

Boys studying modern foreign languages at GCSE in schools in England

Part 1. Schools that are beating the odds.
Bobbie Mills, Education Policy Institute

Part 2. What makes an odds-beating school?
Teresa Tinsley, Alcantara Communications



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Foreword

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. As well as teaching English all over the world, the British Council advocates for languages in the UK, produces research on language learning in schools and on the value of languages and intercultural learning to the UK. We also support the excellent work of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Modern Languages, which recently published a National Recovery Strategy for Languages. We believe that the UK needs more of its people to speak foreign languages and gain the understanding of other cultures that comes with that – for employability, for trade and the economy, for diplomacy and security and for our cultural life.

Progress on the uptake of languages in schools has lagged. Our Language Trends research shows that the more disadvantaged you are, the less likely you are to learn a language at school (Language Trends 2019). One of the concerns regarding take-up and provision for languages in English secondary schools, is the gender gap among the candidates for GCSE language subjects (which becomes even more marked at A level).

Boys are far less likely than girls to be taking languages – especially French and Spanish – and amongst those that do, girls out-perform boys in terms of the proportion achieving the top grades. Therefore we commissioned this research to find out more about the schools that are doing well in boys' participation and achievement (particularly disadvantaged boys).

This report identifies schools "beating the odds" in Part 1, and in Part 2 shows the results from a survey of the practices of those schools, identifying factors which are allowing them to 'beat the odds' and puts forward case studies and recommendations based on the findings.

Our ambition is that that every young person regardless of disadvantage or gender should have access to language learning and the understanding of other cultures that comes with that learning.

Sir Ciarán Devane
Chief Executive
British Council

It is well known that since modern foreign languages ceased to be a compulsory part of the Key Stage 4 national curriculum, from September 2004 onwards, there has been a sharp fall in the number and proportion of students in England studying for and taking GCSEs in modern languages.

This raises concerns about whether students are receiving a fully rounded education, and whether the schools system is preparing students for a world in which people will increasingly move and communicate across national boundaries - necessitating an ability to understand and converse in languages other than our own.

Less well understood is the large gap in take-up of modern foreign languages between girls and boys – which is why this British Council commissioned report is so welcome. Boys' entries into modern foreign languages are significantly lower than those of girls – making languages the only subject in the government's "EBacc" pillar to have a larger gender divide.

Strikingly, once we control for a range of pupil characteristics, including disadvantage and prior attainment, girls are over twice as likely as boys to enter and achieve at least a grade 4 (equivalent to the old "C" grade) in a language GCSE. Why do so few boys choose to study languages, and why do those who do so underperform girls? This report looks at these issues.

EPI researchers have identified a group of "odds-beating" schools where boys do much better in languages than might be expected based on the school's disadvantage and attainment characteristics, and the national averages.

There will continue to be scrutiny about whether or not modern foreign languages are harshly graded at GCSE level in comparison to other subjects (which Ofqual has recently reported on) and to what extent accountability measures such as Progress 8 and the EBacc should push most students to undertake a GCSE in a modern foreign languages. This report does not consider such issues. What the report does demonstrate is that even within the existing systems of accountability and marking, there are actions which schools can implement to increase the number of students – including boys – who are studying foreign languages and securing a "pass" grade. School leaders and policy makers will be interested in the conclusions of the report and in learning lessons from those "beating the odds".

David Laws
Executive Chairman
Education Policy Institute

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Part 1. Schools that are beating the odds.

Bobbie Mills, Education Policy Institute

Executive Summary

Entries in modern foreign language (MFL) GCSEs have fallen since 2014. Boys' rate of entry and attainment in language subjects are consistently below those of girls. Notwithstanding the overall trends in language learning, there are schools, trusts and local authorities (LAs) in which boys' language entry and attainment at GCSE are both relatively high given their context. This report takes a statistical approach to identifying those schools. Our analysis has identified schools with pupil intakes that are statistically associated with low language attainment at GCSE, but that are, in practice, achieving substantially higher entry and attainment for boys than might be expected given national trends.

Part 1 of this report sets out the national trends in language entries across all pupils since the introduction of the English Baccalaureate school performance measure, better known as the 'Ebacc', and Part 2 sets out how this varies for boys. Part 3 introduces the method used for identifying schools that, considering their context, are performing well for boys' language attainment, and then presents the findings. The schools that appear to be 'beating the odds' (as we have phrased it) for language attainment are analysed to determine whether certain regions, LAs or multi-academy trusts (MATs) are overrepresented among them. The pupil characteristics of these schools are also analysed to draw out common attributes.

Key findings

We use 'beating the odds' as shorthand for state-funded mainstream schools in England that are predicted by our model to have language attainment for boys that is lower than the national average for all pupils, but that in practice achieved attainment rates that are ten percentage points higher for (a) all boys and (b) disadvantaged boys. We excluded selective schools and schools with an insufficient number of boys finishing Key Stage 4 in each year.

- Controlling for a range of factors including disadvantage and prior attainment, girls are more

than twice (2.17 times) as likely as boys to enter and achieve at least a grade 4 in a language GCSE.^{1,2}

- The strongest predictors of a pupil's attainment in a GCSE language when controlling for a range of factors is their prior attainment (as measured across a range of curriculum areas) at KS2 and their IDACI score (derived from their home postcode).³ The higher the prior attainment of the pupil and the more affluent their neighbourhood is, the more likely they are to achieve at least a grade 4. This is a stronger predictor than whether or not the pupil is identified as disadvantaged in terms of their eligibility for free school meals.

- While a quarter of secondary schools included in our analysis have beaten the odds for boys' language entry and attainment at some point in the last five years, far fewer (five per cent) have done so consistently over time.

- 574 of 2,253 schools have beaten the odds for boys' language entry and attainment at least once in the five-year period between 2013/14 and 2017/18.

- 117 schools (five per cent) have consistently beaten the odds by achieving better than Education Policy Institute (EPI)-predicted language entry and attainment for boys for three or more of the past five years. Eleven schools have achieved this five years running.

- The number of schools beating the odds has dropped substantially in recent years.

- In 2013/14, 275 schools qualified as beating their odds. This figure dropped to 118 in 2016/17 and to 75 in 2017/18.

- In terms of schools currently beating the odds, there are only 37 schools that both beat the odds for boys' language outcomes in the most recent year of data (2017/18) and have done so for at least two of the preceding years since 2013/14.

- There is little strong evidence that a school's likelihood of being identified as beating the odds is related to its governance:

- 20 of 37 schools that beat their odds in the most recent year of data and have done so for 3+ years overall are in multi-academy trusts (MATs). Four are in single academy trusts. Altogether this equates to 65 per cent of these schools being governed by academy trusts, which is consistent

with the national proportion for all state-funded mainstream secondary schools. It should be noted that seventeen of the 24 schools that sit under these trusts (70 per cent) are academy converters.

- Nine of the sixteen school groups identified as consistently beating the odds as a group are MATs, compared with seven local authorities (LAs). Eighteen of the 42 academies that sit under these MATs (43 per cent) are academy converters.
- The North West is strongly represented among both individual schools and school groups that are beating the odds for boys' language outcomes.
 - Half (six of eleven) of the schools beating the odds five years running are in the North West.
 - Twelve of the 37 schools that beat their odds in the most recent year of data and have done so for 3+ years overall are located in the North West.
 - 42 of the 82 schools that belong to the consistently odds-beating MATs and LAs are located in the North West.
- Despite these schools having achieved better results for boys than might have been expected, girls continue to outperform boys in languages in the schools that we have identified as beating the odds.
 - For language entry, gender gaps tend to be smaller in odds-beating schools than in other schools.
 - For language attainment, gender gaps in fact tend to be wider in odds-beating schools compared with other schools.

On average, individual schools beating the odds have higher levels of disadvantaged pupils and higher prior attainment in comparison with other schools. Schools governed by the school groups that are beating the odds also have higher levels of disadvantaged pupils and higher prior attainment on average, in addition to having higher than average levels of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL). On the whole, however, the schools identified in this report as beating the odds have a wide range of school intakes, including some with high numbers of pupils with low prior attainment.

The vast majority of the schools identified in this report as beating the odds are located in cities, towns and major conurbations, though a handful are in rural areas. Most are either Ofsted rated

Good or Outstanding, but some are currently rated Requires Improvement and even Inadequate. Many of the multi-academy trusts identified as consistently beating the odds are mixed phase. Given emerging research highlighting the potential benefits of a smooth transition between primary and secondary phases for MFL teaching, one could hypothesise that these MATs have felt a benefit of being mixed phase in this respect. Part 2 of this publication by Teresa Tinsley reports on a survey of the odds-beating schools identified, and includes questions on the role of languages in primary schools.⁴

Recommendations

- More study is needed on the benefits of language study for young people in the UK. **Particular focus of further research should be given to the potential cross-curricular benefits of language learning, and its role in improving literacy and numeracy.**
- In light of the likelihood of a missed 2022 target for 75% of pupils to be studying the EBacc, **government should clarify its position on the persisting gender gap within modern foreign languages, and whether it intends to address it.** Initiatives to improve gender balance have been funded by DfE in a number of subjects - typically those where girls are underrepresented. While the underrepresentation of girls across certain subjects (and subsequently certain job sectors) arguably feeds into different and wider issues in society than the underrepresentation of boys in certain subjects, government must clarify its position on subjects where boys are underrepresented.
- **Ofqual should act on its findings to address the difficulty of MFL assessment at GCSE to enable more inclusive language learning for all abilities.** In addition to the gender gap, languages are the only EBacc component where the entry gap has persisted between pupils with low prior attainment and their peers with higher prior attainment. The findings from the survey reported in Part 2 indicate there can be overlap between inclusive language learning for all abilities and improved take-up for boys. This may be addressed by Ofqual's decision to adjust grading in GCSE French and German, and the impact of this intervention should be monitored to assess whether uptake improves for pupils with low prior attainment.

1. This figure is calculated by taking the reciprocal of the odds ratio reported in Figure 3.1 i.e. 1/0.46.

2. The Key Stage 4 assessment system has recently transitioned to introduce new GCSEs, including a new 9 to 1 grading system. For some subjects (English language, English literature and mathematics), the new GCSEs began to be taught in September 2015, with the first results issued in August 2017. For other subjects, including French, German and Spanish GCSEs, the first results were issued in summer 2018. Regarding the new 9 to 1 grading system, where 9 is the highest grade achievable and 1 is the lowest, Ofqual advises that a grade 4 be regarded as equivalent to a grade C under the previous grading system. A grade 4 is also sometimes referred to as a 'standard pass'.

3. The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) is part of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). It is an area-based measure defined at the level of Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) and was last calculated for 2015. It takes the form of a score between 0 and 1, which can be interpreted as the proportion of families in LSOA, with children aged under 16, which are income deprived. The higher the score, the more deprived the neighbourhood.

4. Louise Courtney, 'Transition in modern foreign languages: a longitudinal study of motivation for language learning and second language proficiency', *Oxford Review of Education* 43, no. 4 (July 2017): 462-481, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2017.1329721>.

1: Introduction

Languages form one of the five pillars of the government’s ‘EBacc’ measure of school performance alongside English, mathematics, the sciences, and the humanities (geography or history). The Department for Education (DfE) identified these subjects as those that “[keep] young people’s options open for further study and future careers.”⁵ The EBacc measures the number of pupils who take GCSEs in these ‘core’ subjects, and measures schools on how well pupils do in these subjects. Given this status, the number of entries in language GCSEs might have been expected to rise significantly since the EBacc’s introduction in 2010. However, after a short-term increase, entries have stagnated and then fallen. Furthermore, boys’ entries are consistently below those of girls, making languages the only EBacc subject pillar to have a significant gender divide. This report sets out trends in the proportion of boys and girls taking languages at GCSE in mainstream state-funded schools in England and identifies the schools and school groups that appear to be bucking those trends.

5. Department for Education, updated 24th January 2019, ‘English Baccalaureate EBacc’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>.

6. This includes classic languages Latin, Greek and Ancient Hebrew as well as modern foreign language subjects

7. Department for Education, updated 24th January 2019, ‘English Baccalaureate EBacc’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>. This includes classic languages Latin, Greek and Ancient Hebrew as well as modern foreign language subjects. Department for Education, 24th January 2019, ‘Key stage 4 and multi-academy trust performance 2018 (revised)’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-and-multi-academy-trust-performance-2018-revised>.

8. Branwen Jeffreys, ‘Language learning: German and French drop by half in UK schools’, (BBC News, 27th February 2019), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47334374>.

9. Association for Language Learning, November 2017, ‘Outcomes of Survey’, <http://www.all-london.org.uk/site/index.php/outcomes-of-survey/>

10. Pre-publication data for 2019 provided by kind permission of the British Council.

11. Robert Coe, ‘Comparability of GCSE Examinations in Different Subjects: An Application of the Rasch Model’, *Oxford Review of Education* 34, no. 5 (October 2008): 609–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980801970312>; Jonathan Clewes, ‘Inter-Subject Comparability in A Level Sciences and Modern Foreign Languages’, n.d., 23; Beth Black et al., ‘Inter-Subject Comparability: A Review of the Technical Literature’, n.d., 88.

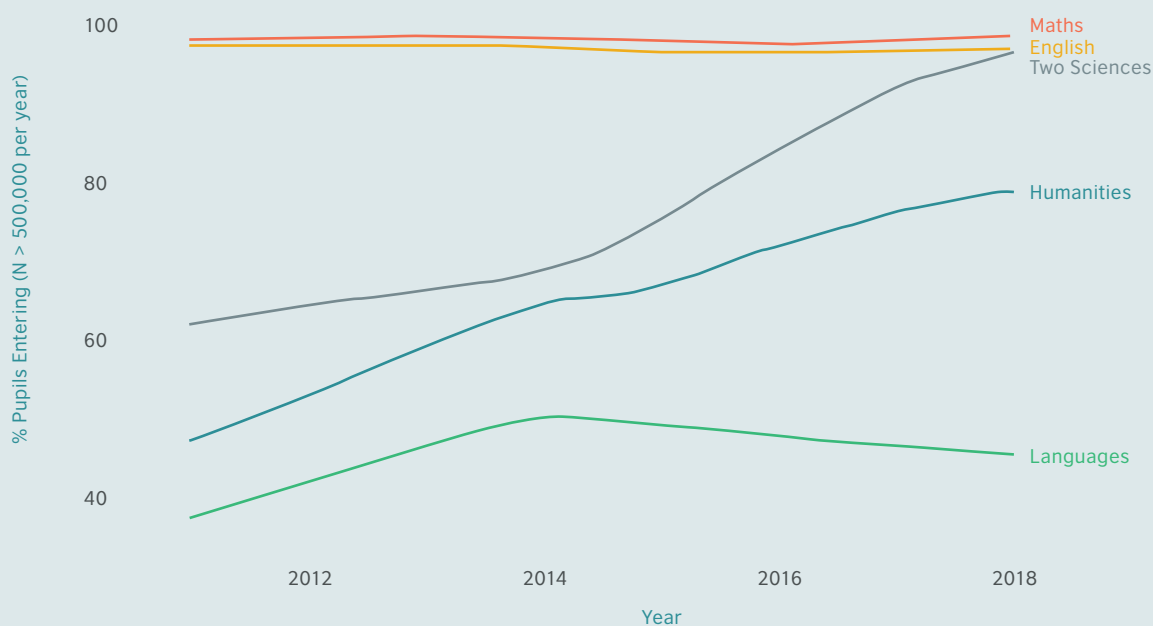
Figure 1 shows that across all state-funded mainstream schools, entries in the EBacc language pillar reached a peak in 2013/14 at just above 50 per cent before falling each year – by an average of one percentage point per year – to reach 45.5 per cent in 2017/18.⁶

The DfE has stated an ambition for 75 per cent of pupils to study the EBacc subject combination by 2022. While the DfE points out that language entry levels remain above where they were at the beginning of the decade (around 38 per cent), this is lower than where they might be expected to be given trends observed in other EBacc subjects.⁷ Participation in the humanities subjects (geography or history) has risen from below 50 per cent nationally in 2010/11 to more than three quarters of pupils taking a humanities GCSE in 2017/18. Entries in two science subjects are now above 95 per cent.

The trends outlined here have been attributed to a variety of factors. MFL ceased to be a compulsory area of study at GCSE in 2004, and since then participation has declined from three quarters of pupils in the early 2000s to less than half today. The perceived difficulty of the subject area is often cited as a barrier to raising participation, and surveys of schools and language teachers have found concerns around the difficulty of the subject area and over harsh grading to be widespread.^{8,9} The British Council’s annual Language Trends survey was conducted most recently between January and March 2019, with 1,621 responding schools from both primary and secondary phases and from the state and independent sectors. The key findings indicated inequalities in access to language learning from primary school upwards, with substantial variations in language teaching provision and take-up being associated with socio-economic status and educational attainment more generally. 45 per cent of responding state schools indicated that the implications of Brexit are a challenge to providing high quality language teaching. The report noted that many schools are making efforts to maintain take-up of languages at GCSE and A level but the “nature and content of external exams” is overwhelmingly cited as the major barrier to increasing numbers.¹⁰

There is indeed existing statistical evidence that it is more difficult to achieve higher grades in some language subjects at GCSE and A Level than in other subjects.¹¹ In November 2019 Ofqual published a decision to align French and German GCSE grading with Spanish, having concluded that French and

Figure 1: Percentage of pupils entering each EBacc subject pillar, 2010/11 to 2017/18



Source: National Pupil Database 2010/11-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

German are severely graded in comparison to GCSEs in other subjects. Furthermore, although the challenges of identifying ‘native speakers’ makes it difficult to quantify the effect their participation has on examination grading, there is research indicating that native speakers who take an A Level in their fluent language may have a “small, yet important effect” on assessment outcomes.¹² However, the studies of inter-subject comparability have also found grading to be equally or more severe in some science subjects, and yet science entries have increased in recent years. This illustrates that there is likely to be more at play than subject difficulty. Other factors may include the relative value given to STEM subjects by schools and society over language subjects, which is then reflected in school timetabling and subject choice. For example Science is compulsory. The availability of qualified foreign language teachers has also been identified as a key challenge to delivering the EBacc.^{13,14} The availability of language teachers with a relevant degree is a particular challenge, with 40-50 per cent of teachers in various language subjects holding a relevant degree in 2017.¹⁵

A gender imbalance in language study has historically persisted in schools in England, with boys’ participation being particularly low in French.¹⁶ Gender gaps in language study, favouring girls, have also been observed in schools in Scotland and Australia.¹⁷ England-based research into why this gender gap persists has been limited to a few small-scale projects, but the phenomenon has long been acknowledged.¹⁸ Part 2 of this publication by Teresa Tinsley reports on a survey of the odds-beating schools identified here. The survey aimed to identify factors contributing to these schools achieving stronger take-up of languages by boys, and as such casts light on why the gender gap might persist elsewhere.

12. Rachel Taylor and Nadir Zanini, ‘Native Speakers in A Level Modern Foreign Languages’, 2017, 86. This removes around 165 schools from each year of the dataset.

13. Peter Sellen, ‘Analysis: The challenge of navigation teacher recruitment, pay and curriculum choices’ (Education Policy Institute, 12 August 2017), <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/analysis-challenge-navigating-teacher-recruitment-pay-curriculum-choices/>.

14. Rebecca Allen, ‘How many language teachers would we need to reach the Conservatives’ 75per cent EBacc target?’ (FFT Education Datalab, 22 May 2017), <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2017/05/how-many-language-teachers-would-we-need-to-reach-the-conservatives-75-ebacc-target/>.

15. Luke Sibieta, ‘The Teacher Labour Market in England: Shortages, Subject Expertise and Incentives’ (London: Education Policy Institute, 30 August 2018), <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-teacher-labour-market-in-england/>.

16. Teresa Tinsley, ‘Languages: The State of the Nation’, (British Academy, February 2013), https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/State_of_the_Nation_REPORT_WEB.pdf.

17. John De Cecco and Margaret Shaw, ‘Boys’ Motivation towards the Learning of Modern Foreign Languages’ (British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 2008), 22; J. Carr and A. Pauwels, *Boys and Foreign Language Learning: Real Boys Don’t Do Languages* (Springer, 2005).

18. Barry Jones and Gwenneth Jones, *Boys’ Performance in Modern Foreign Languages: Listening to Learnings* (Centre for Information on Language Teaching, 2001).

2: Trends in boys' language GCSE entry since the introduction of the EBacc

There is a substantial and persistent gender gap in EBacc language entry of between ten and twelve percentage points. This is in clear contrast with the other four EBacc subject areas where gender gaps are negligible in terms of entry.

Figure 2.1 illustrates that entry levels for both boys and girls rose by about twelve percentage points between 2010/11, when the EBacc was introduced, and 2013/14. The first year that schools' responses to the EBacc could be observed in performance tables was 2012/13.¹⁹ In 2013/14, entry levels in a language subject at GCSE for both boys and girls reached their highest level at 43.3 per cent and 55.3 per cent respectively. Boys' entry has since dropped to 37.9 per cent in 2017/18, and girls' entry has also fallen to 50.3 per cent. It does not appear that either one is falling more rapidly than the other.

Figures 2.2 and 2.3 illustrate how gender gaps interact with other pupil characteristics, specifically disadvantage and prior attainment.

Figure 2.2 shows that non-disadvantaged pupils are, on average, more likely to enter an EBacc language subject at GCSE than their disadvantaged peers. Non-disadvantaged boys have consistently had higher entry levels on average than disadvantaged girls, but in recent years entry levels for non-disadvantaged boys have decreased and are approaching those of disadvantaged girls.

