National College
for School Leadership

Research Associate
Summary report

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Resource

Closing the gap for groups of pupils: a primary leadership perspective

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Introduction

The recent schools white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (HM Government, 2010) is clear in its direction for education in relation to closing the gap:

> The very best performing education systems show us that there needs to be a... determination to close attainment gaps between pupils from different parts of society.

> HM Government, 2010:8

While there is an evident need to close gaps between the most and least advantaged pupils in society, how does this relate to other groups within schools? What other gaps might need to be closed between what could be seen as vulnerable groups of pupils when compared with others: vulnerable due for example to: special educational needs (SEN), English as an additional language, or gender. Further, how might these gaps be closed and what role do school leaders play in this?

This research project commenced as a result of the author analysing data in her own school, which showed regularly that a small group of able girls were not meeting expectations in mathematics. The research focuses particularly therefore on the relative underperformance of higher attaining girls in maths at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and questions how school leaders address the individual closing the gap issues in their schools. The following research questions formed the basis of the study:

— How do leaders recognise that there is a trend for underachievement?

— What common factors cause groups of pupils to do less well in school?

— How do some schools, identified by Ofsted as being successful, develop learning strategies to support groups of pupils who are not meeting expectations?

— Which leadership behaviours are beneficial to closing the gap for underachievement?

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology within four schools, all in the City of York and graded good or better in their most recent Ofsted inspection at the time of the research. This provided an opportunity sample[1] to the researcher, also a primary headteacher in York. Two were in favourable socio-economic areas and two had more disadvantaged catchments. The methodology comprised:

— four group interviews with approximately 12 Year 5 and 6 girls in each school to investigate their views on their learning in mathematics and how they were taught by teachers of different genders and these teachers' expectations of them

— semi-structured interviews with headteachers in each of the schools and with Year 6 teachers in three schools

Key findings

The study identified four approaches that leaders deploy in endeavouring to close gaps between pupil groups. These are summarised below.

Identifying the gaps

Leaders all spoke of the use of data to highlight pupils who were not meeting expected outcomes:

> "We discuss broadly what is happening; who is underachieving; what should we do? It's not just for [identifying the need for] particular interventions but to [focus upon] an aspect of teaching and learning."

> Headteacher

Leaders also demonstrated their knowledge of their pupils by pinpointing particular groups of pupils in their schools whom they recognised were less likely to meet expectations:

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[1] An opportunity sample consists of the subjects that are available to the researcher at the time the study is carried out.

> Middle-band quiet girls; they are the ones that we have to work hardest with. We are on the lookout for that middle band of children that don't necessarily fit into any category [eg gifted and talented or SEN) and that you can miss if you are not careful.

> Headteacher

This included for example pupils with poor attendance, pupils who coped badly at transition points, and pupils who for whatever reason were unmotivated.

Schools collected and analysed data aside from pupil performance data to inform their planning for groups of pupils. This included pupil surveys, work scrutiny and classroom observation. In all cases the study underlined the importance of school leaders having knowledge about the local context in order to be effective in identifying needs and strategies to successfully address these.

Identifying barriers to achievement

Once the data highlighted gaps in a particular area, leaders spent time analysing these: considering the reasons behind these gaps, looking for root causes, that is, what could be termed barriers to achievement and attainment. The key feature of this process was that it involved leaders and teachers thinking about their own particular context, issues and their potential impact.

Barriers identified included:

— pupils' skills: '[Pupils'] fall-down is to read to solve maths problems; language pulls them back' (headteacher)

— transition points and the potential impact on vulnerable groups: 'We really keep a keen eye on our looked-after children to make sure that they do not lag behind.' (headteacher)

— pupil wellbeing

— in-school variation, for example inconsistency between classes in a year group

The interviews with the girls offered other possible barriers to learning such as ability grouping, relationships with, and the attitudes of, their teacher and preferred styles for learning, as illustrated by these comments from pupils:

> Female teachers praise you about how you learn.

> Males are picky.

These could be seen to reflect some of the conclusions of other gender-based studies that investigated how some systems can enhance learning for a majority of pupils but can disadvantage a minority.

Taking action

Taking action included a wide range of strategies. While these included intervention programmes, they were not confined to these approaches as perhaps might have been predicted.

There were examples of:

— headteacher-led strategies, eg, an aspiration programme to help pupils recognise the importance of maths

— changes in staffing structures to support pupils causing concern

— professional development for staff involved in supporting pupils causing concern

— creating a culture in school to encourage staff to try out different strategies: 'We as teachers need to think if a child is struggling. We have got to think, "that way worked the last two years, but I have got to think of a different way of doing it."' (teacher)

— recognition of needs of a particular cohort of children and teaching adjusted to meet their needs

— programmes set up to build up confidence as well as improve learning, for example one-to-one tuition

— recognition of the importance of parents/carers and family to support pupils and encourage involvement in school

Evaluating impact

All leaders cited examples of reviewing practice to ensure that the strategies that had been planned were impacting on pupils' learning and closing the gap. This included not only checking performance data but also monitoring and evaluating the impact of measures deployed to address other issues such as barriers to children's emotional wellbeing and confidence in school.

Staff teams were involved in assessing the impact on pupils, so encouraging accountability for pupils' learning by all staff.

Which leadership behaviours are beneficial to closing the gap for groups?

Key leadership behaviours for closing the gap arising from the study were:

— modelling the importance of a well-structured organisation and systems to support closing the gap work

— commitment to meet the learning needs of all pupils

— taking personal oversight of performance data while working within a collaborative team

— exhibiting tenacity, rigour and thoroughness, for example in considering context, ensuring appropriate provision and monitoring outcomes for vulnerable learners

— demonstrating high expectations of staff accountable for pupil performance

— creating an ethos that encourages learning and reflection

— empowering others to try different strategies to meet pupils' learning needs

— being open to devising new strategies to meet the changing learning needs of identified groups

— adopting an outward-facing perspective to engage with critical partners, eg parents

— recognising and valuing collaborative work with colleagues to develop strategies, so practising distributed leadership

Recommendations

Based on this study, the recommendations for closing the gap in pupils' learning that can be offered to headteachers and other leaders are as follows:

— Create a culture in school that encourages reflection on practice, and values professional development to improve pupils' learning.

— Maintain knowledge of effective teaching and learning strategies so these can be deployed in supporting strategies focused on the needs of vulnerable learners.

— Maintain awareness of individual pupils and their specific needs so leaders and teachers are able to recognise these and provide personalised learning programmes.

— Maintain effective systems for monitoring and evaluating school performance, using data to identify gaps.

— Place value upon school pastoral systems to ensure children are gaining in confidence from their learning and attending school regularly.

— Listen to the views of a cross-section of pupils so that a range of voices are heard before setting up learning programmes.

— Find ways of ensuring ongoing knowledge of the local context.

— Ensure progress and outcomes are rigorously monitored and evaluated.

— Ensure leadership is distributed to promote strategy development and shared accountability.

— Support leaders in their roles.

References

HM Government, 2010, *The Importance of Teaching*: The Schools White Paper 2010, Cm 7980, Norwich, HMSO

Acknowledgements

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