**Further details: Lessons from ‘odds-beating’ schools: understanding how schools serving disadvantaged areas achieve good outcomes**

**Project Description**

This full time 3 year PhD studentship, starting in September 2019, is fully funded by the ESRC CASE studentship scheme (ESRC NWSSDTP, <https://nwssdtp.ac.uk>), together with the Manchester Institute of Education at The University of Manchester (<http://www.education.manchester.ac.uk/>) and St Patrick’s Teaching School in Salford (<https://teachingschool.stpatricksrchigh.co.uk/>).

CASE studentships involve a PhD student working in partnership with a professional organisation to undertake a study which has been designed to enhance the organisation’s work. This creates an exciting opportunity for students to undertake a PhD which bridges between academic and professional concerns, having a direct impact in a professional context while also producing a PhD thesis.

The PhD will require the successful candidate to become an ‘embedded researcher’ based at St Patrick’s Teaching School. The appointed student will work with a trio of schools, led by St Patrick’s, all of which are achieving good outcomes in disadvantaged areas. The student will:

* undertake detailed in-depth qualitative research in each school to explore how the schools understand and are responding to disadvantage in their local contexts and pupil populations
* facilitate a process of cross-school learning, supporting the trio of schools to share and deepen their understandings and practices in response to emerging findings
* work with St Patrick’s Teaching School to explore how it might draw on the research findings to develop its offer to schools.

The PhD will be supervised by Dr Kirstin Kerr and Dr Laura Black from The Manchester Institute of Education, and closely supported by Barbara Rogers CBE, a National Leader of Education and head of St Patrick’s Teaching School. Further details of the required project are outlined below. Applicants are strongly advised to discuss their applications with Dr Kirstin Kerr (kirstin.kerr@manchester.ac.uk).

**Detailed project proposal**

**Background and aims**

In recent decades, affluent countries world-wide have sought to improve the quality of their schools. But despite some gains, the poorest learners, living in the poorest areas, are still doing systematically least well (OECD 2017). In England, policymakers have started to think about these spatial concentrations of poor outcomes as ‘cold spots’. With reference to schooling, the Department for Education (DfE) and National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) have defined these as areas with the highest levels of disadvantage, where schools face the most challenging circumstances, and where additional supports are needed to improve schools and children’s lives (DfE and NCTL 2018).

Recent efforts to “grow support in cold spot areas” have included the creation of Teaching Schools, defined as “strong schools led by strong leaders that work with others to provide high-quality training, development and support” (DfE and NCTL, 2018). Distinctively, this approach seeks to harness the expertise of schools which Campbell-Wilcox (2017) terms ‘odds-beating’ – i.e. consistently achieving good outcomes, through equitable practices, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Given Ofsted’s concerns that some schools are securing improvements by exacerbating inequalities through excluding the most disadvantaged learners, learning from schools which appear more equitable is especially important.

In response, this study seeks to learn more about how schools which appear ‘odds-beating’ succeed, and to use this knowledge to inform Teaching Schools’ work. Specifically, it will explore how these schools: understand disadvantages in their local contexts and student populations; respond to these in practice; and what it is about the nature of their response that supports their success. Through this, the study aims to address two gaps in current knowledge, which a focus on odds-beating schools throws into sharp relief:

1. While school improvement research has done much to identify the universal characteristics of successful schools, it has tended to result in generic, de-contextualised, prescriptions for improvement (Muijs 2004). More elaborate quantitative analyses have indicated synergies between different characteristics – e.g. Bryk (2010) demonstrates that to be odds-beating, schools must be equally strong in leadership, teaching and learning, and parent-community-school ties. Overall, however, improvement research does little to illuminate what odds-beating schools actually do, in their particular contexts, which supports their success and could inform wider action.
2. There are diverse, disconnected strands of research which highlight good practices relating to particular aspects of schooling (e.g. leadership [West 2005], pedagogy [Munns, 2014] or school-community relations [Kerr 2016]) and reveal the importance of schools’ local contexts in shaping these. However, the attention paid to odds-beating schools is patchy, and many of the good practices identified may be in otherwise poorly performing schools. It therefore remains extremely difficult to piece together synthesised and contextualised understandings of what odds-beating schools do, which could help address limitations in improvement research.