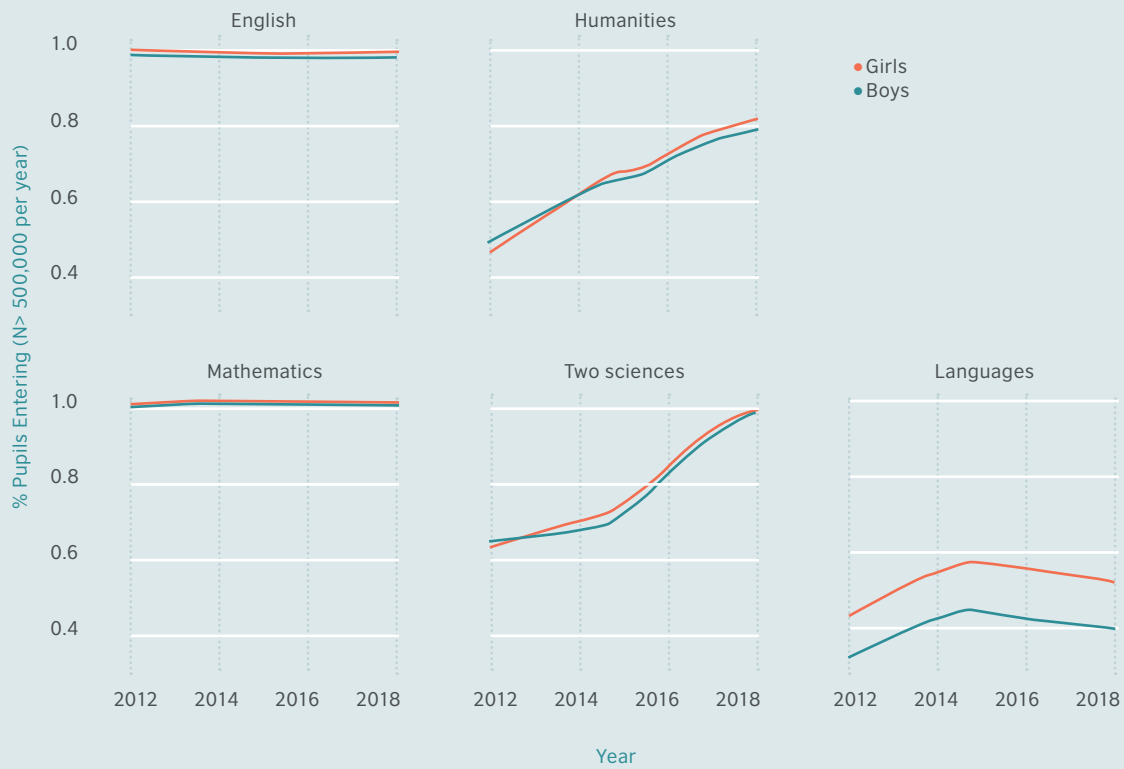
Figure 2.3 reveals that gender gaps are much smaller within prior attainment groups, but boys are still consistently below girls in terms of language entry. The figure also illustrates that prior attainment band is a stronger predictor than gender for language participation at GCSE. It is notable that language entry levels in the low prior attainment group did not see the same initial rise with the introduction of the EBacc as higher prior attainment groups did, and as low prior attainers saw in other EBacc subjects. It appears that, with the introduction of the Progress 8 schools performance measure, which compares pupils' results at GCSE to those of other pupils with similar prior attainment, and is partly calculated using pupil attainment in EBacc subjects, most schools responded to fill the EBacc 'slots' of their pupils with low prior attainment by encouraging more entries in humanities and science subjects,

as opposed to languages. This may be encouraged by the fact that Progress 8 does not stipulate which EBacc subjects to use as a basis for calculating a pupil's progress.

To summarise, the EBacc language pillar stands in clear contrast with the other EBacc subjects, both in terms of trends in entry levels overall and in terms of a persistent gender gap. This language-entry gender gap persists when splitting cohorts by disadvantage and prior attainment, although the gaps are substantially narrower within prior attainment groups.

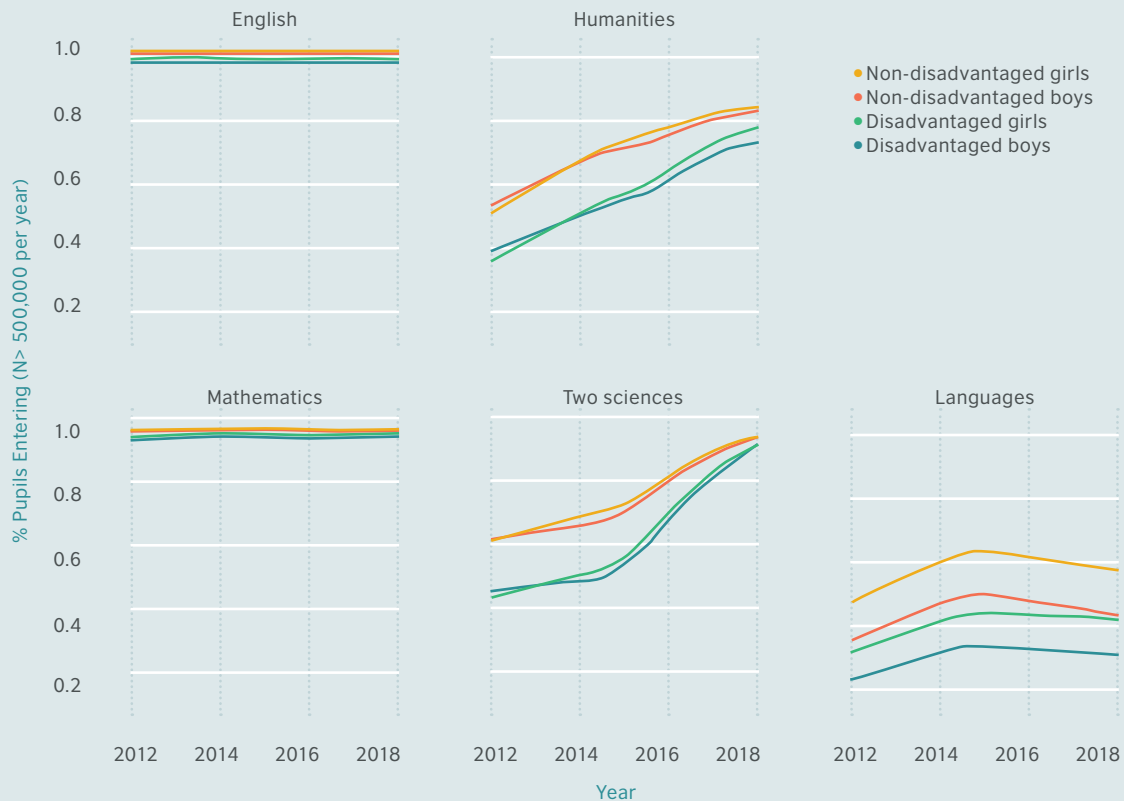
19. The EBacc was announced in September 2010, meaning that most schools were first able to respond to the changes with the cohort of pupils starting GCSEs in September 2011

Figure 2.1: Trends over time in EBacc subject entry, by gender, 2010/11-2017/18



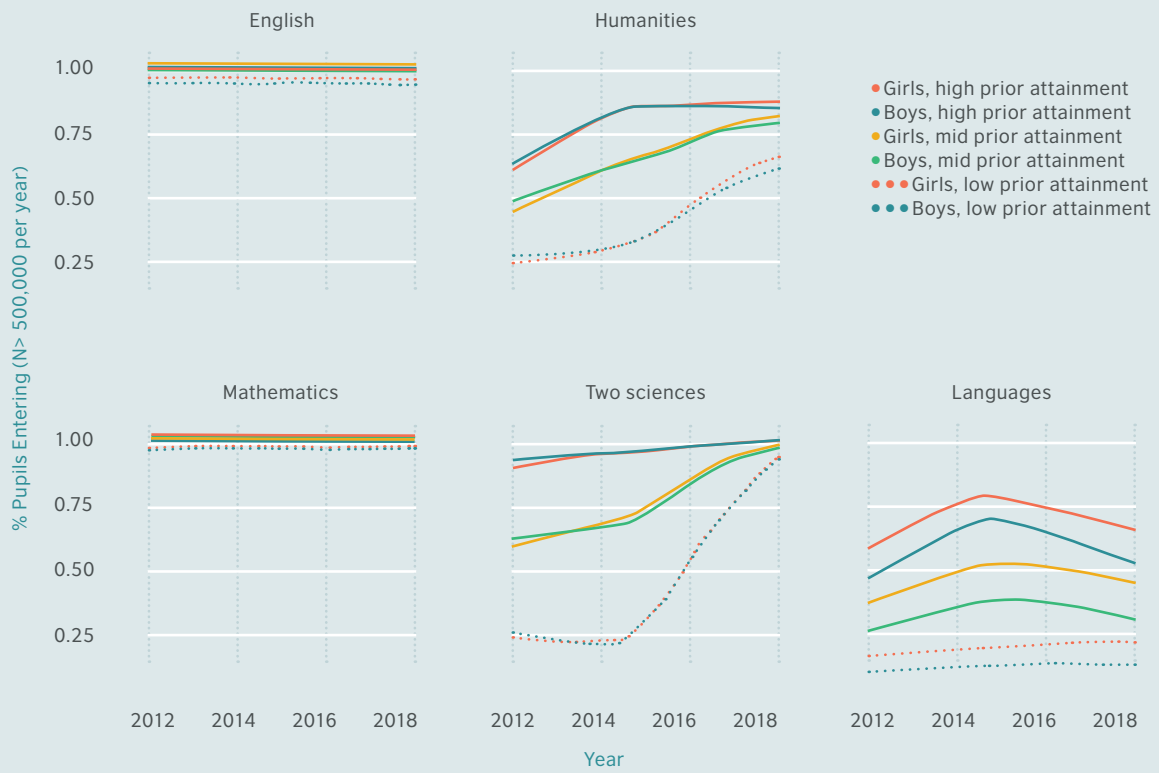
Source: National Pupil Database 2010/11-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 2.2: Trends over time in EBacc language entry, by gender and disadvantage, 2010/11-2017/18



Source: National Pupil Database 2010/11-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 2.3: Trends over time in EBacc language entry, by gender and prior attainment, 2010/11-2017/18



Source: National Pupil Database 2010/11-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

3: Schools, trusts and local authorities that are beating the odds in boys' language outcomes

Method and data

We aimed to identify schools or school groups that appeared to be beating the odds for boys' entry and attainment in GCSE language subjects. This section sets out our approach for identifying schools achieving better modern foreign language (MFL) entry and attainment levels than would be expected given their pupil intakes.

Modelling national data

The approach taken was to conduct a logistic regression analysis of whether an individual pupil entered one or more modern foreign language GCSEs or equivalent qualifications and achieved at least a grade 4 (or C prior to 2017/18) in one of these MFL subjects²⁰. An outcome that captured attainment as well as entry was preferred over capturing entry in isolation. This was to avoid capturing schools in which, potentially for accountability reasons, a high percentage of boys are entered for a language GCSE but only a small percentage of them achieve above a standard pass. Therefore the odds ratios indicate the likelihood of any pupil achieving above a 4 at language GCSE, and not only those who enter the subject.

A set of pupil and school characteristics were used as explanatory variables. We limited our explanatory variables to relatively 'fixed' characteristics that a school cannot intervene to change. Selective schools were excluded from the model.²¹

Figure 3.1 reports the odds ratios for each control variable.

Being male, being disadvantaged, or having identified special educational needs makes a pupil less likely, on average, to achieve a grade 4 or above in a modern foreign language GCSE. If a pupil is female, they are more than twice (2.17 times²²) as likely as a male pupil to achieve at least a grade 4 in a language GCSE.²³ This is a stronger predictor than whether or not the pupil is identified as disadvantaged in terms of their eligibility for free school meals. A pupil who is not identified as disadvantaged is 1.75 times as likely as a disadvantaged pupil to achieve a grade 4.

The strongest predictors of a pupil's attainment in a GCSE language are their prior attainment at KS2 (measured across a range of curriculum areas) and their IDACI score (derived from their home postcode). The higher the prior attainment of the pupil and the lower their neighbourhood's IDACI score (low = low percentage of families with income deprivation), the more likely they are to take an MFL subject and achieve at least a grade 4. The prior attainment and the IDACI score variables each have an odds ratio of above 4.50 (1/0.22 in the case of IDACI score). This odds ratio indicates how much higher a pupil's likelihood of achieving at least a grade 4 in a language GCSE can be expected to be relative to those pupils with lower prior attainment or those who live in less affluent neighbourhoods. For example, pupils are banded into three broad prior attainment groups, and a pupil in the middle or high attainment bands is on average 4.56 times as likely to achieve this language outcome than a pupil in the next lowest attainment band.

20. Note that the previous section focused on entry of the EBacc language pillar, whereas this section takes entry in one or more modern foreign language as its key measure. The two are slightly different, as classical languages like Latin, Greek and Ancient Hebrew are included in the EBacc measure, but not in the modern foreign languages measure. Entry in modern foreign languages is the preferred measure for identifying schools that are beating the odds because this puts a focus on foreign languages that are currently spoken and are more relevant to addressing the concerns of England's skills and relationships in today's globalised world.

21. This removes around 165 schools from each year of the dataset.

22. This is calculated by taking the reciprocal of the odds ratio reported in Figure 3.1 i.e. 1/0.46.

23. The Key Stage 4 assessment system has recently introduced new GCSEs, including a new 9 to 1 grading system. For some subjects (English language, English literature and mathematics), the new GCSEs began to be taught in September 2015, with the first results issued in August 2017. For other subjects, including

Figure 3.1: Odds ratios for logistic regression analysis predicting whether or not a pupil enters one or more modern foreign language GCSEs (or equivalent qualifications) and achieves at least a grade 4 (or C prior to 2017/18) in one of these qualifications

Note: Odds ratios range from zero to infinity and indicate the odds of an event occurring relative to the odds of another. In this case an odds ratio of 1 indicates that a pupil with a given characteristic (e.g. pupil is male) is equally likely to enter and achieve at least a grade 4 in a language subject compared to a pupil with the reference characteristic (e.g. pupil is female); greater than 1 indicates the pupil is more likely to enter and achieve at least a grade 4 than a pupil in the reference group; less than 1 means the pupil is less likely to have this outcome than a pupil in the reference group.

Predictor	Odds Ratios
Pupil is male	0.46
Pupil is disadvantaged	0.57
Pupil is classified as having special educational needs	0.42
IDACI score, from pupil's postcode (low score = low percentage of families with income deprivation) ²⁴	0.22
Pupil is in next higher prior attainment band (Three bands, ordered low, middle and high)	4.56
Pupil speaks English as an additional language	3.60
Pupil's postcode is in London	1.46
Pupil attends school in London	1.36

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools. Number of pupils > 2,000,000

Whether or not the pupil speaks English as an additional language is also an important predictor of GCSE language entry and attainment. If a pupil is recorded as speaking a language other than English as their first language, they are 3.60 times as likely as a pupil with English as a first language to achieve a grade 4. It should be noted that this analysis does not detect whether pupils with EAL are taking a GCSE in their home language. However, GCSEs only exist for nineteen languages out of many more that could be spoken at home by pupils with EAL and we have carried out additional analysis (page 19) to see schools that are beating the odds when restricting to subjects that are most commonly taught in schools – French, German, and Spanish.

Finally, pupils who live or attend school in London are slightly more likely to achieve a 4 or above in a language GCSE than those in other regions.

Using the model to predict language outcomes in schools

Using this model, it is then possible to predict any given pupil's propensity to enter and achieve at least a 4 in one or more MFL GCSE (or equivalent) subjects. It is then in turn possible to predict a school's level of MFL entry and attainment by taking an average of its pupils' estimated propensities. A school's predicted MFL outcomes can then be compared with its actual outcomes in a given year.

An advantage of this is that we can look at schools that are in challenging circumstances and that may not be performing highly in absolute terms, but who are nonetheless performing better than would be expected given the level of challenge. Equally, we avoid simply identifying schools that one might expect to be doing well in MFL, e.g. schools with pupils with high prior attainment or schools in affluent areas.

Identifying schools that are beating the odds

Having used the logistic regression model to create a predicted level of MFL entry for each school based on their pupil characteristics, we then applied several criteria to identify schools that were achieving better than expected levels for boys, or who were 'beating the odds.' These criteria were:

- the school's predicted MFL attainment for boys are below the national average MFL attainment for all pupils,
- the school exceeds its predicted attainment for (a) all boys and (b) disadvantaged boys by ten percentage points.

Schools with fewer than ten boys finishing Key Stage 4 were excluded from the all boys calculation (a), and schools with fewer than ten disadvantaged boys finishing Key Stage 4 were excluded from the disadvantaged boys calculation (b).²⁵ To ensure valid comparison, we also excluded all schools with fewer than ten girls finishing Key Stage 4 from the final report.

We also grouped schools under local authorities or MATs to analyse consistency within groups. Groups are allocated as at summer 2018, and only those with three or more schools are used in the final analysis.

24. The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) is part of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). It is an area-based measure defined at the level of Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) and was last collected in 2015. It takes the form of a score between 0 and 1, which can be interpreted as the proportion of families in the LSOA, with children aged under 16, who are income deprived.

25. For a summary of the number of schools excluded from the dataset each year, see the Technical Appendix.

Summary of schools and school groups beating the odds for boys' language outcomes

This section gives a summary of the number and characteristics of schools that our model identifies as beating the odds for boys' language entry and attainment.

Note that these schools do not represent those in which entry or attainment for boys in modern foreign languages are high in absolute terms. Nor do they necessarily represent the schools with a small or reversed gender gap. Rather, these are schools that were predicted by our model to have below national average entry and attainment in modern foreign language subjects for boys (based on the characteristics of the schools' pupil intakes), but that in fact achieved at least ten percentage points above their prediction both for boys overall and for just the disadvantaged group of boys, thereby beating the odds.

Figure 3.2 shows that the number of schools beating the odds for boys' language entry and attainment was consistently above 260 between 2013/14 and 2015/16, before dropping in the past two years. This recent drop is consistent with the fact that language entries have decreased overall in this time. To explain this point further, it should be underlined that the test for whether a school qualifies as an odds-beater is held fairly constant between each year included in this study. This stems from the fact that we predict schools' language entry and attainment based solely on the characteristics of their pupils, and the relationship between our selected set of pupil characteristics (gender, disadvantage etc.) and MFL outcomes remained fairly stable during the period of our study. In other words, a pupil's gender had a similar effect on their propensity to enter a language GCSE in 2013/14 as it did in 2017/18. It follows that, unless a school's intake varied drastically from year to year (which does happen), a school's predicted level of language entry and attainment would remain fairly consistent across each year. The drop in the number of schools beating the odds emerges as each year fewer schools exceed their prediction. This study cannot conclusively establish why fewer schools are exceeding their prediction, but it is likely linked to the factors discussed in the introduction relating to changes in school accountability, attitudes towards language study and the difficulty of the qualification.

Figure 3.2: Number of schools beating the odds in each year between 2013/14 and 2017/18

Year	Number of schools beating the odds	Total schools in dataset
2013/14	275	2,284
2014/15	263	2,301
2015/16	267	2,278
2016/17	118	2,249
2017/18	75	2,253

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

As at 2017/18, 574 schools were open that had met our criteria for beating the odds in at least one year in the past five years. More than half of these only did so in one year out of five. Figure 3.3 provides a breakdown of how many of the past five years schools have met the criteria. Eleven schools met the criteria for beating the odds in all five years. Six of these eleven are located in the North West.

Figure 3.3: Number of years individual schools have beaten the odds 2013/14-2017/18

Number of years beating the odds	Number of schools
1	323
2	134
3	78
4	28
5	11
Total	574

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18)

This section gives a summary of the 37 schools that beat the odds in 2017/18 and have done so in at least two of the four preceding years. This creates a group of schools that have beaten the odds in three or more of the past five years up to and including 2017/18.

The group is summarised in terms of region and school group type. We then examine the distribution of various pupil characteristics among this group in comparison with schools that did not beat the odds for language outcomes. Specifically, we look at these schools' gender gaps in MFL outcomes, as well as their distribution of pupils with English as an additional language, pupils who are disadvantaged, and pupils with different levels of prior attainment. This exploration is intended to provide potential explanations for why these particular schools are exceeding their predicted level of language entry and attainment for boys. Breakdowns by urban/rural classification, religious character and Ofsted rating are also provided.

Figure 3.4: Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18), by region

Region	Number of schools
East Midlands	4
East of England	4
London	2
North East	4
North West	12
South East	4
West Midlands	4
Yorkshire and the Humber	3
Total	37

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.4 gives a count of the schools by region. The numbers are too small to make definitive statements about how the schools are distributed nationally, but the North West is notably overrepresented.

