schools have outstanding, extraordinary headteachers and staff whose achievements should rightly be celebrated. But those people don't exist throughout the system. Not everyone is Sir Alex Ferguson.

Learning from extraordinary individuals is one thing, but you can't build a whole system just on exhorting everyone to be more like them. Systemic constraints have to be seriously addressed. That is why even in the fields of school improvement and school effectiveness research, which were for a long time focussed on capturing factors that work universally, the [importance of context](#) is now recognised and there is [increasing focus](#) on building capacity in schools in challenging circumstances rather than just expecting them to do what works in the leafy suburbs or for an exceptional few.

Tackling educational inequality is urgent and important, so we should expect politicians to continue to insist that poverty is no excuse and that all schools should be excellent and held to account. But as long as giving recognition to the systemic constraints on disadvantaged schools is treated as a dangerous ideology rather than a serious analysis of organisational reality, then the remedies will be insufficient. There's no room in this blog for writing a manifesto for improving disadvantaged schools, but some obvious starting points might be to avoid socially unbalanced intakes where possible by area banding and ending selection; to effect a much more significant redistribution of funds; to implement continuing professional development to build skills and aid retention of good teachers; and to provide teachers the room and support to develop pedagogies that have [been shown to be effective](#) in disadvantaged schools elsewhere in the world.

Systemic problems need systemic remedies, and there is plenty of research waiting to be tapped to inform the process.

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### **About the author**

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