Simply, little research has sought to understand schools which appear odds-beating as whole, complex, contextualised, multi-faceted organisations, and in sufficient detail to explore the potential transferability of their approaches – in whole or in part. This may leave Teaching Schools with few reference points beyond their own practices, and constrained by the limitations inherent in these, when thinking about what schools in cold spots can do to improve.

Explicitly addressing these issues, this study has been co-designed with St Patrick’s Teaching School, which is committed to developing high-quality research-informed support, and led by Barbara Rogers CBE, a DfE-appointed National Leader of Education. It will ask three overarching questions:

1. How do schools which appear odds-beating understand disadvantage in their local contexts and student populations?
2. How do they respond to this?
3. What is it about the nature of their response that supports their success?

It will pursue an ethnographic-style case-study design, which involves St Patrick’s forming and leading a ‘learning triad’ (Ainscow 2015) by partnering two other secondary schools from Greater Manchester which appear odds-beating. A triad-model is advantageous, establishing a sample which allows both for some depth of study and variation between schools and contexts; and a structure for the schools to work together to deepen their own and the study’s learning. Individually and collectively, they will:

1. surface, scrutinise and share their understandings and practices in relation different aspects of schooling and their local contexts
2. explore and articulate any synergies between these
3. explore how learning from this can directly inform St Patrick’s Teaching School, and the triad’s wider work.

Notably, schools working in triads is a core strategy for tackling educational inequalities currently being implemented by the Greater Manchester Education and Employment Board (GMEEB), of which Barbara Rogers is a member. This creates a supportive environment for the study.

**Research activities and timeline**

The CASE student will work closely with Barbara Rogers to establish the triad. Like St Patrick’s, the two additional schools must:

1. serve a disadvantaged area and student population reflecting local disadvantage
2. have sustained student progress and achievement at or above national averages
3. demonstrate equitable practices in admissions and exclusions.

GMEEB has already identified potential schools by drawing together progress and attainment data, Ofsted data, and local intelligence.

Practically, the study will have four stages:

* ***Stage 1 (Sept 2019-March 2020):*** The triad will be established. A literature-informed synthetizing framework will be developed to guide data collection, building on Bryk’s core dimensions of leadership, teaching and learning, and parent-community-school ties, and potential synergies between these. This will help ensure that each school’s approach is considered holistically, and there is a detailed, comparable focus on particular aspects within these.
* ***Stage 2 (April 2020-March 2021):*** Guided by the framework, initial research activities in each school will explore the disadvantages arising from students’ home and community contexts and how the schools respond to these. Activities will include: in-depth interviews with governors; senior and middle leaders, teachers and teaching assistants; observations of lessons, pastoral support and community-oriented activities; analysis of schools’ policies; and pupil and parent voice activities.
* ***Stage 3 (April 2021-March 2022):*** Distinctive elements of each school’s practice revealed in Stage 2 will be further explored through bespoke research activities.
* ***Stage 4 (April-September 2022):*** The student will complete a draft of the thesis and work with St Patrick’s on dissemination.

Throughout, St Patrick’s will convene termly triad meetings when, led by the CASE student, staff from the three schools will explore emergent findings and their implications. The CASE student will also:

* keep ethnographic-style field notes and a reflective research journal
* undertake ongoing within-case and cross-case analysis, using inductive and thematic approaches to develop individual and collective case-accounts. These developing accounts will inform the termly triad meetings and individual accounts will be member-checked in advance.
* work closely with St Patrick’s, through regular supervision and related activities, to ensure:
* research activities are focused and designed appropriately to be effective
* appropriate lines of enquiry are pursued in Stage 3
* the study directly informs St Patrick’s Teaching School provision
* the other triad schools receive valuable ongoing feedback.

**Outcomes and contribution to knowledge**

Building on existing literature, the study will generate detailed, nuanced, holistic case-study accounts of what a sample of odds-beating schools do, in response to disadvantage in their local contexts, which enables them to be successful. This will extend the international evidence-base by directly addressing the gaps in knowledge outlined earlier. It will enable the triad-schools to surface, scrutinise and extend their understandings and practices. St Patrick’s will apply the knowledge generated to its work in cold spot areas, to help address educational inequalities more effectively. The other triad-schools may multiply this in their own work.