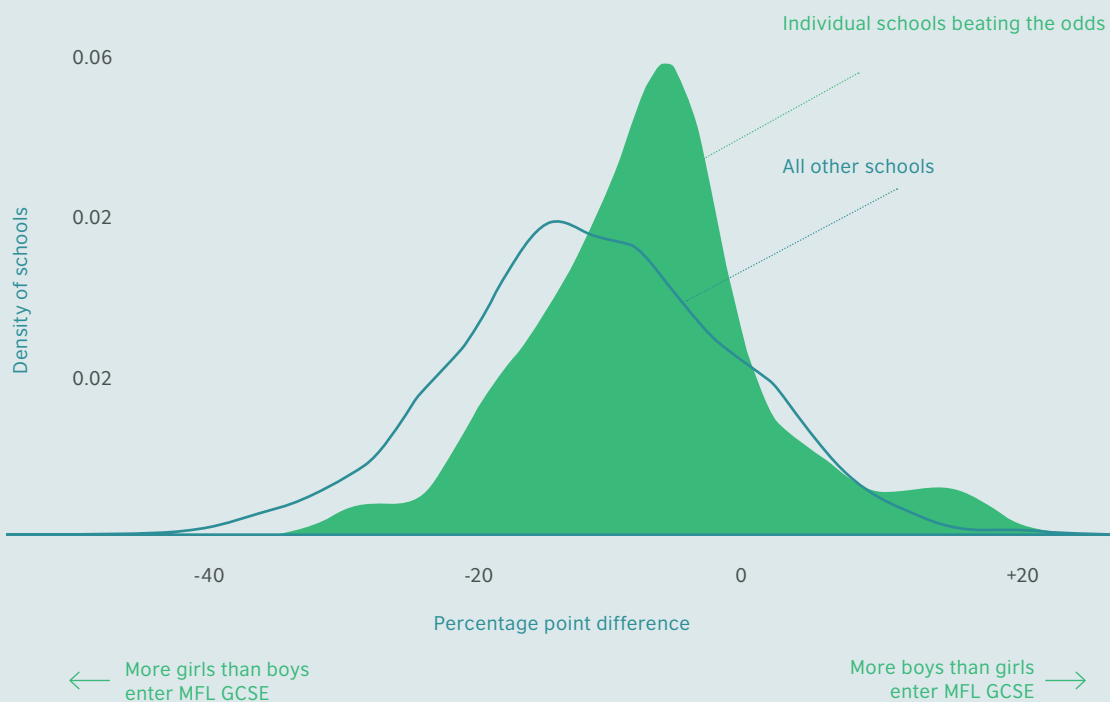
Figure 3.5: Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18), by school group type

School Group Type	Number of schools
Local Authority	13
Multi-Academy Trust	20
Single-Academy Trust	4
Total	37

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

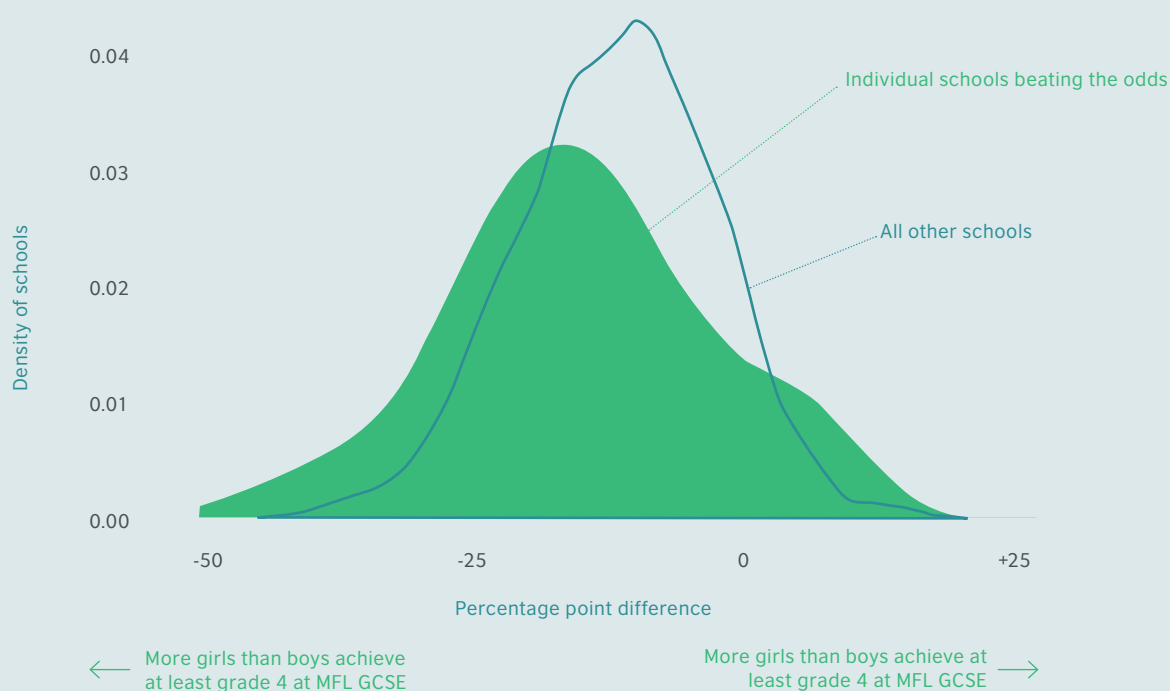
Figure 3.5 reports a breakdown of this subset by school group type. We find that just over half of these schools (20 of 37) belong to multi-academy trusts, with a further four belonging to single-academy trusts. There is one MAT and two LAs where more than one of their schools have beaten the odds for three years including in 2017/18. The MAT is ARK schools. The LAs are Manchester and Salford. While academies are slightly more likely to beat the odds in comparison with local authority schools, this is in line with national proportions for all mainstream maintained schools, and is not an indication that the type of school governance is linked with likelihood of beating the odds. It should be noted that seventeen of the 24 schools that sit under these trusts (70 per cent) are academy converters, which by definition are schools that were permitted to convert on the strength of good results.

Figure 3.6: School-level gender gaps, difference in percentage of pupils entering one or more modern foreign language GCSE (or equivalent) (boys minus girls), Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n=37), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,959)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.7: School-level gender gaps, difference in percentage of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in one or more modern foreign language GCSE (or equivalent) (boys minus girls), Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n = 37), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,959)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

The following figures (Figures 3.6-3.11) are shown in density plots, which visualise the distribution of a given variable across a group and allow comparison with that of another group. The peaks indicate the highest concentration of points. The number of schools included in each group for each figure varies where schools have been excluded due to counts of pupils associated with certain characteristics being lower than ten.

Figures 3.6 and 3.7 examine how the gender gaps for MFL outcomes in the 37 individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,959).²⁶ Figure 3.6 shows the difference in MFL entry levels between boys and girls. Figure 3.7 depicts the difference between boys and girls in terms of average attainment levels.

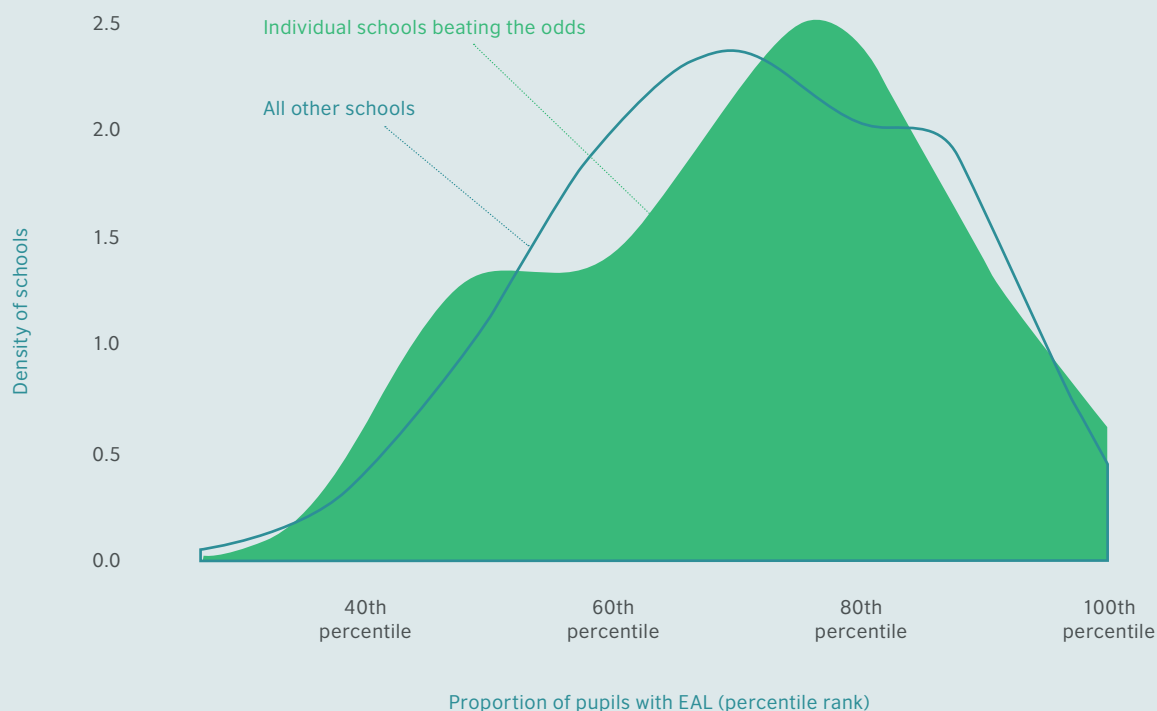
Both figures demonstrate that overall girls tend to have higher levels of entry and attainment in MFL subjects than boys. The two figures show quite different trends in comparison with other schools, however. The subset of odds-beating schools has an average gender gap that is closer to zero for entry in comparison with other schools. However, the gender gap for attainment in the subset schools appears to be even wider than it does for the comparison group of schools.

Overall, it is clear from Figures 3.6 and 3.7 that individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) do not all have negligible or reversed gender gaps. On the contrary, a school that manages to beat their odds for boys may have even stronger entry levels for girls, making for wider within-school gender gaps than in other schools. The difference between entry and attainment trends suggests that the factors encouraging boys to enter language GCSEs may not be the same as those determining their attainment.

Figure 3.8 compares the subset of individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) with all other schools in 2017/18 in terms of the percentage of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) finishing KS4. Schools are assigned a national percentile rank for the percentage of their pupils finishing KS4 with EAL. We find that overall there is little difference between the distribution of EAL levels in odds-beating schools and that of the comparison group.

26. Note that schools were excluded from the comparison group if they were EPI-predicted to have a level of MFL attainment for boys that exceeded the national average for all pupils, as this would make it impossible for them to meet the criteria of schools beating the odds.

Figure 3.8: Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n = 28), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 827) – by proportion of pupils with EAL (percentile rank)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

For this group of individual schools beating the odds, we conducted supplementary analysis to calculate the number of boys entered in 'core' language subjects that have traditionally been taught at GCSE in schools in England (French, German and Spanish), and separate 'other' language subjects (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, Gujarati, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish and Urdu). The purpose of this was to estimate to what extent these schools may have been identified as odds-beaters due to boys on their roll entering GCSEs in languages that were taught in the school, and to what extent boys were entering GCSEs in languages that may not have been taught in the school but ones they have had experience of at home or in other learning environments, e.g. a national community Saturday school. We find that only six schools of this group of 37 had more than ten boys entered in a language other than the traditional French, German or Spanish GCSE subjects. These languages were Italian, Polish, Turkish, Urdu and Chinese. No school entered more of its pupils in 'other' language subjects than in French, German or Spanish. Given that this analysis did not include access to the School Workforce Census, it is not known whether or not these schools were teaching these languages as part of their normal timetable.

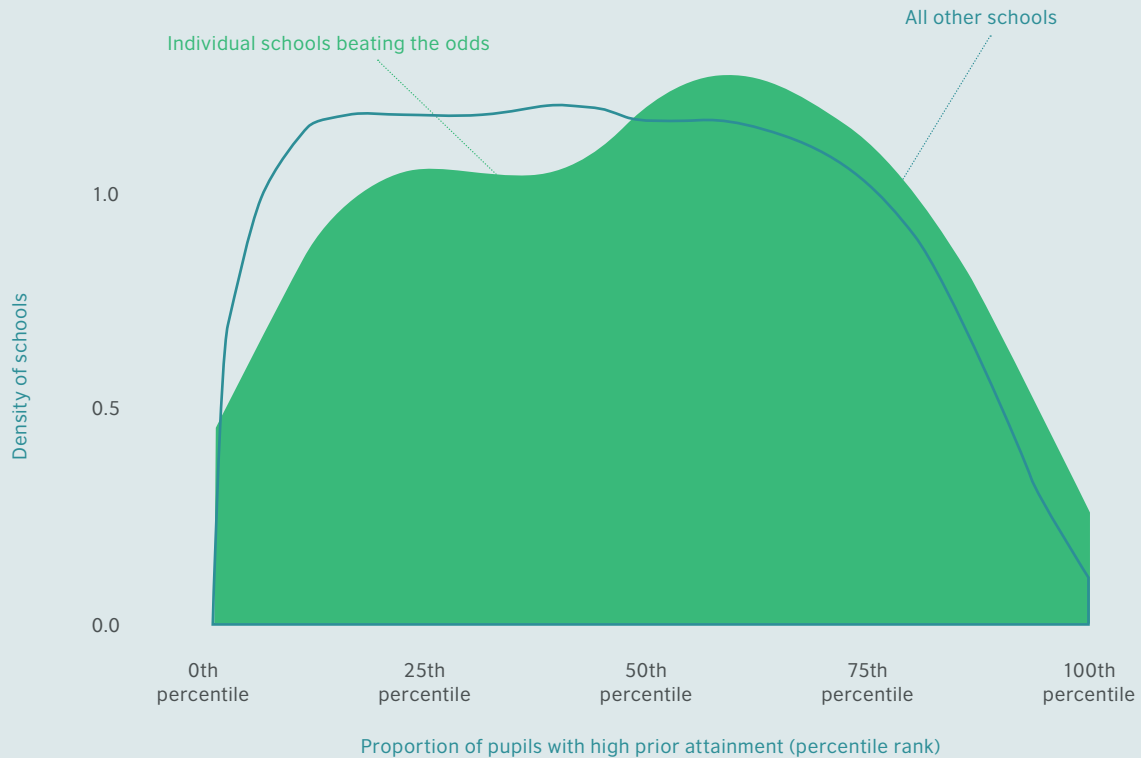
Figure 3.9 repeats the same comparison as for Figure 3.8, but this time for percentage levels of disadvantaged pupils finishing KS4, assigned as national percentile rank. Unlike EAL, a pupil being identified as disadvantaged means they are less likely, on average, to enter and achieve at least a 4 in a language GCSE subject. Nevertheless, individual schools beating the odds (including 2017/18) appear to have slightly higher than average levels of disadvantage than schools in the comparison group, but there is also a peak around below-median levels of disadvantage. The finding that some schools that are beating the odds have higher than average levels of disadvantage can be interpreted as consistent with previous EPI research which has found that the progress gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is closing fastest in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantaged pupils.²⁷

Figure 3.9: Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18 (n = 37), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,915) – by level of disadvantage (percentile rank)



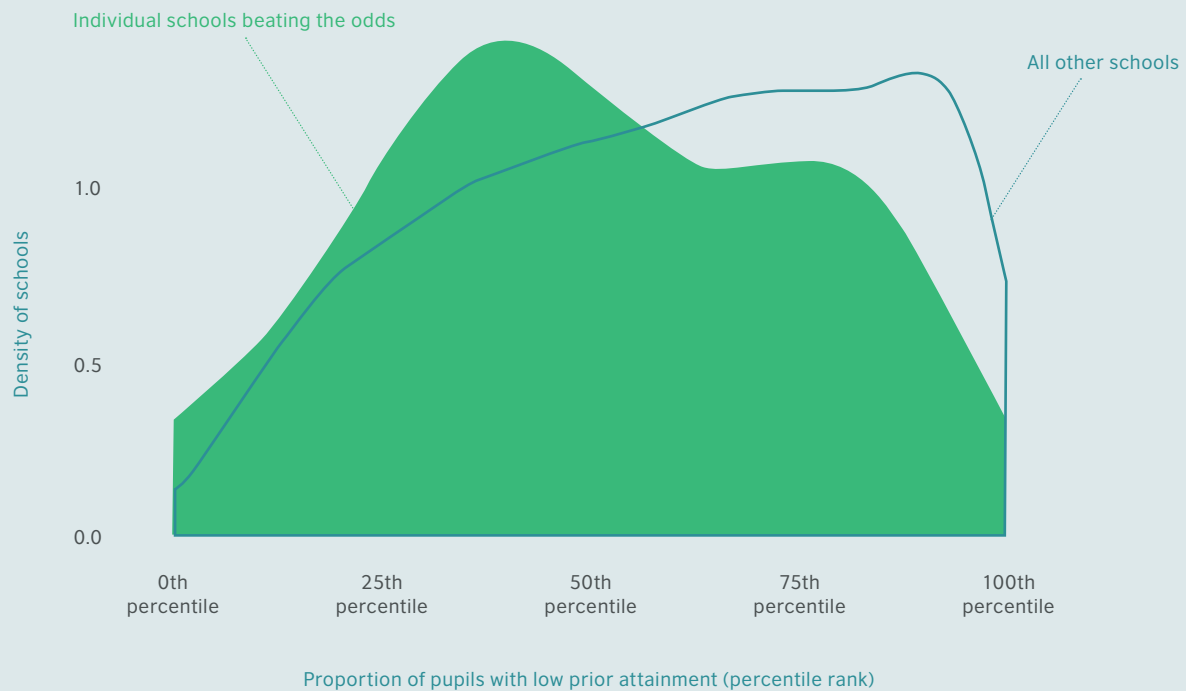
Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.10: Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n = 37), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,920) – by proportion of high prior attainers (percentile rank)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.11: Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n = 34), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 2,139) – by proportion of low prior attainers (percentile rank)



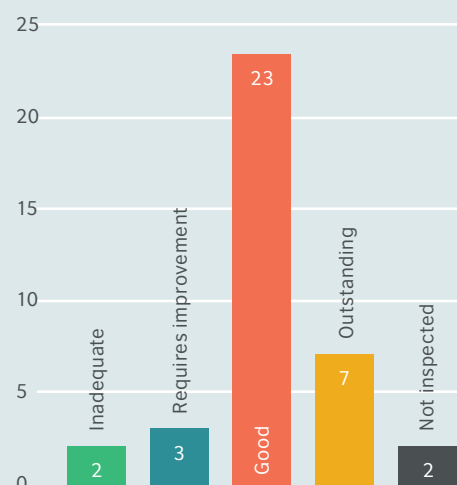
Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figures 3.10 and 3.11 illustrate the distribution of low and high prior attainers across the subset of 37 schools and the comparison group. Despite the model controlling for level of prior attainment among the pupil population finishing KS4, it appears that the pupils in the subset schools have a slightly higher level of prior attainment than average. In particular, it appears that the odds-beating schools have notably lower than average levels of pupils with low prior attainment. From section 2 and from the odds ratios presented in Figure 3.1 it was seen that prior attainment is a strong predictor of language attainment. Schools with more high prior attainers and fewer low prior attainers could be expected therefore to have stronger language outcomes, and this pupil attainment profile could be part of the explanation for why these schools appear to be beating the odds.

Notwithstanding the differences between the two groups, there is still considerable overlap illustrated across all figures presented in this section. Indeed, a quarter of these individual odds-beating schools have large numbers of low prior attainers.²⁸

The majority of the schools in this subset are Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding, though five are rated Requires Improvement or even Inadequate (Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.12: Ofsted rating, Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n = 37)

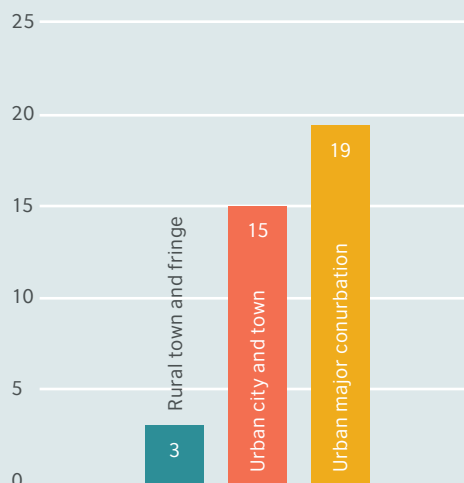


Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools; Get information about schools July 2019, DfE

28. Above seventeen per cent, which is around the 75th percentile nationally.

Three of the schools in this subset are located in rural settings, with the remaining majority located in urban areas (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13: Urban/rural classification, Individual schools beating the odds (including in 2017/18) (n = 37)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools; Get information about schools July 2019, DfE

Thirteen of the 37 schools (35 per cent) have a religious designation, all of them Christian, Church of England or Roman Catholic denomination. Such schools are overrepresented in this group, as the proportion of secondary schools in England that have a religious designation is less than 20 per cent.

The MATs and LAs consistently beating the odds

The sub-section above addressed individual schools that are currently beating the odds for boys' language entry and attainment. This sub-section turns to school groups – specifically multi-academy trusts (MATs) and local authorities (LAs). It provides a summary of groups that appear to have performed well against our criteria in the past five years.

To identify specific MATs and LAs that are consistently beating the odds, we looked for school groups where more than half of their schools (as at 2017/18) were identified as beating the odds for boys' language entry and attainment at any point in the last five years. School groups with fewer than three secondary schools were excluded from this analysis. This is because the aim is to identify school groups that are achieving consistency across their group.²⁹

Sixteen school groups (nine MATs and seven LAs) demonstrate consistency for achieving higher language entry and attainment for boys than their pupil profiles might predict, where more than half of their schools (allocated as at 2017/18) were identified as beating the odds for boys' language entry and attainment at any point in the last five years. Eighteen of the 42 schools that sit under these MATs (43 per cent) are academy converters, which were generally permitted to convert on the strength of good results. 21 of the 42 (50 per cent) are sponsored academies, and the remaining three are free schools.

There are only two school groups (one MAT and one LA) where all schools have beaten the odds for boys' language entry and attainment at least once in the last five years. The local authority is Halton, and the trust is Wade Deacon Trust. These are both located in the North West.

In terms of number of schools, the largest local authority identified as consistently beating the odds is Bury, located in the North West, where nine of twelve (75 per cent) schools have beaten the odds at least once in the last five years. The largest MAT identified as consistently beating the odds is ARK, where nine of sixteen (56 per cent) schools have beaten the odds at least once in the last five years.

Again, the North West is overrepresented in this group, with 42 of the 82 individual schools (51 per cent) that make up these sixteen MATs and LAs.

29. We have not accounted for schools moving between trusts or for schools moving from local authority control to being supported by a trust. This means that the outcomes of an individual school cannot be attributed to its governance. We have grouped schools as at summer 2018, the point at which we have the latest set of complete data, in order to identify existing school networks that have demonstrated capacity to beat the odds in boys' language outcomes.

Figure 3.14: School groups beating the odds

Group Type	Group Name	N secondary schools in group (as at summer 2018)	% secondary schools in group beating the odds in one of the last five years (2013/14-2017/18)
LA	Halton	3	100%
MAT	Wade Deacon Trust	4	100%
LA	Manchester	7	86%
LA	Bury	12	75%
MAT	Our Lady Of Lourdes Catholic Multi-Academy Trust	4	75%
MAT	The Howard Partnership Trust	4	75%
MAT	The Spencer Academies Trust	4	75%
MAT	Excalibur Academies Trust	3	67%
LA	Islington	3	67%
MAT	Parkside Federation Academies	3	67%
MAT	The Cardinal Hume Academies Trust	3	67%
LA	Liverpool	8	63%
LA	Cheshire West And Chester	10	60%
MAT	Greenwood Academies Trust	7	57%
LA	St. Helens	7	57%
MAT	ARK Schools	16	56%

Source: National Pupil Database 2013/14-2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools; additional information from Get information about schools, DfE. Note that only secondary schools with at least ten disadvantaged boys and ten girls are included.

It is notable that eight of the nine MATs in this group also operate primary schools. Given emerging research highlighting the importance of a smooth transition between the primary and secondary phases for MFL teaching, one could hypothesise that these MATs have felt a benefit of being mixed phase in this respect. The survey report in Part 2 of this publication included questions on the role of languages in primary schools.³⁰

The following figures (Figures 3.15-3.20) present similar density plots to Figures 3.6-3.11, and visualise the distribution of certain pupil characteristics among the schools belonging to the consistently odds-beating school groups identified in this section (taking only schools open as at 2017/18, $n = 82$), in comparison with other schools that did not beat the odds ($n=1,935$).³¹ Note that not all of the schools included under the odds-beating school groups are individual odds-beaters in their own right, rather they are part of a group that has been identified as consistent overall. In addition, note that the number of schools included in each group under each figure varies where school measures are suppressed due to insufficient pupil numbers.

Figure 3.15 depicts gender gaps in MFL GCSE entry in the schools belonging to our sixteen identified consistent school groups, compared with other schools in 2017/18. The distributions largely overlap, showing that, for both groups, more girls on average enter at least one MFL GCSE (or equivalent) than boys. Figure 3.16 shows the distributions for the gender gaps in attainment in MFL, and shows that for both groups girls tend to outperform boys, but that gender gaps are on average wider in the subset of schools belonging to consistent school groups than for other schools that did not qualify as beating the odds in 2017/18.

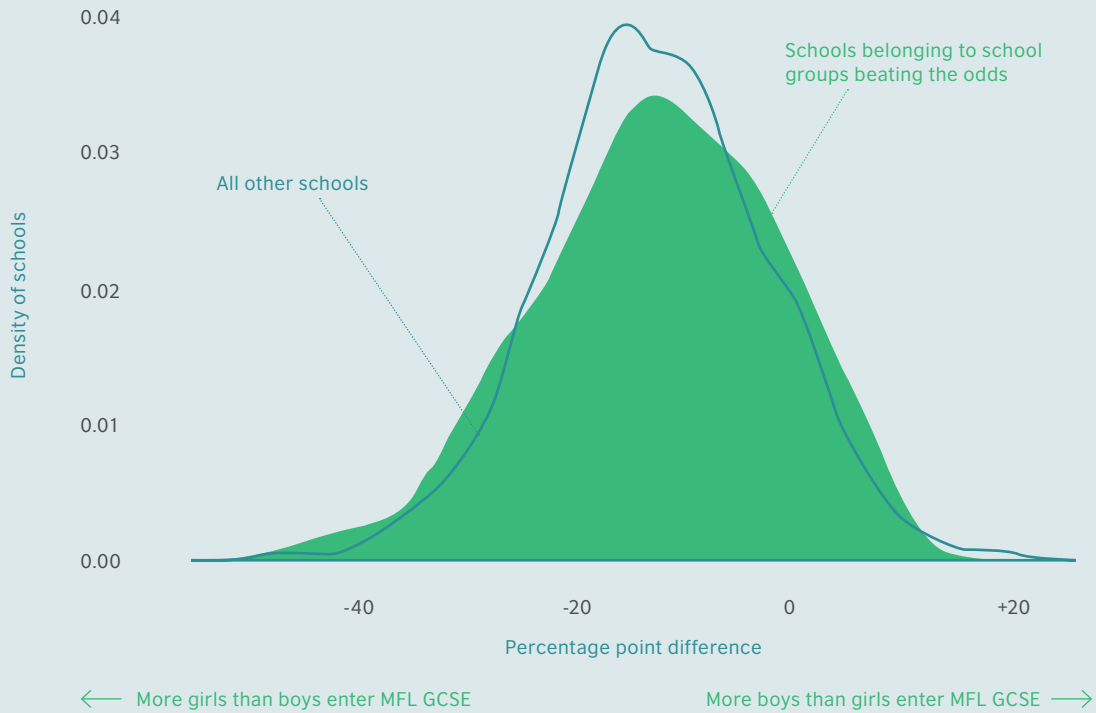
As with Figures 3.6 and 3.7, Figures 3.15 and 3.16 imply that schools that achieve better than would be predicted language entry and attainment for boys may still have persistent or even wider gender gaps than other schools. Equally, it seems that factors influencing boys' entry in languages are not the same as those influencing their attainment.

Figure 3.17 turns to the distribution of the percentage of pupils with EAL finishing KS4, assigned by national percentile rank. Here it can be observed that most schools belonging to consistent school groups have higher than average levels of EAL.

30. Louise Courtney, 'Transition in modern foreign languages: a longitudinal study of motivation for language learning and second language proficiency', *Oxford Review of Education* 43, no. 4 (July 2017): 462-481, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2017.1329721>.

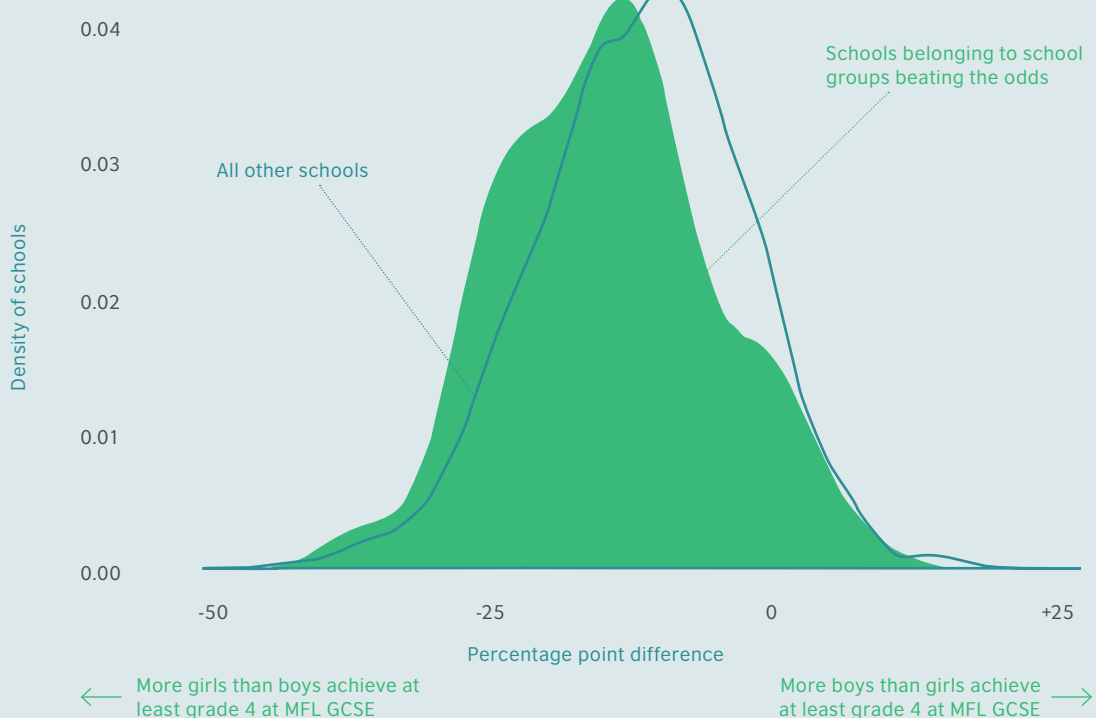
31. Note that schools were excluded from the comparison group if they were EPI-predicted to have a level of MFL attainment for boys that exceeded the national average for all pupils, as this would make it impossible for them to meet the criteria of schools beating the odds.

Figure 3.15: School-level gender gaps, difference in percentage of pupils entering one or more modern foreign language GCSE (or equivalent) (boys minus girls), schools belonging to sixteen consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 82), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,935)



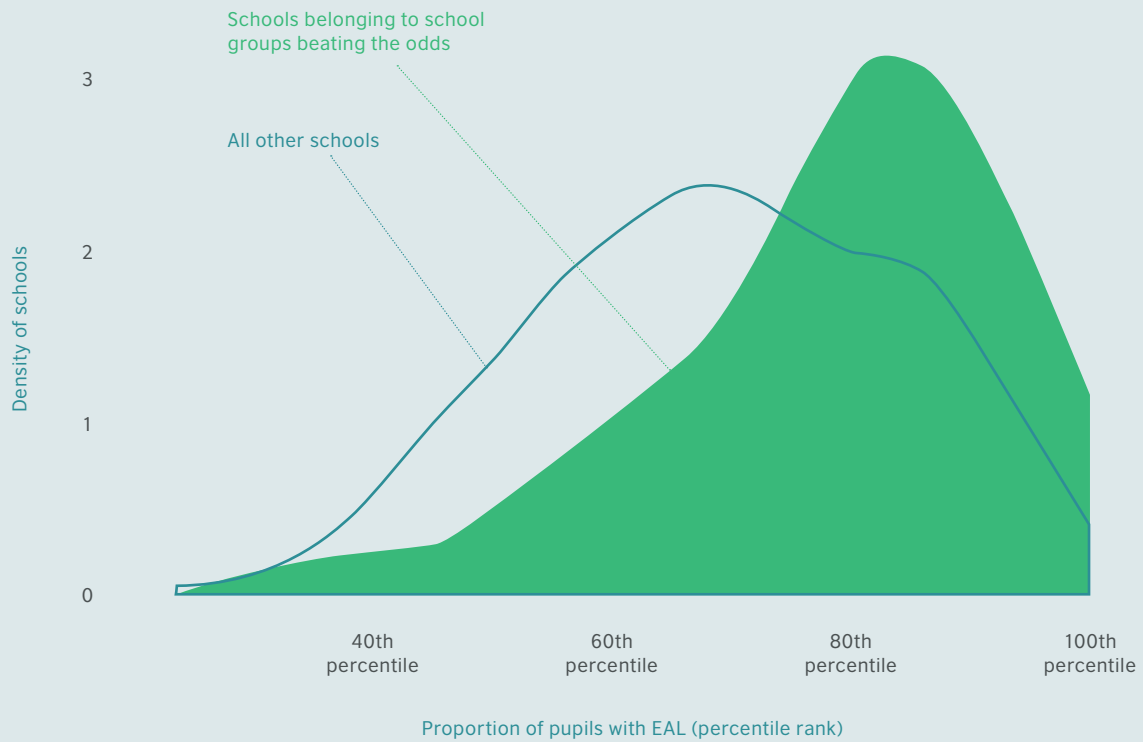
Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.16: School-level gender gaps, difference in percentage of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in one or more modern foreign language GCSE (or equivalent) (boys minus girls), schools belonging to sixteen consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 55), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,935)



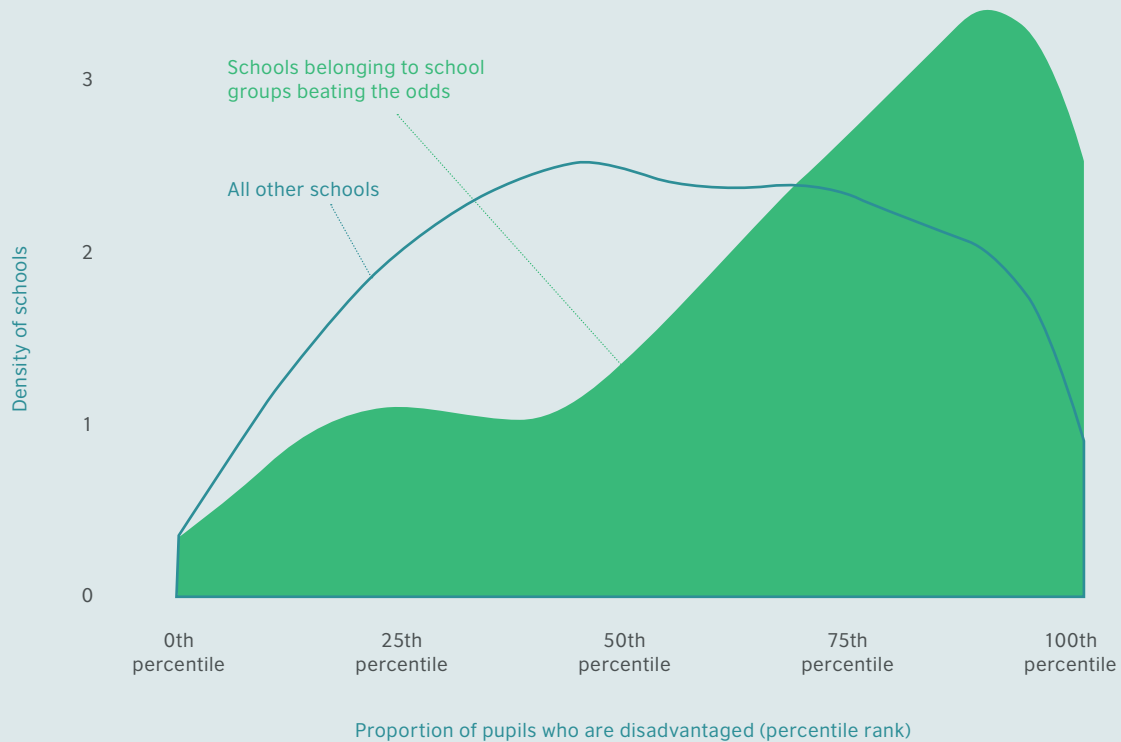
Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.17: Schools belonging to sixteen consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 55), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 819) – by EAL



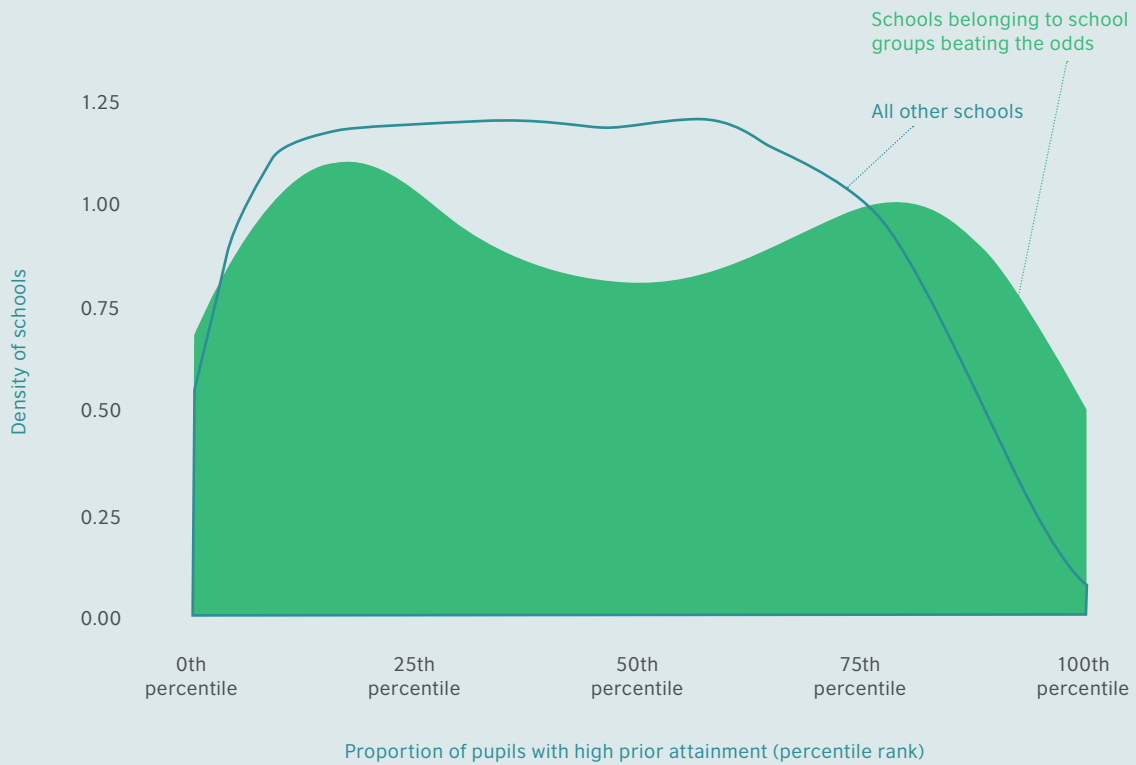
Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.18: Schools belonging to sixteen consistent school groups open at 2017/18 n = 55 compared with all other schools in 2017/18, n = 1,891 – by disadvantage



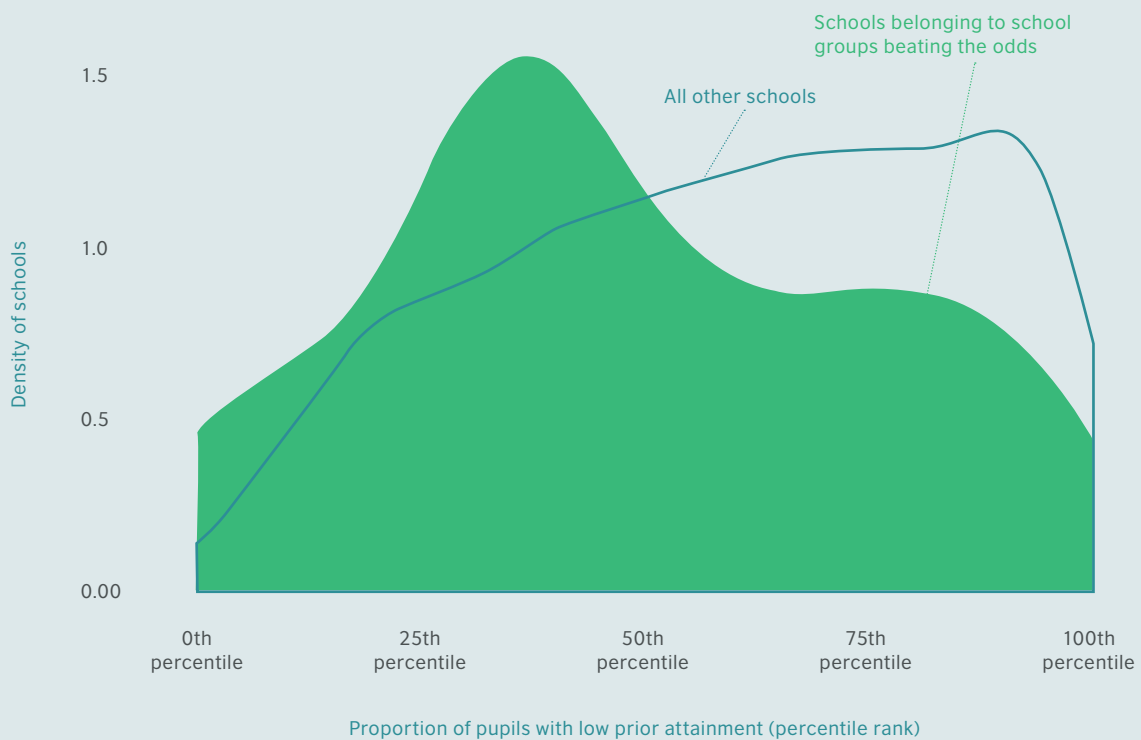
Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.19: Schools belonging to sixteen consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 82), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,896) – by proportion of high prior attainers



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

Figure 3.20: Schools belonging to sixteen consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 73), compared with all other schools in 2017/18 (n = 1,755) – by proportion of low prior attainers



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools

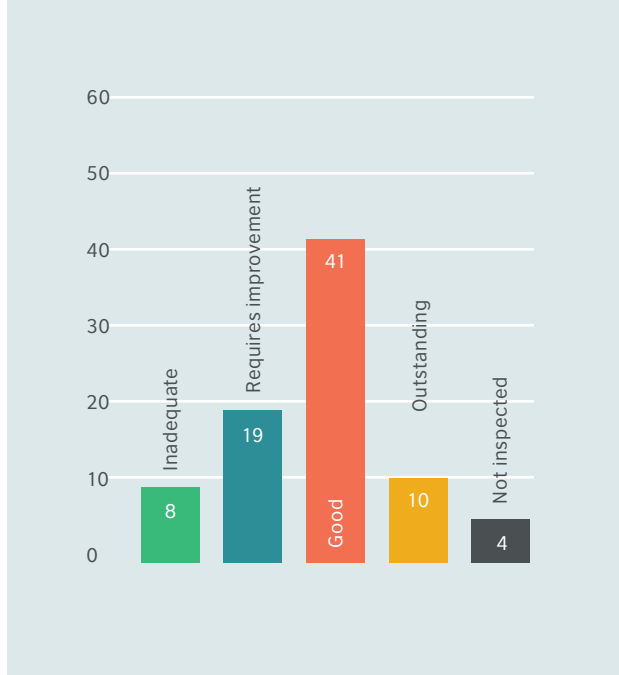
For the distribution of levels of disadvantage, Figure 3.18 shows that the schools belonging to the consistent school groups are more likely to have higher levels of disadvantage. This is in contrast with a more even spread among the comparator group. This echoes the overall patterns found in Figure 3.9.