**Dissemination**

St Patrick’s will disseminate findings through its Teaching School work with schools and Local and Diocesan Authorities in Greater Manchester and the North West. It will also bring these to bear on strategic developments nationally and in the city region. For example, in addition to GMEEB, Barbara Rogers sits on the Mayor’s Greater Manchester Reform Board, which guides devolved policy and DfE’s Secondary Head teacher Reference Group, which supports national policy development. She also works with Regional Schools Commissioners, NCTL, and advises school systems internationally.

Academic audiences will be reached through high profile journal articles and British, American and Australian Education Research Association conferences. The academic supervisors will also ensure international coverage through their professional networks, e.g. Dr Kerr (first supervisor) is a member of the US-based Institution for Educational Leadership’s research network.

**References**

Ainscow, M. (2015) *Towards Self-improving School Systems*. London: Routledge

Bryk, A. (2010) Organising Schools for Improvement. *Phi Delta Kappan.* <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171009100705>

Campbell-Wilcox, K. et al (2017) *Innovations in Odds Beating Schools.* Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield

DfE and NCTL (2018) *Teaching schools: a guide for potential applicants* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/teaching-schools-a-guide-for-potential-applicants>

Kerr, K., Dyson, A., and Gallannaugh, F. (2016) Conceptualising school-community relations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. *Educational Research* 58(3): 265-282

Muijs, D. et al. (2004) Improving schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. DOI: 10.1076/sesi.15.2.149.30433

Munns, G. et al. (eds) (2013) *Exemplary Teachers of Students in Poverty.* Abingdon: Routledge

OECD (2017) *Update Report 2017: Inclusive Growth.* Paris: OECD

West, M., Ainscow, M. and Stanford, J. (2005) Sustaining improvement in schools in challenging circumstances. *School Leadership & Management*, DOI: 10.1080/1363243052000317055

**Person specification**

Applicants must hold a Master’s degree at merit level or above in a relevant social science or humanities discipline, such as education, social anthropology, social policy, or sociology. They must demonstrate a keen awareness of issues relating to the impacts of disadvantage on education and life chances, and of school-focused efforts to address these. Teaching experience, or experience of working in schools in other pupil-focused capacities (e.g. in pastoral support), in Local Authority school improvement services, or similar contexts, is highly desirable. A high level of competence in qualitative data generation and analysis is essential as the study will involve the development of ethnographic style case studies.

The successful candidate must be DBS cleared.

The successful candidate must also be based in the Manchester area. This is to allow the student to work closely with St Patrick’s and the other trio schools, and to access the university’s full range of services.

Candidates must satisfy the ESRC's academic and residential eligibility requirements and be UK (full award) or EU citizens (fees only). Find out more about eligibility here (see p4):

<https://nwssdtpacuk.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/nwssdtp-case-guidance_2019.pdf>

**Financial support**

The studentship covers academic fees, provides an annual Maintenance Stipend (£14,777 in 2018, exact rate for 2019 subject to confirmation from the RCUK), and access to a Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) for reimbursement of research related expenses including, but not limited to: conference attendance, training courses and UK fieldwork. A small additional stipend for local travel expenses and essential equipment may be available.

**Further information**

Applicants are strongly recommended to discuss their application with Dr Kirstin Kerr in advance of submission. Dr Kerr’s contact details are: kirstin.kerr@manchester.ac.uk

The deadline for applications is 13.02.19. Interviews will be held at St Patrick’s RC High School and Teaching School, Salford. The provisional date for interviews is the morning of Wednesday 27th February.

Candidates invited for interview are expected to cover their own expenses.

**Application**

Apply by Wednesday 13th February 2019 5pm GMT by emailing pgr-seedfunding@manchester.ac.uk the following, using **‘St Patrick’s Teaching School ESRC CASE Studentship’** as the email subject:

* A full CV
* A personal statement outlining the applicant's suitability and interest to undertake the proposed project, paying particular attention to the proposal's substantive and methodological aspects.
* An example of a piece of academic writing produced by the applicant of 5,000-10,000 words. (Applicants may consider submitting two shorter pieces of c.5,000 if these deal separately with conceptual and empirical analyses.) This may be a chapter(s) from a Master’s dissertation, in which case, an abstract or introduction outlining the context/aims/research questions of the study must also be included.
* The names and contact details of two academic referees who are able to comment on the applicant’s suitability for PhD study and to undertake the advertised project.
* The name and contact details of an additional referee who can comment on the applicant’s professional suitability to undertake the project in partnership with St Patrick’s Teaching School.