Figures 3.19 and 3.20 find that the schools belonging to the consistent school groups have higher than average prior attainment, having both greater numbers of high prior attainers and lower numbers of low prior attainers compared with other schools. As seen in Figures 3.10 and 3.11, this was also the finding for individual schools beating the odds.

Schools belonging to consistent school groups have similar pupil intakes to those of individual schools beating the odds in terms of disadvantage and prior attainment. While individual schools beating the odds had no discernibly different level of pupils with EAL in comparison with other schools, it appears that schools belonging to school groups beating the odds have higher than average levels of EAL in comparison with other schools.

Most of the schools governed by the consistent school groups are Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding, though a third (27 out of 82) are rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate (Figure 3.21). Note that not all of the 82 schools qualified as beating the odds in 2017/18, rather they are part of school groups that have been identified as consistent. Only one school in each of the Inadequate and Requires Improvement categories beat the odds in 2017/18.

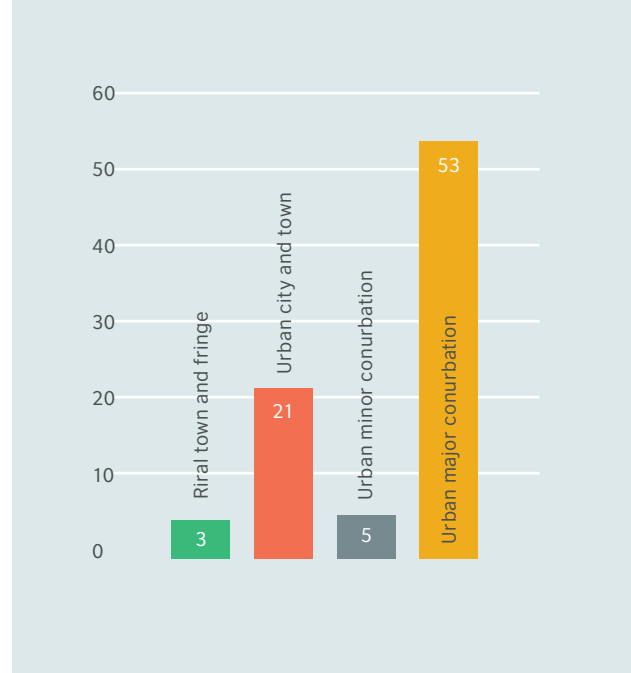
Figure 3.21: Ofsted rating, schools belonging to consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 82)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools; Get information about schools July 2019, DfE

All but three of the schools in this subset are in urban settings, with the other three being in areas classified as ‘rural town and fringe’ (Figure 3.22).

Figure 3.22: Urban/rural classification, schools belonging to consistent school groups open at 2017/18 (n = 82)



Source: National Pupil Database 2017/18, DfE, mainstream state-funded schools; Get information about schools July 2019, DfE

26 of the 82 schools (32 per cent) are schools with a religious designation. All of them are of Christian, Church of England, Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic denomination. Schools of religious designation are overrepresented in this subset of odds-beaters, given that the proportion of such secondary schools in England is less than 20 per cent.

4: Conclusion

The introduction of Progress 8 and the English Baccalaureate has prompted a shift in the subjects that pupils study at GCSE. These performance measures introduced new incentives for schools, particularly regarding the subjects they encourage their middle and high prior attaining pupils to take. Languages contrast with other EBacc subjects with other EBacc subjects in that entry levels are steadily falling and there is a clear and persistent gender gap both in terms of entry and attainment. This report brings to light those trends, explores the key predictors of achieving a ‘standard’ pass in an MFL GCSE, and identifies the schools and school groups that are achieving better than would be expected outcomes for boys.

Overall, a small proportion of schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities are consistently achieving better language outcomes for boys than was predicted by our model based on the characteristics of their pupils finishing KS4. The North West is strongly represented among both the individual schools and the school groups that are beating the odds for boys’ language outcomes, and this warrants further investigation. The 37 schools that met our criteria for beating the odds in both 2017/18 and in two of the previous four years do not necessarily have narrower gender gaps, even if they have stronger outcomes for boys than might be expected.

The slow decline of languages, coupled with the gender gap evidenced in this report, raises questions around how likely it is that schools can reach the DfE’s stated ambition of 75 per cent EBacc entry. What is more, the fact that Russell Group universities have recently distanced themselves from the concept of ‘facilitating subjects’, commenting that it has sometimes been “misinterpreted” as suggesting that “every student entering a Russell Group university

must have studied at least one of these subjects”.³² The Russell Group now provides guidance on student subject choice via its Informed Choices website. Whilst the move has been interpreted by some as a challenge to the continuing relevance of the EBacc, the DfE has stated that the new approach to subject choice guidance does not detract from the importance of EBacc subjects.³³

The DfE has recently introduced a range of measures to improve language take-up across the whole student body at GCSE. These measures include a £4.8 million investment to create a network of nine MFL hubs to be led by a new centre for excellence at the University of York, funding for foreign exchange trips targeted at schools with above average levels of disadvantage, and support for Mandarin teaching.^{34,35} Language provision was made compulsory for primary schools in 2014. In November 2019 Ofqual published a decision to align French and German GCSE grading with Spanish, having concluded that French and German are severely graded in comparison to GCSEs in other subjects. While these policies may prove effective there is little current evidence that they will tackle the gender gap.

Recommendations

- More study is needed on the benefits of language study for young people in the UK. **Particular focus of further research should be given to the potential cross-curricular benefits of language learning, and its role in improving literacy and numeracy.**
- In light of the likelihood of a missed 2022 target for 75% of pupils to be studying the EBacc, **government should clarify its position on the persisting gender gap within modern foreign languages, and whether it intends to address it.** Initiatives to improve gender balance have been funded by DfE in a number of subjects - typically those where girls are underrepresented. While the underrepresentation of girls across certain subjects (and subsequently certain job sectors) arguably feeds into different and wider issues in society than the underrepresentation of boys in certain subjects, government must clarify its position on subjects

32. ‘Importance of Subject Choice’, The Russell Group, accessed 19 July 2019, <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/news/importance-of-subject-choice/>.

33. Freddie Whittaker, ‘Ministers Face Three Inconvenient Truths about the EBacc’, Schools Week, 24 May 2019, <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-three-inconvenient-truths-about-the-ebacc/>.

34. Department for Education, 19th January 2019, ‘£2.5 million to boost international exchanges for schools’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/25-million-to-boost-international-exchanges-for-schools>.

35. Department for Education, 10th January 2019, ‘New centre for excellence to boost modern foreign language skills’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-centre-for-excellence-to-boost-modern-foreign-language-skills>.

where boys are underrepresented.

- **Ofqual should act on its findings to address the difficulty of MFL assessment at GCSE to enable more inclusive language learning for all abilities.**

In addition to the gender gap, languages are the only EBacc component where the entry gap has persisted between pupils with low prior attainment and higher prior attaining peers. The findings from the survey reported in Part 2 indicate there can be overlap between inclusive language learning for all abilities and improved take-up for boys. This may be addressed by Ofqual's decision to adjust grading in GCSE French and German, and the impact of this intervention should be monitored to assess whether uptake improves for pupils with low prior attainment and whether there is evidence to support extending this intervention to other language subjects.



Technical Appendix

The analysis used longitudinal data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) and the school census. These are statutory data collections for all maintained schools and academies in England, collected by the Department for Education. We also matched school-level data from the DfE's 'Get information about schools' register (formerly Edubase). We excluded selective schools from the logistic regression model.

The approach taken was to conduct a logistic regression analysis of whether an individual pupil entered one or more modern foreign language GCSEs or equivalent qualifications and achieved at least a grade 4 (or C prior to 2017/18) in one of these MFL subjects. An outcome that captured attainment as well as entry was preferred over capturing entry in isolation. This was to avoid capturing schools where, potentially for accountability reasons, a high percentage of boys are entered for a language GCSE but only a small percentage achieve above a standard pass. Therefore the odds ratios indicate the likelihood of any pupil achieving above a 4 at language GCSE, and not only those who enter the subject.

Note that section 2 focuses on entry of the EBacc language pillar, whereas this section takes entry in one or more modern foreign language as its key measure. The two are slightly different, as classical languages like Latin, Greek and Ancient Hebrew are included in the EBacc measure, but not in the modern foreign languages measure. Entry in modern foreign languages is the preferred measure for identifying schools that are beating the odds because this puts a focus on foreign languages that are currently spoken and are more relevant to addressing the concerns of England's skills and relationships in today's globalised world.

The languages included under the category of modern foreign languages are (as at 2018): French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, Gujarati, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Turkish and Urdu.³⁶

A set of pupil and school characteristics were used as explanatory variables. We limited our explanatory variables to relatively 'fixed' characteristics that a

school cannot intervene to change.

The control variables were:

- Pupil gender, coded as binary between male and female pupils
- Pupil disadvantage, where a pupil is identified as disadvantaged if they have been known to be eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years, have ever been under local authority care or are a service child
- Pupil special educational need, coded as binary between pupils with and without an identified special educational need
- IDACI score derived from pupil's postcode
- Pupil prior attainment band, using bands provided in NPD derived from SATs scores
- Pupil first language, coded as binary between pupils with and without English as an additional language
- Whether or not the pupil lives in London, derived from the pupil's postcode
- Whether or not the school attended is located in London, derived from the school's postcode

These explanatory variables were tested in a number of combinations separately for each year between 2012/13 and 2017/18. Inspecting the stability of coefficients over time and comparing Cox and Snell's R-statistic for each model tested, the final model combines data from years 2013/14 to 2017/18 and all explanatory variables listed above. The R-stat for the final model is 0.233. The interpretation for the R-stat is similar to that of R². The intercept in this model is 0.03.

In identifying schools that beat the odds for all boys overall, we excluded schools with fewer than ten boys finishing KS4. Likewise, we also excluded schools with fewer than ten disadvantaged boys finishing KS4 when identifying schools that beat the odds for disadvantaged boys.

36. Source: 2018 Revised Subject Tables, Key stage 4 and multi-academy trust performance 2018 (revised)

Count of schools excluded from dataset each year due to counts of boys (all or disadvantaged) being less than ten

Year	N schools excluded, number of boys finishing KS4 is less than ten	N schools excluded, number of disadvantaged boys finishing KS4 is less than ten
2013/14	29	321
2014/15	63	351
2015/16	73	414
2016/17	56	470
2017/18	23	484

Note on the North West

The predominance of schools located in the North West that appear in both subsets is striking. Twelve of the 37 individual odds-beating schools are located in the North West, and 42 of the 82 schools governed by the sixteen consistently odds-beating school groups are located in the North West. The numbers are too disproportionate to have occurred by chance.

Of the twelve individual North West schools in the list of individual odds-beaters, only one school has more than ten boys entered for what would be classed as an 'other' language (that is, a language subject that is not typically taught in schools in England). In this case the language is Urdu. This means it is not certain that these schools' language results are bolstered by entering pupils into GCSEs in language subjects that are not likely to be taught as part of the school's curriculum.

Data disclaimer

This publication includes analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-pupil-database>

The Department for Education is responsible for the collation and management of the NPD and is the Data Controller of NPD data. Any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD in this publication are the responsibility of the Education Policy Institute and not the Department for Education.

This publication also draws on statistical data from ONS. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

Part 2. What makes an odds-beating school?

Teresa Tinsley, Alcantara Communications

1. Scope and aims of this report

Among the multiple concerns regarding take-up and provision for languages in English secondary schools is the issue of gender stratification of candidates for GCSE, which becomes even more marked at A level.¹ Boys are less likely than girls to be taking languages – especially French and Spanish – and amongst those that do enter, girls out-perform boys in terms of the proportion achieving the top grades (grade 7 and above).²

In Part 1 of this report, 43 schools that were beating the odds in terms of boys and languages were identified.³ This complementary research project identifies factors pertaining to the schools identified by the EPI analysis which are allowing them to ‘beat the odds’ and puts forward case studies and good practice guidelines based on the findings.

The schools under consideration are not necessarily at the top of the table as regards either take-up or attainment for boys in languages. They are defined as odds-beaters because they are doing ten percentage points better than would be expected given their pupil intake. The EPI research used national trends to make a prediction of how well each school would be expected to do given its pupil intake, and then compared that prediction to how well they actually did in practice.

The first phase of this research project gathered, through consultation with individual experts and teachers in the areas of gender equity and languages, a wide range of ideas on possible factors which could contribute to higher than expected take-up and achievement in MFL at GCSE by boys. On the basis of these suggestions and the researcher’s experience of analysing the findings of annual Language Trends surveys, a questionnaire was developed for completion by the sample of schools identified by EPI. This was designed to include both multiple choice and open questions, and to provide opportunities for respondents to offer explanations not already suggested as possible factors for odds-beating in languages by boys in their schools.

The questionnaire was uploaded to an on-line platform and the link sent via a British Council email address to the Head of Languages in each school. The survey was open during September to November 2019, yielding 32 responses, equivalent to a response rate of 74 per cent. Case studies representing schools in different circumstances were selected from the responses, and further information sought from these schools as necessary to provide a more complete picture. Conclusions on the key factors contributing to these schools’ success have been set out alongside good practice guidelines emanating directly from respondents’ answers.

Factors explored in the research

Following initial discussions with leading experts and consultations via social media, seven categories of potential factors affecting positive take-up and achievement by boys in languages were established:

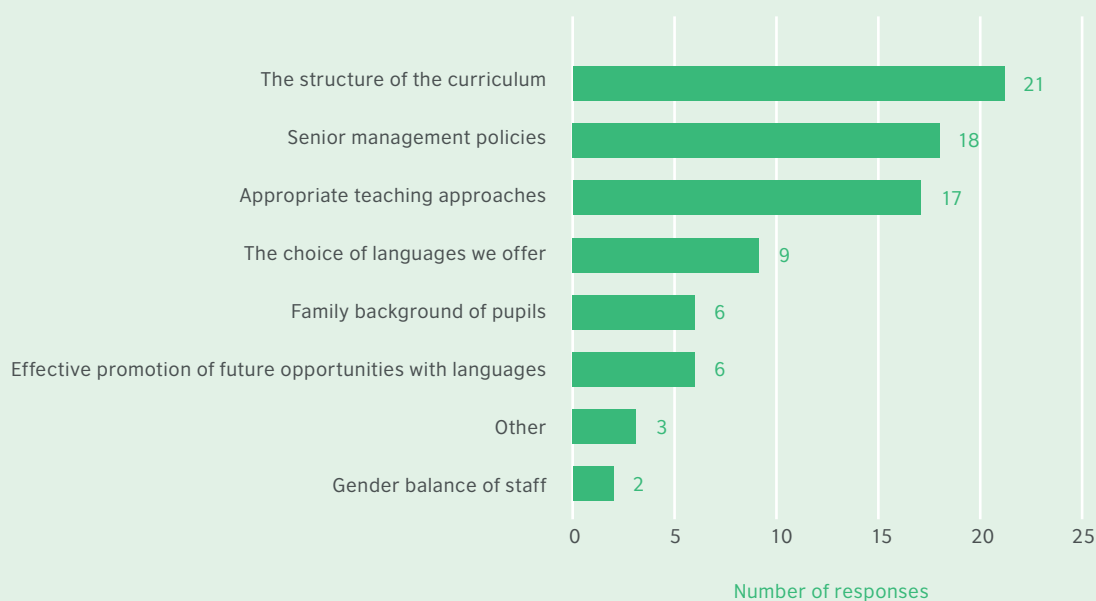
1. The choice of languages offered. This was based on anecdotal feedback that boys may be more motivated by German or by Mandarin, and the observation that uptake for these languages is less gender-biased towards female candidates at GCSE and A level.
2. The structure of the curriculum. Among the possible factors explored here were arrangements (including time allocation) for languages in Key Stage 3, the way option choices are set up as pupils progress to Key Stage 4, and the extent to which compulsion – for some or all pupils – plays a part in higher than expected take-up and achievement by boys in the sample schools. We also asked respondents from schools with Sixth Forms to report on take-up and gender balance for languages post-16.
3. The gender balance of staff. We wanted to know whether access to male teachers, language assistants or other male role models is a significant factor in these sample schools.
4. Teaching approaches. We included both closed and open questions designed to gather information about approaches and methodologies for language learning which respondents favour and which they

1. See annual Language Trends surveys and especially Teresa Tinsley and Kathryn Board, *Language Trends 2015/16: the state of language learning in primary and secondary schools in England*, British Council/Education Development Trust, pp. 16-17 and 21.

2. In both French and Spanish, girls account for nearly 60 per cent of all entries.

3. The EPI research identified 37 schools that both beat the odds for boys’ language outcomes in the most recent year of data (2017/18) and did so for at least two of the preceding years since 2013/14. It also identified a further six schools which beat the odds in 2017/18 and belong to multi-academy trusts and Local Authorities where at least 50 per cent of schools have beaten the odds at least once during the 5-year window between 2013/14 and 2017/18.

Figure 1: What do you consider to be the main reasons why your school recruits a higher than expected proportion of boys into languages? Up to three responses permitted (n = 31)



deem particularly effective with boys. We also asked whether there are policies or practices which respondents consider particularly off-putting to boys.

5. Promotion of future opportunities with languages. We asked what schools do to promote languages for careers, who is involved, and whether they consider their pupils are well-informed about career opportunities with languages. We also asked about school trips abroad and other extra-curricular activities which might enhance motivation for language learning.

6. Senior management policies. We explored the extent to which there is a whole school policy which supports languages or take-up by boys in particular and whether support from multi-academy trusts or local authorities is a factor.

7. Pupil profiles. We asked whether boys who take languages to GCSE tend to be influenced by their parents and sought to establish whether other factors in the family background of pupils are relevant to higher than expected take-up and attainment. We asked about the gender balance of different groups of pupils taking a language in the sample schools (e.g. those in receipt of the Pupil Premium Grant) and their experiences of language learning in Key Stage 2.

The survey findings are reported according to these seven categories, with some overlap between them.

2: Key findings

Responses to an initial overview question identified three main – and interconnected – reasons why schools recruit a higher than expected proportion of boys into languages:

- the structure of the curriculum;
- senior management policies;
- the teaching approaches they employ.

These findings were confirmed by the responses to other questions.

The choice of languages offered was not widely seen as an important factor by respondents, and there is no clear pattern of provision in the odds-beating schools to suggest that the choice of languages might influence take-up or achievement by boys. However, the majority of schools in the sample take steps to offer pupils a language-rich environment by giving them opportunities to learn, or at least try out, more than one language in Key Stage 3. Respondents cited a wide variety of extra-curricular language activities in their schools, and teachers clearly work hard to provide pupils with a rich array of language-related activities in addition to normal lessons.

There is no strong bias towards male teaching staff in the sample schools and no sense that they provide pupils with exceptional opportunities to meet male linguists as role models.

There is some evidence that careers advice for languages is more effectively managed in the odds-beating schools than in other schools (for example, by having dedicated staff to arrange language-related careers visits, or by having regular input on languages and careers) but respondents think there is much more that their schools could be doing to promote opportunities with languages. Opportunities for pupils in the odds-beating schools to take part in school trips and work experience abroad appear no more widespread than in other schools nationally in England, nor do they appear to take in greater proportions of pupils who have had significant experience of learning a language in primary school.

The key determinants of exceptional participation and outcomes for boys in languages emerging from this research are senior management policies

which determine the structure of the curriculum and guide pupils towards languages at GCSE. Two thirds of responding schools operate some form of compulsion, and four more strongly advise at least some groups of pupils to take languages. Only six schools operate free choice for all and of these, three say that languages have been compulsory until very recently.⁴ Inclusive policies towards languages in some of the odds-beating schools where there are groups of learners who are lower-attaining, disadvantaged or have special needs or disabilities appear to favour boys in particular. The EBacc, which requires a good pass in a language at GCSE, is cited as a strong driver.

Few schools are deliberately focussing on achieving a gender balance or overcoming gender stereotypes in languages or any other subjects. There is no overarching pattern of support by either local authorities or multi-academy trusts, although there are some examples of good practice. The family background of pupils is cited as important in a minority of schools, all with above average proportions of pupils with English as an additional language. Parental influence appears to be minimal and some schools cite negativity on the part of parents towards compulsory languages. Take-up and enthusiasm for languages post-16 is low in the odds-beating schools, as it is in the rest of the country.⁵

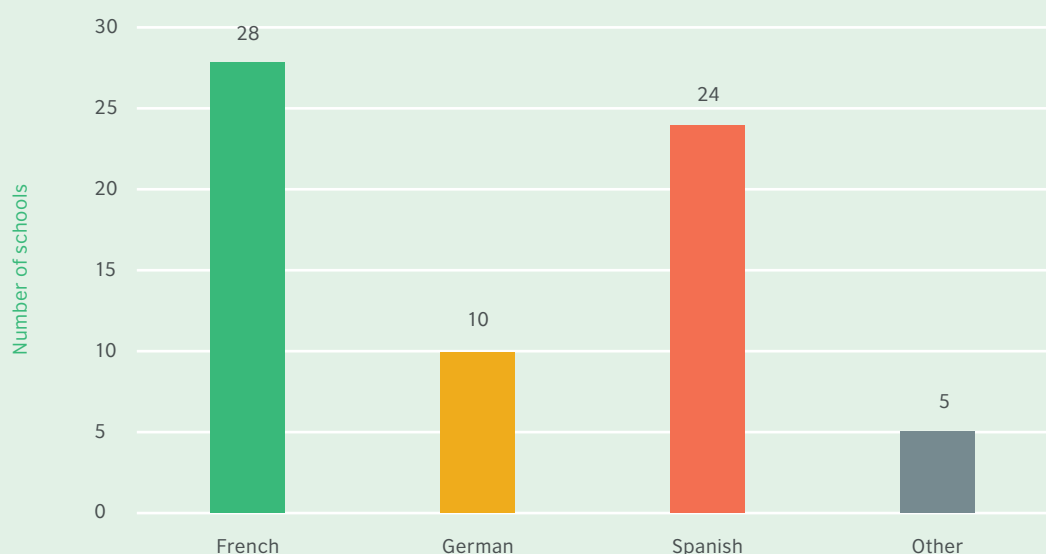
As a response to the expectation that large numbers of both boys and girls will take a language at Key Stage 4, teachers in the odds-beating schools adopt teaching approaches which will achieve good results and these too appear to be decisive in setting them apart from the rest. Respondents point to a wide variety of techniques and emphases they bring to their teaching, citing variety and pace as well as a strong focus on speaking and interaction, use of humour, rewards and an element of competition which they say tend to be effective with boys. They eschew 'old-fashioned' approaches, too much writing, and vocabulary learning. They teach grammar systematically but avoid decontextualised rule-learning.

4. Another school selected to take part in the survey declined to do so because they operate a compulsory languages policy and had been disappointed with the performance of boys in the 2019 exams.

5. Teresa Tinsley, Language Trends 2019, Language teaching in primary and secondary schools in England, British Council, p. 14.

3. Survey findings

Figure 3.1: Which languages do your pupils learn in Key Stage 3 as fully timetabled subjects (i.e. not extra-curricular options or tasters)? (n = 31)



3.1. Languages offered

Provision for languages at Key Stage 3 by schools in the sample is no different from that offered by state secondary schools nationally in England, with approximately 90 per cent teaching French, around three quarters offering Spanish, and around a third (ten out of 31) teaching German.⁶

The choice of languages offered was not widely seen as an important factor by respondents, and two provided contrasting views in relation to German and Spanish:

We have maintained a strong German department and we are particularly successful with boys at German GCSE. We have not tried to stop German and start Spanish like so many schools have done.

Spanish is very popular as lots of our pupils go on holiday to Spain. We make a conscious effort to encourage and motivate boys with lots of competitive elements and games.

There are nine schools which say that the choice of languages they offer is one of the main reasons why the school recruits a higher than expected proportion of boys into languages. Of these:

- 3 teach French and Spanish at Key Stage 3
- One teaches French, Spanish and Mandarin
- One teaches Spanish only
- Two teach French, German and Spanish
- One teaches French, German, Spanish and Mandarin
- One teaches French and German.

(All the above relate to languages taught in Key Stage 3).

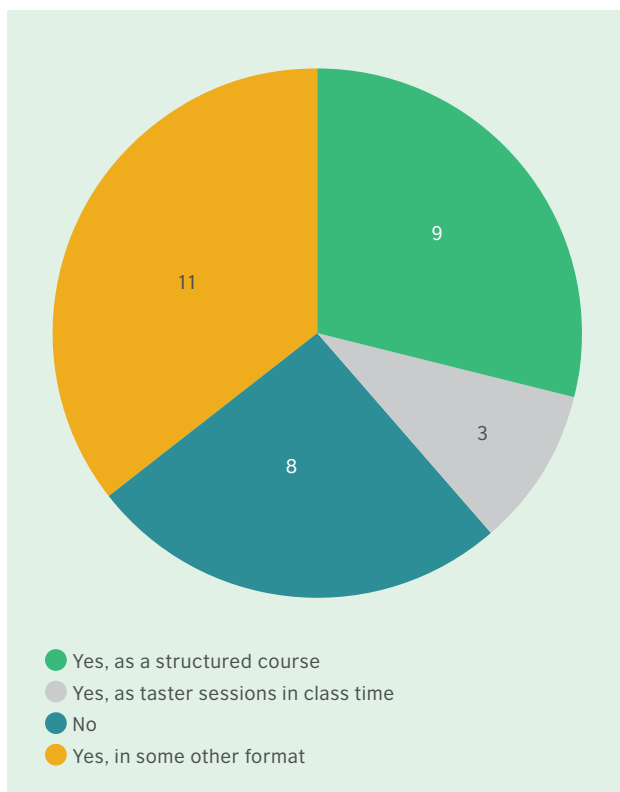
There is therefore no clear pattern emerging to suggest that the choice of languages provided has any influence on take-up and achievement by boys.

6. Data from Language Trends 2019 (p.11) gives 40 per cent of English state secondary schools teaching German in Key Stage 3, a slightly higher proportion than here which, in view of the smaller sample does not seem to be significant.

Exposure to more than one language at Key Stage 3

There is some indication, however, that offering pupils a language-rich environment may be significant. Around two-thirds of schools in the sample (20) report offering some opportunities for pupils to learn or at least try out, more than one language in Key Stage 3. Although only nine of these do so as a structured course, eleven others provide opportunities to experience other languages in a range of different formats:

Figure 3.2: Numbers of schools where pupils have the opportunity to learn - or try out - more than one language in Key Stage 3 (n = 31)



Numbers of schools where pupils have the opportunity to learn - or try out - more than one language in Key Stage 3. Base = 31

The ways in which more than one language – in some cases, multiple languages – are made accessible to pupils are many and varied, as summarised below:

Figure 3.3: Ways in which odds-beating schools provide access to more than one language

	Structured courses:
Year 7	Carousel of 4 languages (and specialisation into one in Year 8)
	All pupils do ML2 with one hour a fortnight
	Upper sets do ML2
	ML2 for all students in Mandarin Excellence programme
	Top sets do ML2 and choose 1 in Year 8
Year 8	1 hour of Spanish or German in Year 8 alongside 2 hours of French
	Tasters in Spanish or German for top sets (one lesson a week for one term)
	All pupils do ML2 starting in Year 8
Year 9	Pupils able to opt to start ML2
	Gifted and Talented/top sets can opt to start MFL2
	Top sets all take ML2
	Lower ability begin Spanish rather than continuing French
	One year optional courses in Latin and Mandarin
Year not specified	All pupils do Spanish, with tasters in French and Chinese
	All pupils do ML2 in Years 7 and 8 and continue with one or both in Year 9.
Year 10	Optional ML2 ab initio

In addition, schools offer access to learning additional languages through informal or voluntary sessions, for example, as taster sessions as part of the options process or a language club, optional after-school or breaktime sessions, or occasional classes, for example for the European Day of Languages.

One approach to offering two languages at Key Stage 3 was found not to be successful:

We had French for a year and then Spanish for another year and that would then give them the opportunity to choose one but we found it had a massive pitfall: they forget their other language and we have now moved to giving either French or Spanish and they stick with that for as long as they are in school.

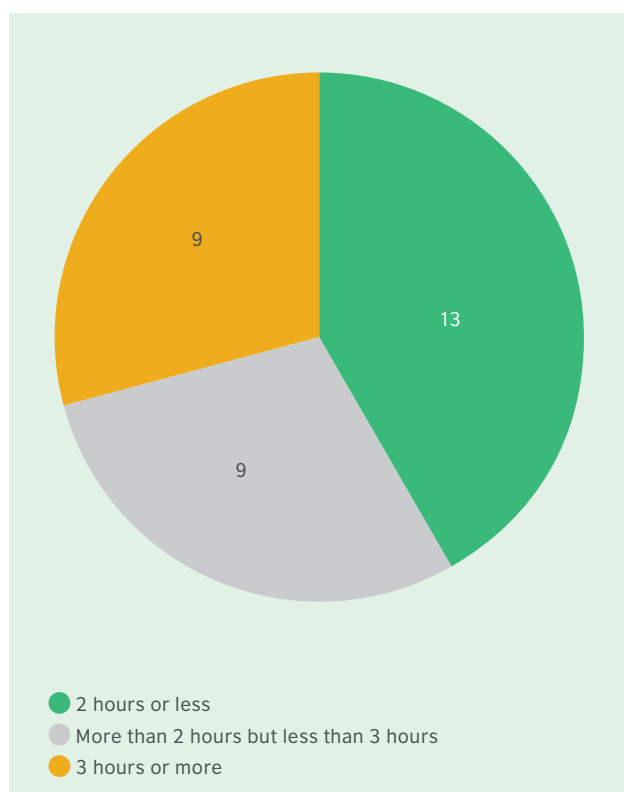
Of the nine schools which say that the choice of languages on offer is important, five do not offer opportunities to learn more than one in Key Stage 3 and two do so as a structured course – there is no clear pattern emerging here.

3.2 The structure of the curriculum

Time allocation for languages in Key Stage 3

Schools in the sample present a mixed picture as regards the amount of time they set aside for languages in Key Stage 3. While nine schools provide teaching for more than three hours per week, a larger group of thirteen schools offers less than two hours per week. This variation is in line with national trends as set out in Language Trends surveys.

Figure 3.4: How much curriculum time per week is set aside for languages in Key Stage 3? (If pupils learn more than one language, please give the total amount of time) (n = 31)



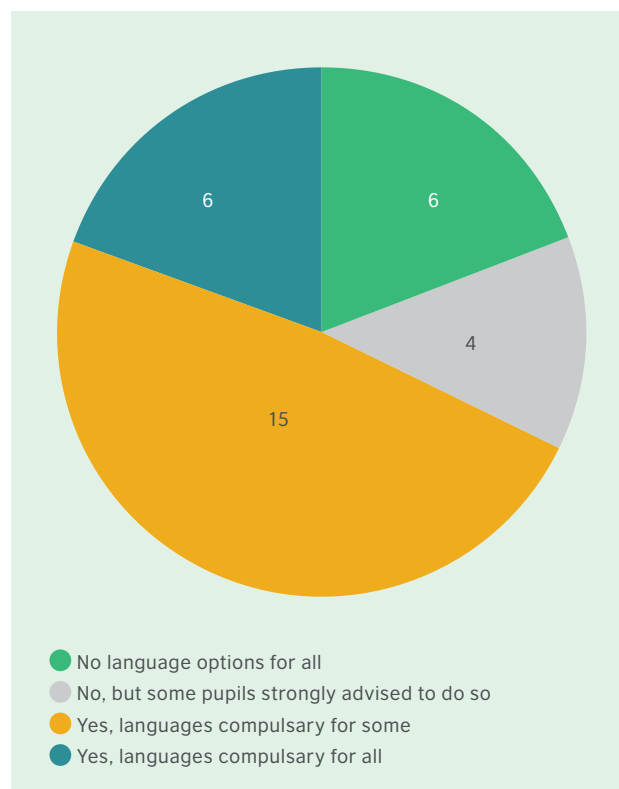
However, time for languages at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 appears as a significant factor in some schools – see case studies below and also this example:

Year 10 have 3 x 50 minutes per week and Year 11 have 4 x 50 mins per week.

Compulsion in Key Stage 4

Two thirds of schools in the sample operate some form of compulsion, while others strongly advise languages to at least some pupils. Only six schools operate free choice for all and of these three say that languages had been compulsory until very recently.

Figure 3.5: Are any pupils in your school required to take a language for GCSE? (n = 31)



We can conclude that some form of compulsion to study languages beyond the statutory period of Key Stage 3 is a significant factor in allowing these schools to 'beat the odds'. Two thirds of respondents identified 'the structure of the curriculum' as a key factor in favouring uptake by boys (see Figure 1, p.30) and their comments clarifying this reveal that this is a reference to compulsion in one form or another. Judging from these, there is a degree of overlap between the 'compulsory for all' and the 'compulsory for some' categories: some schools which ticked the former reported that there may be some pupils who do not take a language, while some of those ticking the latter indicated that the numbers not taking a language tended to be very low:

Only 20 students with very low attainment/real literacy issues do another subject (BTEC course).

Apart from those students who struggle significantly with literacy and numeracy, taking at least one language to GCSE is compulsory.

Where languages are compulsory for some pupils, but not all, comments indicate that this tends to refer not just to the very top sets but to at least two-thirds of pupils and in some cases up to 90 per cent:

The top 6 groups generally take a language at GCSE.

Around 90% of students do MFL at GCSE.

The EBacc appears to be an important driver for schools to achieve high uptake:

We ask those who have studied two languages in Year 9 to opt for at least one as part of their choices. This is obviously with an eye on the EBacc and Government policy but we generally encounter very little resistance to this. The remainder of the year group are encouraged to consider studying a language and we present why this might be advantageous in the future.

A large number of students are expected to take a language at GCSE as part of the Ebacc route.

Higher ability top 65-70% of pupils are told to take a language as part of the Ebacc.

Others rely on strong encouragement:

We strongly recommend (even make it compulsory) for set 1 students to carry on with languages and encourage anyone who would like to carry on.

The top band (8 sets) are strongly encouraged to take a language.

Where schools do not operate any form of compulsion, in a number of cases they have done so in the past and this would have been a factor explaining their history of ‘beating the odds’:

Historically languages were compulsory at GCSE but this year they have become an option subject.

After this academic year all MFL GCSE classes have been taken as an option. This is our last year of full cohort GCSE as the decision was made to make MFL an option last year.⁷

One school highlighted practice to provide all pupils with access to the broadening cultural benefits of language learning, even those who will not take a GCSE:

A very small group of pupils who have specific learning needs do not take a language at GCSE. They focus instead on the cultural aspect of the language through the completion of research and project work.

Timing of option choices for Key Stage 4

Around half (fifteen) make GCSE choices a year ‘early’, in Year 8, with less than half (fourteen) doing so in Year 9. In national Language Trends surveys, bringing GCSE choices forward to Year 8 – and the effective reduction of Key Stage 3 to two years – is associated with declining numbers taking languages for GCSE, with teachers observing that pupils have not had long enough experience of the subject to give them the confidence to choose it or perhaps to develop an enthusiasm for it based on the competence they have achieved.⁸ However, in the case of these odds-beating schools, where there is a high degree of compulsion and/or expectation that pupils will continue learning a language in Key Stage 4, the shortening of Key Stage 3 to two years does

not act as a barrier to take up and may actually be beneficial in providing longer to prepare for the GCSE.

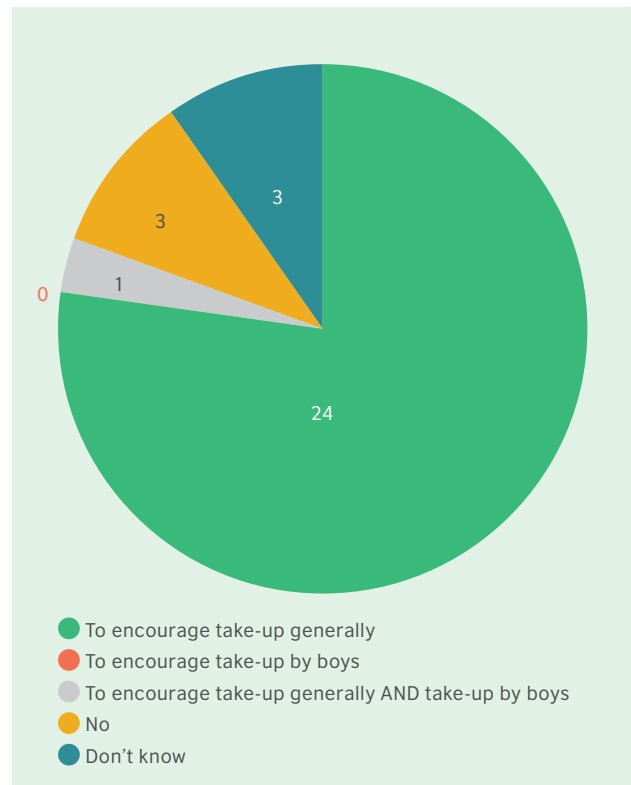
One school has found a way to ensure that all pupils, even the small number who do not continue to GCSE, receive a full three years of language learning:

They choose their GCSE language in Year 8, but no-one drops a language until a small group drop languages at the end of Year 9. Other option choices are end of Year 9.

Structure of option choices for Key Stage 4

More than three quarters say that the option choices in their school are set up in a way which encourages take-up generally – clearly where languages are compulsory this is bound to be the case. None say that they are specifically designed to encourage take-up by boys and only one says they are designed to encourage take-up generally and by boys in particular. Only three schools say their option system does not necessarily favour languages.

Figure 3.6: Are GCSE option choices in your school set up in a way which encourages take-up of languages generally, and/or take-up by boys specifically? (n = 31)



7. This respondent mentions concerns about the new GCSE specification as the reason for this.

8. Language Trends 2019, p. 11.

Comments in relation to this question again show the importance of the EBacc:

EBacc is a motivating factor for students to take languages. Senior Management decide which students take GCSE language.

The top 40% (roughly) who study two languages in Year 9 are required to opt for one. The options choices process also encourages the students to consider the relevant subjects for the EBacc which is explained to them to help in their decision. It also helps that the school offers four choices alongside the core subjects as this gives our students the opportunity to tick the boxes but at the same time to choose GCSE courses that they would like to do such as arts, technology alongside those subjects that Government policy currently favours.

Students are given a 'Pathway Pack' which either follows an Ebacc or non-Ebacc route. All students in the top 8 sets are given the former and therefore most subsequently continue with a language. There is a very small handful of students that express that they do not want to do an MFL and therefore they drop into the latter pathway.

Respondents give some examples of how option blocks are set up to encourage pupils to take languages:

It is in all option blocks.

When choosing options, Spanish features in two out of three of the pupils' boxes which increases the odds of them choosing languages. We also hold an options information evening for both pupils and parents where we give a detailed talk and give them the opportunity to ask questions about the Spanish curriculum.

Post-16 take up and gender balance

About half the schools in the sample (all those with post-16 pupils) provided comments on the take-up and gender balance for languages at A level. Of these, a large proportion reported that take-up is low (or in one case, insufficient to run courses) with fewer boys than girls taking a language in the sixth form:

Class sizes of 2-6, more females than males.

Very low take up (2 to 5 students) no boys.

Take up is low, fewer boys than girls, this is an area in which we are struggling to recruit although we have had male students in the past who have studied languages at Uni.

One school was able to point to healthy take-up, but skewed towards girls, another said that although take-up was equally split between boys and girls, it was very low. Just one school reported a more positive situation:

In French across Year 12/13 we have 12 linguists, 6 are boys. In Spanish across Year 12/13 we have 13 linguists, 4 are boys. In previous years we have had more boys than girls.

It does not seem to be the case then, that better than expected take-up and achievement by boys at GCSE is leading to strong recruitment for languages post-16. However, it should be stressed that the EPI research did not look at AS or A level figures so we do not know whether these schools are also doing better than expected for schools in similar circumstances in languages post-16.

3.3. Gender balance of staff

Language teachers

There is no strong bias towards male teaching staff in the sample schools. The sample of schools employ a total of 187 language teachers of which 156 (83 per cent) are female. Only one school has more men than women languages teachers and two schools have a 50-50 gender balance. Eleven schools have no male teacher and the rest have proportions varying from one out of ten to four out of six.

Nine schools employ one or more Language Assistants, and only two out of a total of twelve are male.

Although across the country as a whole, the gendered profile of the language teaching profession may be a contributing factor to poor take-up and achievement by boys in the subject, the findings here show that schools can beat the odds without a more equal gender balance among staff. This is not to say, of course, that a better gender balance of language teaching staff nationally would not be desirable.

Other male role models

Respondents were asked what opportunities, if any, pupils have to meet other male linguists as role models. Around a third of respondents (ten) said none, or very few. Another third commented on opportunities to meet male linguists as role models which had occurred through happenstance – male supply teachers, language assistants, PGCE students, or sixth formers who help out with lower years. The final third of schools pointed to organised opportunities – outside speakers, university partnerships, links with schools abroad etc., which offers students the chance to meet male linguists:

On diversity day we invite people who use languages in their jobs to come and speak to pupils and we celebrate this day on the European Day of Languages. Many of the staff are encouraged to share their experiences of work opportunities and we celebrate what speaking another language gives us on World Book Day.

Trips to restaurants, local universities and language day/cultural day within school with business volunteers.

Guest speakers from Liverpool University and an interpreter from Real Madrid. We have also invited past pupils to come back into school to promote languages.

3.4. Teaching approaches

Approaches which characterise provision in the odds-beating schools

Responding schools were asked which of a list of various approaches to language teaching were a particularly strong focus in the school. It should be noted that they were also given the option to respond 'we do this, but it's not a strong focus' – this was in order to identify more closely which approaches might be associated with 'beating the odds' in the schools under consideration.

Almost all the responding schools highlighted a focus on speaking and interaction and a large proportion also pointed to the explicit teaching of language-learning strategies and the formal teaching of grammar. The use of humour was also a strong feature in the majority of responding schools.

Approaches which are successful with boys

Linked to this same question, we asked which of these approaches respondents found particularly successful with boys. This produced a slightly different listing (see Figure 3.8, p38), in which the use of humour was judged top in terms of effectiveness with boys and the formal teaching of grammar appears towards the bottom of the list:

Commenting on the use of humour, respondents said:

Allow some silliness/humour when writing/speaking, let them ask for silly verbs and join in the silliness when appropriate.

Boys like anecdotes about languages, funny stories about a word/an expression, consistency, songs, films, honest talks.

There was also a great deal of consensus on the effectiveness of interactive activities, and speaking as opposed to writing.

Our boys like competition and engage much more with speaking than writing.

Kinaesthetic activities, competitive games, ICT lessons, pace, pair and group work, interactive around the room activities, personal knowledge of students and humour.

Figure 3.7: Teaching approaches which are a strong focus in responding schools (n = 31)

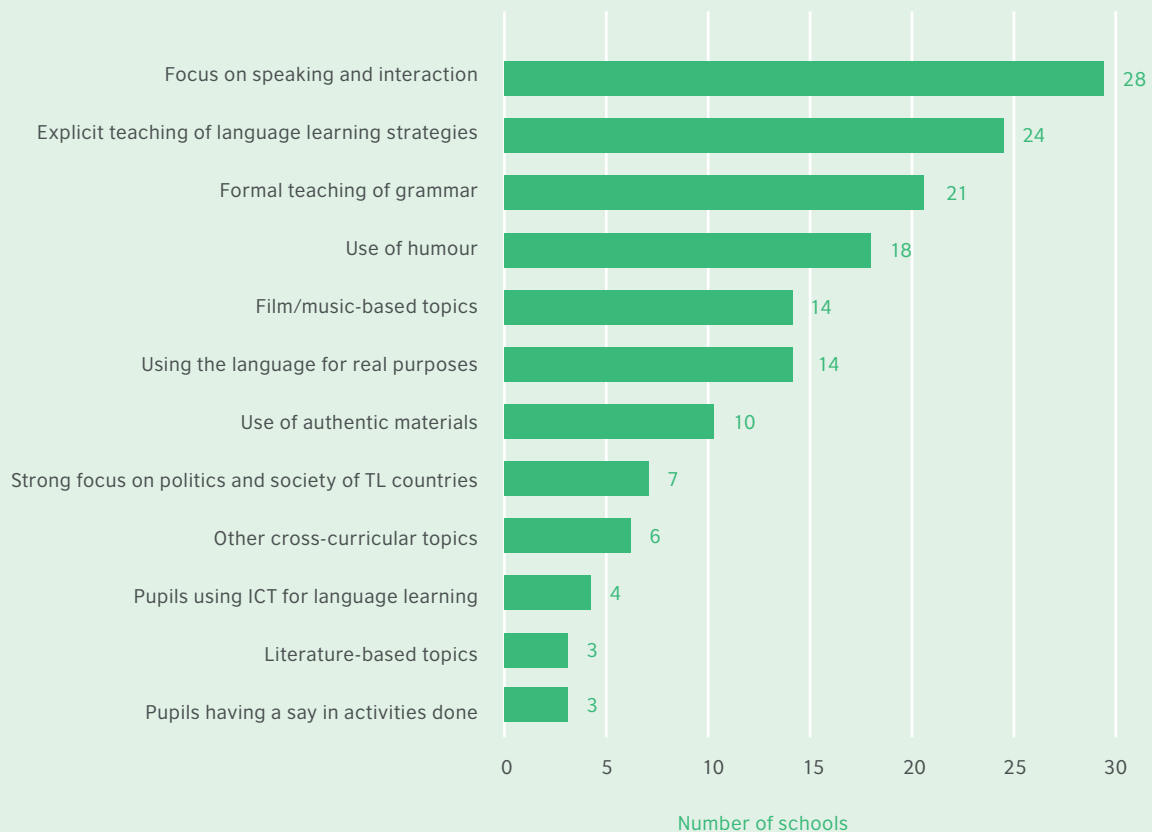
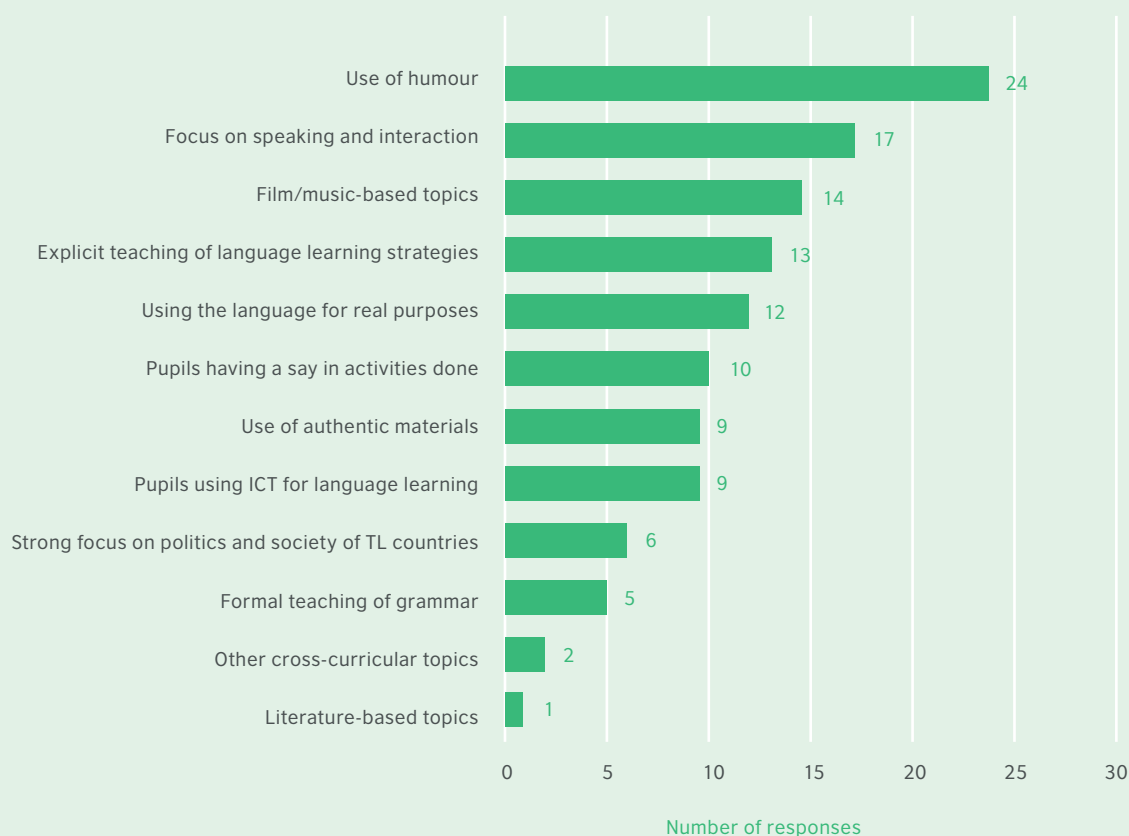


Figure 3.8: Teaching approaches deemed particularly successful with boys (n =31)



Respondents were able to cite a wide variety of approaches which they had found particularly effective with boys – the length of their answers in many cases bearing witness to the professionalism with which they were addressing a complex challenge. The word cited most frequently was ‘competition’ – although clearly not as a miraculous fix or in isolation:

Use of the communicative approach, focusing on speaking and listening. Competitive low-stakes retrieval practice quizzes. Links to further study and world of work. Clearly showing their learning journey and progress - not going to be fluent in a year but look how far you have come!

Boys respond well to the element of competition. Use of genuine resources that link to the local area sparks interest.

... boys do nearly as well as the girls here. They like the cultural awareness that transpires in everything that is taught in the department. They like the structure and the short activities planned. There is a real pride for the boys to be able to achieve in their French lessons and to feel they are progressing.

The importance of structure, modelling and effective support was also highlighted:

Strong routines - very structured Scheme of Work - fast pace of lessons - thorough planning - competitions - high expectations and relentless/never giving up on anything

- consistency across the department - strong speaking test practice - groups created to match the profile of students/teachers.

Constant use of strong frameworks and scaffolding to allow them to build up their confidence before building up independence.

All students are fully supported and have access to online materials at home. We use Memrise as a vocabulary learning tool. Extra support is available to students after school.

Several respondents also mentioned rewards and incentives:

Active lesson episodes and games do work well, as well as a reward system that acknowledges boys' success instantly. For example, we have a raffle ticket system where pupils are rewarded for getting them at the end of every lesson, which makes the incentive greater for boys to do the right thing with immediate effect!

Competition always encourages boys. The use of stickers which they collect on their books for rewards. They will do anything for these.

Preparation for exams also forms an important element in schools' success:

We set Vocab Express homework each week. Key Stage 4 is tested on exam vocabulary each week. We attend Exam board meetings and we network with other MFL depts. We follow a textbook written by one of the

Chief Examiners with sufficiently challenging tasks to cover all of the exam style questions. We are endlessly enthusiastic and we instil them with confidence.

Policies or practice believed to be off-putting to boys

Respondents were asked to respond to an open question asking whether there is any type of policy or practice in languages which they deliberately avoid because they regard it as off-putting to boys. Most responses to this can be grouped around the rejection of ‘old-fashioned grammar’ and ‘didactic lessons’ with too much ‘teacher talk’, writing, text books and emphasis on perfection.

In our experience, lots of teacher talk puts all students off, as does bland learning of vocabulary in isolation.

I work on communication mostly rather than trying to get it perfect.

Two schools reported on organisational practices they avoided:

We try to balance out ability groups so that there isn't a bigger proportion of any gender in any group. For example, in a top set, we would try to put an equal amount of boys and girls even if more girls do better than boys in terms of performance. We then avoid the lower ability boy-heavy groups which reinforce that image that boys are less able in languages.

We tend to treat boys the same as girls, however in groups where the number of boys is greater than girls we ensure that behaviour is of a good standard and that boys are not sitting grouped together.⁹ Settling starters are important in these groups as are mini plenaries to check learning is taking place and that students are engaged.

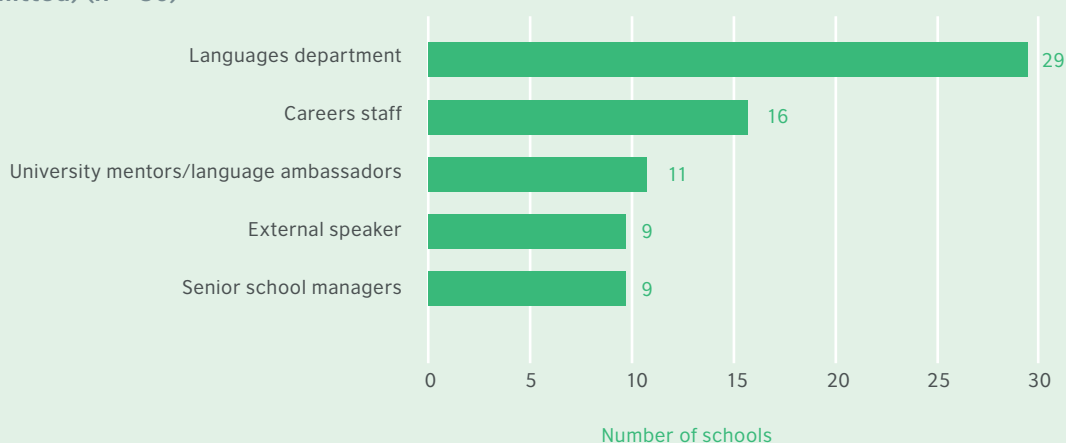
3.5. The promotion of future opportunities with languages

Careers advice

The survey found some evidence that careers advice for languages is handled better in the odds-beating schools than in other schools. The 2018 Language Trends survey found that senior managers and careers staff were involved in providing careers advice about languages in 38 per cent of English state secondary schools. In this group the aggregate number of schools where careers staff and/or senior managers are involved is nineteen out of 30 – nearly two thirds.

However, none of our respondents think that their pupils are very well informed about opportunities with languages, although around two thirds think they are ‘quite well informed’.

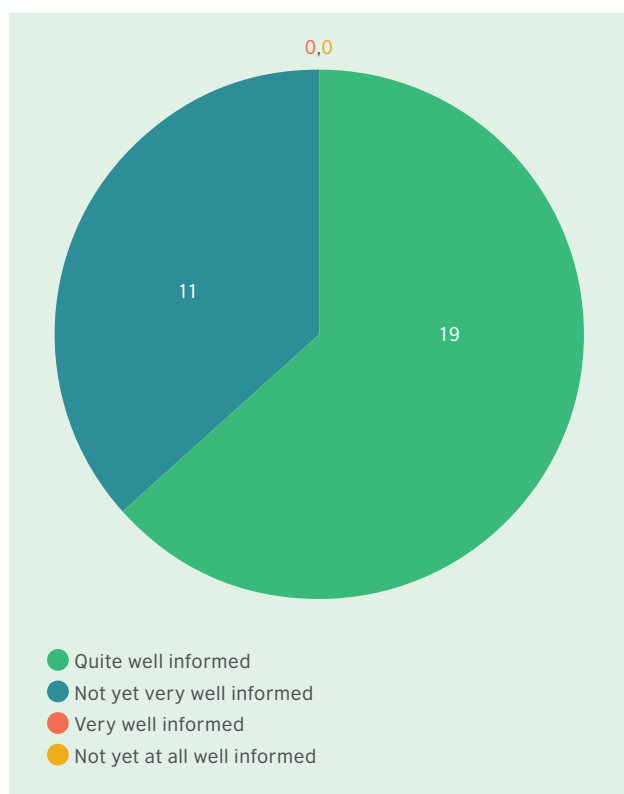
Figure 3.9: Who provides careers advice to your pupils in relation to languages? (multiple answers permitted) (n = 30)



Who provides careers advice to your pupils in relation to languages? (multiple answers permitted). Base = 30

9. However, another school found that the opposite – allowing boys to work together – can also work well.

Figure 3.10: To what extent do you think pupils in your school are well-informed about the opportunities available with languages? (n = 30)



Comments tend to articulate a view that there is much more that schools could be doing to promote opportunities with languages:

We have displays in the department explaining career opportunities using languages, but would like this to be more of a focus in the future; this is an area we would seek to develop.

I don't think that enough is done to give potentially real opportunities to our pupils vis à vis language learning.

We need to have more engagement with outside agencies on how languages can help in the 'real world'.

Languages are not included in career-related talks on a regular enough basis. It is quite tricky to find inspirational speakers and visitors who would 'fly the flag' for languages, which is a real shame as we know from experience that boys have responded well to this in the past.

However, a few schools provided examples of exceptionally good practice in relation to providing regular opportunities to develop an understanding of career pathways with languages:

Every week a different career linked to languages is highlighted in lessons. Subject leader leads assembly to all year groups highlighting the importance of learning languages and where they can take you. We look for opportunities to invite in guest speakers from local companies/organisations where languages are important.

We drip feed this into lessons especially before options evenings. I have PowerPoints we made and resources

we created around this to show where languages can be useful to them while not even out of the country. I tell them about myself and my own background and it seems to work as they relate in most cases (might be worth mentioning that I am a male MFL teacher).

This is an area of focus this year in the department and the school. We have dedicated staff (including a senior member of staff) who look for opportunities for career visits for MFL.

Work experience abroad

Opportunities for pupils in the odds-beating schools to take part in work experience abroad are no more widespread than in other schools nationally in England. Four schools in our sample of 30 offer work experience abroad – a proportion broadly comparable with the 15 per cent of state secondary schools in England which reported doing so in the 2018 Language Trends survey.¹⁰ Six of our sample schools have offered work experience abroad in the past but the majority (two thirds) have never done so.

School trips abroad with a language element

Similarly, the proportion of odds-beating schools which offer school trips abroad with a language element (around three quarters of the sample schools – 23 out of 30) is broadly in line with those doing so nationally, as reported in Language Trends surveys.¹¹

However, feedback from the odds-beating schools was positive about trips abroad and some respondents provided examples of practices involving serious engagement with the language and culture:

We went on a trip to Spain where all the monitors were native speakers, and they spoke almost exclusively in Spanish. There were opportunities to speak Spanish on a daily basis on excursions, and to interact with the monitors while playing sports.

I have ex-colleagues and university friends in Spain and I set out a whole day to take our students to their school and have them join normal lessons and interact with real Spanish students their age while there and this has proven to be the most memorable and most powerful highlight of their trip abroad, especially for boys.

Paris and Berlin trips have language tasks, boys engage with the task and are motivated to 'have a go'.

Other opportunities outside the normal curriculum

Respondents cited a wide variety of extra-curricular language activities in their schools, including lunch time clubs, film showings, visits to universities and local independent schools, and involvement in competitions. Teachers in these schools clearly work

10. Language Trends 2018, p. 7.

11. Language Trends 2019, p. 15.

hard to provide pupils with a rich array of activities:

MFL film club. We are looking at present to set up a model in which we would take year 9s to our feeder Primary Schools to deliver a languages club.

All students are welcome to learn Spanish in a lunchtime if they are not doing so as part of the curriculum. We have a strong Japanese offering including a biennial trip to Japan and many opportunities to host visitors from our partner schools. There is also a Brazilian Portuguese club run during lunchtimes. Latin is also offered as an extra-curricular activity and can lead to qualifications if the students wish.

National Competitions: Year 7 Foreign Language Spelling Bee, Year 8 Translation Bee. British Film Institute study days for French and Spanish. Work with SOAS University: Languages Challenge/talks from student ambassadors. Arsenal Double Club for French and Spanish.

We have an international film club and a Languages club where we rotate languages and focus on culture, songs, traditions. We also organise a 'European Week of Languages' to coincide with the European Day of Languages, with plenty of activities such as a European-themed Bake-Off competition, a salsa taster session, some language challenges to complete with form classes, etc.

3.6. Senior management policies

School policies on languages

Eighteen of the 31 respondents identified senior management policies as a decisive factor in delivering higher than average take-up and achievement by boys. This was closely related to the structure of the curriculum and the use of compulsion as discussed in sub-section 2 above. Beyond this, respondents provided comments which shed light on wider senior management policies which support take-up and achievement by boys. These include:

- Offering alternative accreditation in addition to GCSE:

Almost all of our students take GCSE, with a small FCSE entry. We have 2 top sets in Years 7-11 and then broad ability groupings but often teach GCSE groups of up to 30 students.

- Not restricting entry to GCSE for students unlikely to pass:

All ability groups (high, medium and low prior attainers) take a language on principle. So, we do not restrict entry to those who are able to take Higher Tier or even to pass, in order to improve the school outcomes. Normally there are higher proportions of boys in lower sets, but they are also expected to take a language.

- Allowing for smaller classes to run

We believe this is an important part of a rounded curriculum. MFL is a 'core' subject area, like English, Maths and Science. Pupil Premium funding is to a great extent used to allow smaller classes for lower sets in core subjects, and extra literacy and maths support, which also helps to stop boys lagging behind.

Leadership have let us run with smaller cohorts than other subjects e.g. this year Chinese was able to run with only 3 students taking it and French with 7 students. Usually this wouldn't be a viable number to run the course.

- A pro-languages ethos

It is perhaps significant that at least six schools in the odds-beating sample have been Specialist Language Colleges. One of these (Hornsea School and Language College, in the East Riding of Yorkshire), commented:

The legacy and ethos of being a language college remains and it is our firm belief as MFL teachers, supported by SLT (Senior Leadership Team) that we do right by our students by offering a broad and balanced curriculum to GCSE.

School policies on gender

Only four respondents have an explicit whole-school policy (i.e. beyond the languages department) to achieve a good gender balance in languages, more than two-thirds (21) do not, relying on compulsion

and general promotion of languages rather than explicitly focussing on achieving a gender balance. Six schools say there is an explicit whole-school policy to achieve a good gender balance in other subjects (e.g. STEM) and seven schools report having a whole-school policy to combat gender stereotypes across all subject areas:

This issue has been high on the agenda and is being addressed through programmes run by a variety of departments such as science and engineering, as well as languages. We have also developed links with the university to encourage recruitment by females of subjects traditionally taken up by more males and vice versa. However, one of the things we have tried to avoid is gender stereotyping our reaction to this issue by generalising 'boys enjoy..., girls respond to...' etc, instead recognising that all students are individuals and different. We have taken the approach that equal encouragement to both boys and girls, having the same high expectations of behaviour and effort and creating a climate in which both boys and girls feel safe to achieve their best in all subjects is more true to our ethos. This philosophy is reflected in our rewards policy, our behaviour systems and in our teaching and learning practice.

There is currently a huge focus on presentation and attitude to work amongst boys to ensure that they are using previous work to support future learning and to nurture more resilience in boys within lessons.

However, the relatively small number of schools involved suggests that whole-school policies on gender have not been a significant factor in delivering odds-beating performance in languages.

Support from local authorities or multi-academy trusts

Few schools – just three – are able to point to significant support received from their local authority or multi-academy trust in relation to promoting take-up for languages and/or overcoming gender stereotypes. A further five report that they receive some support. Ten say the support they receive is negligible and twelve say this does not apply. Again, this does not seem to be a decisive factor. One school, Hillside High School in Bootle, commented:

We work collaboratively with the other MFL departments across our multi academy trust¹² to standardise assessment, marking, the curriculum as a whole and to share good practice.

3.7. Pupil profiles

Family background of pupils

Only six out of 31 respondents identified the family background of pupils as a major deciding factor. All were based in cities or major conurbations and had higher than average proportions of pupils with another language in their background. Two of these schools had more than 50 per cent of pupils with English as an additional language and comments confirmed that family multilingualism was what they were referring to in signalling pupils' home background as a factor:

We have a higher than average entry of EAL students, many of whom speak a second language. A few take an exam in their home language, but in general they find it easier to learn a language and apply themselves to it.

Have boys taking languages been influenced by their parents?

Twelve respondents reported that boys taking languages in their school have been influenced positively by their parents, while only one said that boys take a language despite parental negativity. Given the number of schools where languages are compulsory for all or some pupils, this question was less relevant for many. Respondents commented:

Most parents are open minded and positive about the opportunities that learning a language can bring.

They study GCSE MFL because they have a target of 3+ and above from Key Stage 2. Few parents support the study of a language, often because learning a European language was not part of their experience.

Parents are not commonly positive about languages as they have not had a good experience or they do not value languages as a useful subject as opposed to English, Maths and Science.

We can conclude that parental influence is not a major deciding factor in the odds-beating schools.

Pupil profiles

Respondents were asked to supply the gender breakdown for different groups of pupils studying languages to GCSE in their school. This shows that very few schools have more higher or middle attainment boys than higher/middle attainment girls studying languages. However, more schools reported that boys outnumbered girls rather than the reverse in terms of low prior attainment pupils, those with special needs or disabilities (SEND) and pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG). This suggests that boys may gain disproportionately (in terms of their participation and performance in language learning) from policies which encourage inclusive participation in the subject:

12. Wade Deacon Trust. All four Wade Deacon Trust schools beat the odds in at least one of the five years in the EPI study.

Those not doing the academic pathway may choose MFL - we are happy to accept anyone if their attitude to learning is good, despite finding the subject difficult.

This school comments further on the support it provides for such pupils:

Intervention classes for Pupil Premium students and anyone more than a grade below their target in any skill. A small group of weaker boys are taught separately at times to make sure their contribution is greater.

One school made the point explicitly about how teaching has to adapt and follow on from inclusive recruitment policies:

Once a school commits to this, the languages department then must ensure they create a climate in which everyone can be successful, otherwise the choice to make languages compulsory for the majority of students is difficult to justify.

Languages in primary schools

Only seven responding schools report that most of their pupils have had a 'significant experience' of learning a language in primary school. Languages have only been a statutory subject in Key Stage 2 since September 2014, and this proportion is probably in line with the national picture.¹³ Comments did not indicate that respondents felt that their pupils' experience of language learning in primary school was particularly significant, still less for boys in particular:

Most pupils arrive with the ability to greet each other in a language and with lists of vocabulary, such as numbers.

Primary schools do a good job of sowing the seed of enthusiasm for languages and other cultures, but often lack specialist teachers of languages so cannot teach them anything beyond basic vocabulary such as numbers or common nouns.

On the whole languages are not particularly well-taught in primary schools which can have a detrimental effect on boys' attitudes towards the subject.

Most come to our school with prior knowledge of Spanish but the extent of their knowledge varies significantly.

Figure 3.11: Thinking about the pupils taking a language for GCSE in your school, what is the gender breakdown of the following groups? (n = 29). 'Don't knows' eliminated from chart



13. In 2018, Language Trends found that only twelve per cent of state secondary schools reported that most (more than half) their incoming Year 7 pupils had reached the expected level of competence in languages as set out in the Key Stage 2 programmes of study, p.13.

4. Case studies

Schools were selected for case studies on the basis of their detail and significance of their responses, and to provide a balance of odds-beating schools working in different circumstances.

Limehurst Academy, Loughborough

Limehurst Academy is a multicultural 11-16 converter academy in Loughborough, Leicestershire, judged Good by Ofsted in 2017. More than half its pupils have English as an additional language and the proportion eligible for Free School Meals is slightly above average for England. Its Progress 8 score is 'well above average' and more than three quarters of the cohort (76.3 per cent) enter the full range of EBacc subjects.

All pupils learn French in Key Stage 3 with **three hours a week** set aside for language learning in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The school is trialling the introduction of Spanish and German in Year 8 for all ability groups. This means that students have two hours of French and one hour of either Spanish or German. The school will revert to French only for the less able students if this experience is not wholly positive for them. In Year 9, the most able students have two hours of French and one hour of Spanish in, at least, the first term, to encourage the uptake of Spanish at GCSE.

As regards the choice of language, the school comments:

We used to teach German and French equally in Key Stage 3, but the changes in Key Stage 2 a few years ago made it necessary to offer French to all students after feedback from parents. We have now found that Key Stage 2 schools offer a variety of languages depending on the languages their staff can offer. Due to the varied experience in Key Stage 2, at the start of Year 7, we use four languages to focus on basic language skills. We are adjusting our Year 8 and Year 9 curriculum in order to better build on the experience which students have in Key Stage 2.

About three quarters of the Year 9 cohort each year are strongly encouraged to learn a language to GCSE, and all students have an entitlement to do so, with having a broad curriculum in mind. The school reports that parents are not generally supportive of their child learning a language at GCSE and that it is often a low priority for students in a

school with an inner-city catchment area. Teaching approaches take into consideration the needs of the students, gender, culture, aspirations and home circumstances:

We have always taught skills AND grammar and the focus is on developing independent linguists rather than language parrots. For example, in-house grammar books based on 'thought processes' have been developed over several years, working closely with students and listening to how they access the learning.

Approaches which keep boys on track are described succinctly, as follows:

Humour is key! Honesty - no false praise. Kinaesthetic approach to teaching – e.g. grammar dances, YouTube songs and clips. Challenge - appropriate for the ability of the group. 35% of our students are disadvantaged and 18% of our students are on the SEN register, with 3% having an EHC [Education, Health and Care] Plan, and so support staff are important and their expertise is valued.

The school highlights intensive efforts of MFL staff work to achieve the results they do:

My team have to work very hard to keep students on track. The secret of our success is long working hours, a high level of commitment, a constant review of our curriculum and one-to-one support for our students. Building relationships with students and parents is key in our school.

The school used to offer trips to France, Germany and Spain but because of workload, school trips organised by the MFL department have had to be discontinued:

Staffing hours in our department have reduced this year and our focus is on the classroom. The PE department used to help us out with this, but staffing has changed and we just do not have the capacity to cope with a trip this year. Parents are also not able to afford the cost of trips and the school has not got enough spare money for such a luxury. The current state of Brexit has also discouraged us!

However, careers guidance for languages has become an area of focus since staff are "desperate" to motivate students to see the importance of learning languages:

We have dedicated staff (including a senior member of staff) who look for opportunities for career visits for MFL. However, unlike science, MFL visits are not subsidised by STEM initiatives and local businesses and so we have had

to reject some trips already this year, because the school cannot afford to pay and the students most definitely cannot afford to pay! Investment in language learning by the Government would help. (I know from working with local MFL Heads of Department that I have a generous departmental budget and MFL is valued in my school. However, my school, like every school, cannot pay for every opportunity presented to it.)

The school eagerly takes up offers of help from independent schools, universities and the post-16 sector:

Our local private school invites our students to French, German and Spanish plays each year free-of-charge. For most students, this is their first opportunity to see professional actors. We have links with local universities and visits for MFL are being organised.

It is conscious of a certain “élitism” attached to language learning and critical of exams which reinforce this perception:

The MFL exams are very difficult, especially for children who have nowhere to study at home AND whose parents did not study a language at GCSE. In the past, students have told me that their parents have not wanted to see me on Parents’ Evenings because it reminds them of their own ‘failure’ at school. Languages does not have the same importance. The current approach to language exams reinforces the ridiculous idea that one has to be ‘clever’ to learn a language. Make languages more accessible to all students - male and female - if you want more boys to learn a language!

It notes that students are suffering from “fatigue” at GCSE, because “children have been subjected to unrealistic targets from the age of 3”:

The number of GCSE exams during the final examination period in May now mean that students feel that they have to prioritise on which subjects to focus during the final revision period. Few prioritise their language, especially the less able students.

Loreto High School, Chorlton

Loreto High School is a Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided 11-16 school in Manchester local authority area. It is in the highest quintile for the proportions of its pupils eligible for Free School Meals and has twice the national average of Pupil Premium Pupils and a high proportion of pupils with English as an additional language. Boys account for 55 per cent of the school roll and are a priority group for the school. Its Progress 8 score is average and it enters 34.7 per cent of its cohort in EBacc subjects, lower than the national average of 40 per cent.

Pupils study either French or Spanish for two hours or less during Key Stage 3:

We have recently moved from two languages at Key Stage 3 to just one and so offer an after school session in the other language as well as the opportunity for Gifted and Talented students to do another language

ab initio in Year 9. We also promote other languages by teaching one off classes, for example on the European Day of Languages, and enter children for GCSE languages in their home language wherever possible.

Where children take home language GCSEs, significant efforts are made to ensure that the children are exam-ready and are prepared by MFL teachers to be successful.

As a school with a majority of male pupils, it reports never having had a problem recruiting boys to GCSE. **Option pathways are set up to include a language in each**, so they are not exclusive to the EBacc route and the entry cohort size for MFL is higher than the EBacc entry:

This leads to for example pupils choosing an MFL and Engineering or an MFL and Art or Drama, as well as the EBacc route.

The school believes that its teaching approaches play an important part in its ability to ‘beat the odds’ as regards boys and MFL, though it admits to not having thought particularly about this:

We have thought a lot about resilience and confidence in language learning and our strategies come from this rather than gender, perhaps a side effect of this is that boys have gained the most.

We employ a range of strategies in how we teach boys to maximise engagement and we do very little writing in books and most of our work is done on mini-whiteboards. We also do plenty of speaking activities and have a system of teaching writing through the use of colour-coded words which enables pupils to start with the Target Language rather than translation from English into Spanish.

I would say that teaching in ‘chunks’ a la Gianfranco Conti has been particularly successful with boys as has colour coding language.¹⁴ Film is also a huge hook with boys and many say that the films we watch are the best films they have ever seen. However, a lot of work is done to contextualise and explain the film as well as lots of discussion surrounding the films. We owe a debt of gratitude to Carmen Herrero at Manchester Metropolitan University and FILTA [Film in Language Teaching Association] for our choice of films.

The school also highlights the **multicultural background of its students and their communities** as an asset:

Many have another language at home and can see the use of language learning [...] On diversity day we invite people who use languages in their jobs to come and speak to pupils and we celebrate this day on the European Day of Languages. Many of the staff are encouraged to share their experiences of work opportunities and we celebrate what speaking another language gives us on World Book Day.

It also acknowledges the support of its senior management for a small department of three staff and the fact that they “know our students very well”.

14. See <https://gianfrancoconti.com/>

St Wilfrid's RC College, South Shields

St Wilfrid's is a Roman Catholic 11-19 school classed as Outstanding by Ofsted. It forms part of the Northern Saints Catholic Education Trust. It has an average Progress 8 score and above average proportions of pupils being entered for the EBacc (currently around 47 per cent compared to 40 per cent across England – though it achieved 64 per cent in 2018). It has below average proportions of pupils eligible for Free School Meals and whose first language is not English.

In Key Stage 3, pupils study either French or Spanish, rotating on a yearly basis. The top sets also take a second language and in the last few years, since the school joined the Mandarin Excellence Programme¹⁵, this has been Mandarin. These pupils receive four hours of Mandarin per fortnight. Pupils who are entered for the EBacc are given the option between a language and computer science. The school attributes high take-up of languages to a:

Dynamic and passionate group of staff who love languages and show this to the pupils. We constantly refer to the GCSE and embed GCSE skills into Key Stage 3 so pupils feel confident in their language learning and capable of taking them to GCSE. We use low stakes, competitive retrieval practice starters across the Key Stages to allow pupils to see what they've learnt over time and feel a level of success at the start of a lesson.

The school also encourages pupils to participate in a range of extra-curricular activities relating to languages including trips abroad and to cinemas and restaurants in the local area.

We have started to increase these more and find them very effective with all pupils, particularly boys. Our school/Trust have been very supportive in allowing us to run extra-curricular, supporting financially with trips to reduce cost for pupils, and giving us time to run projects in school such as the week of assemblies for European Day of Languages and finance and support for our work with primaries. This isn't targeted specifically towards gender though but allows us to push languages for all.

The school reports having strong links with its feeder primaries and runs a network for local primary languages teachers:

Our pupils have been into the primaries acting as language leaders to help deliver taster sessions for Year 6 pupils and we run a yearly languages festival led by our pupils for pupils from our feeder primaries. We also have links with local universities and have participated in language taster sessions and competitions, allowing our pupils to see language learning in a different context and allowing them to link to future study and work.

All the school's language teachers are female and there are few other opportunities to meet male linguists as role models. Post-16, the gender balance in languages is skewed towards girls. The school believes that a focus on speaking and interaction is particularly effective with boys but comments:

That quality first teaching is beneficial for all pupils and that, whilst we are mindful of gender, providing all pupils with high levels of challenges, high expectations, engaging teaching methods and a strong link to future study/work means that all pupils are engaged and motivated, regardless of gender and this is what allows us to be successful in the MFL department.

St Mary's College, Voluntary Catholic Academy, Hull

This is a new academy, formerly St Mary's College. It is an 11-16 and 16-18 Voluntary Aided Roman Catholic school with a Progress 8 score "well above average". It has a higher than average proportion of pupils whose first language is not English (27.7 per cent) and high levels of deprivation. The school is part of St Cuthbert's Roman Catholic Academy Trust whose leaders have had a longstanding commitment to supporting the importance of languages within a broad and balanced curriculum. The school's inclusive policy on GCSE entry sees three quarters (76.6 per cent) of the school's pupils enter the EBacc and it sees MFL playing a key role in social mobility.

In Key Stage 3, pupils start with either French, German or Spanish and make their GCSE option choices in Year 8. As they start Year 9 they have the option of picking up a second language alongside their first. Taking at least one language to GCSE is compulsory for most, apart from those students who struggle significantly with literacy and numeracy. This establishes a high profile for the subject and **senior management support the inclusive entry policy by allocating four hours per week for the subject in Year 11:**

We believe that through our entry policy and a firm commitment to outstanding and engaging teaching, including a conscious focus on grammar and culture within the lessons and an emphasis on motivation, this ensures that we enter high numbers whilst still maintaining positive outcomes.

We believe that having an inclusive entry policy is key to this issue; the underlying message being that of the importance of languages. However, once a school commits to this, the languages department then must ensure they create a climate in which everyone can be successful, otherwise the choice to make languages compulsory for the majority of students is difficult to justify.

The school reports that a focus on speaking and interaction, combined with the formal teaching of grammar, is effective with boys. However:

Generally speaking, we try to find that strategies that work with everyone rather than just boys. It became clear to us a number of years ago that students engage in a lesson where there is some level of emotional involvement. So, if all they are learning in a lesson is the meaning of a set of words this becomes clinical and is alienating. However, if the lesson takes these new words further to show the students how to use them to express

themselves and their ideas/opinions this is intrinsically more interesting. Once we realised this, we were able to put a structure in place which ensured that every lesson led the students to a position of being able to use the language to speak/write in an authentic way and one in which they could really be involved emotionally and personally by the end of the lesson. Underpinning this is a strong focus on grammar since the more students understand about the structure of language, the more able they are to express themselves truly without losing the accuracy. We also have rigorous support systems in place when preparing the students for exams which have been tried and tested over the years.

In our experience, lots of teacher talk puts all students off, as does bland learning of vocabulary in isolation. To make language learning engaging, you have to get them excited about the language and this happens as a result of them finding out about the countries and people, as well as providing them with the knowledge and linguistic tool-kit to truly express their ideas and opinions, so that they emotionally engage in the lesson; as soon as they can say something authentic (rather than words you put in their mouth) they are empowered and motivated.

Alongside formal teaching, the school offers a good array of extra-curricular opportunities involving languages including links with schools in France, Germany and Spain:

We offer well attended revision sessions after school and on the Saturdays before the speaking exams. We take part in local competitions when available. We have an international film club once a month. Our post-16 students come in to talk to our Key Stage 4 students about the value of doing languages and their experience in the sixth form. We also run talks from outside speakers who use their languages in their work. Using our links with our partner schools in France and Spain, we host students from those countries once a year in our school and are in the process of setting up a similar link with Germany.

Christopher Whitehead Language College, Worcester

Christopher Whitehead Language College is a converter academy catering for pupils aged 11-18. It has been judged Good by Ofsted, having an average Progress 8 score and a very high proportion of pupils (82.8 per cent) entering the EBacc. It has lower than average proportions of children eligible for Free School Meals (9.9 per cent) and whose first language is not English (7.8 per cent).

Students are allocated to either German or Spanish when they arrive in the school but can opt into French instead. The school is part of the Mandarin Excellence Programme and students following this also study Spanish. Pupils make their GCSE choices in Year 8 and languages remain mandatory for the vast majority of students with around 90 per cent taking a GCSE. Mandarin has been an option subject for the last five years and take-up has always been strong

amongst boys, though overall numbers have been relatively low (maximum of six).

The school has four male language teachers (and six female) with a male head of department, and comments that having **male teachers work with lower ability groups** tends to work well. The school policy on seating plans is flexible and teachers are able to sit boys next to other boys if they feel it is in their best interest.

The sixth form only opened in 2015 and since then, recruitment to French and German post-16 courses has been almost exclusively been girls, though Spanish has been 50/50 boys/girls. Pupils at the school take part in the Language Leaders award and trips abroad are organised to provide as much language input and practice as possible:

We went on a trip to Spain where all the monitors were native speakers, and they spoke almost exclusively in Spanish. There were opportunities to speak Spanish on a daily basis on excursions, and to interact with the monitors while playing sport.

The key differentiating factor in this school is its pro-languages ethos, deriving from the time when it was a Specialist Language College:

The school has had 'Language College' as part of its name since 2005 when the school chose it as its specialism. We no longer receive Language College funding however the decision was made to keep the name. Pupils and parents are aware that when they come to this school they will have to learn a language in Key Stage 3 and that the vast majority will have to continue in Key Stage 4, so the MFL department is in a strong position as we know we will retain the vast majority of students.

5. Conclusions

The research shows that school policies towards languages which include some form of compulsion for at least some pupils are the greatest determinant of higher than expected participation and achievement by boys. The driver of these policies is frequently the aspiration for as many pupils as possible to achieve the EBacc. The research shows how the Pupil Premium Grant and other inclusionary incentives can be used to bring boys into languages. Following on from this, odds-beating schools bring a great deal of professionalism and expertise to the task of providing effective, motivating lessons and a language-rich environment for their pupils. While their strategies do not necessarily target boys in particular, their effect is perhaps more noticeable in relation to boys given the national picture of under-representation and under-achievement. The research finds no evidence to connect any particular language taught to higher than expected achievement or take-up by boys and contradicts some assumptions about the role of grammar and the importance of male role models. It also indicates that good careers advice/promotion of languages can be an important part of the mix, in conjunction with other measures, and that much more could be done in this area. It also highlights the leadership role that multi-academy trusts could play in bringing about greater equity in access to language learning.

There are worrying indications that the outlook for the future may be less positive in some of the odds-beating schools, bearing in mind that they were identified on the basis of their performance in the period 2013-2018 and some have already withdrawn from making languages compulsory, or are about to do so.

Summary of good practice recommendations

Senior management

Survey responses illustrate ways in which senior school managers create a pro-language ethos within their school, by:

- Allotting a substantial amount of time for languages in Key Stage 4 to allow for a wide ability range to be successful – some respondents cite three to four hours per week.
- Supporting language-related extra-curricular activities (e.g. work with local primary schools, assemblies, visits) financially and allowing teachers time to run them.
- Appointment of a dedicated member of staff responsible for careers advice and guidance with languages. Subsidising careers visits for languages in the same way as those for science. Direct involvement in providing positive messages to pupils about the importance of language learning.
- Avoiding gender stereotyping and giving equal encouragement to boys and girls across the subject range.
- Allowing smaller classes to run – to benefit slower learners or simply where numbers are low.
- Inclusive policies on accepting pupils on GCSE courses.
- Where languages are optional, ensuring languages feature in all or almost all option blocks.

It should be recognised that, in a context of severe financial pressures on schools, additional funding would be necessary to implement some of these recommendations.

Departmental organisation

At departmental level, respondents reference the following practices which support uptake and achievement by boys and girls:

- Provision of opportunities for pupils who do not take a language at GCSE to continue learning a language.
- Provision of support for pupils finding the subject difficult.

- Balancing ability groups to avoid an over-representation of boys in lower ability groups.
- Sharing of good practice with other schools within their multi-academy trust or local area.
- Ensuring that trips abroad have a strong language-learning element.
- Providing a wide range of extra-curricular language activities – both within the school and through partnerships with universities and other bodies. Linking with schools abroad.
- Making sure that pupils have regular opportunities to learn about the value of languages in their future lives and careers. Inviting outside speakers and ex-students into the school to talk about languages.

Teaching approaches

At classroom level, respondents in this research exercise referred to the following practices as factors contributing to the successful languages outcomes in their school:

- A preference for speaking and interaction over writing and decontextualised vocabulary and rule-learning.
- Use of strong frameworks and scaffolding to enable learners to build up their competence and confidence.
- Use of rewards and incentives.
- Use of humour and competitive activities.
- Providing clarity and realism in relation to the student's language learning journey.
- Meticulous preparation for exams.
- Use of film – well-selected films, with work to enable contextualisation and discussion.

Appendix

–Response profiles

All the schools in the original EPI research were non-selective and mixed. Schools with an insufficient number of boys finishing Key Stage 4 each year were also excluded. The chart below shows the characteristics of schools in the base sample compared with those in the achieved sample of responding schools.

	Base	Achieved responses
All	43	32
Roman Catholic	12	11
Church of England	3	2
Christian	1	0
Non-denominational	27	19
Converter Academy	18	15
Sponsor-led Academy	8	5
Voluntary Aided	8	6
Community School	4	3
Foundation School	4	2
Free School	1	1

