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Research Associate Full report

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Resource

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

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Abstract

Closing the gap between the attainment of more and less advantaged pupils is a current national priority. While recognising the importance of this imperative, there are other gaps between pupil groups that appear through analysis of school performance data. Closing the gap can therefore arguably apply to a range of groupings between which relative underachievement and vulnerability are identified.

This study focuses on how leaders in a small sample of primary schools worked to close the attainment gap between groups of pupils deemed vulnerable. While the study particularly focused on the attainment in mathematics of more able girls and their relative underperformance, it also sought to explore and understand strategies, systems and behaviours used to close the gap in other contexts within the schools.

The study identified four key activities used by schools and their leaders to close the gap, namely:

1. identifying gaps through use of data
2. identifying barriers to achievement
3. taking action
4. evaluating impact

The study identifies a range of leadership behaviours that support closing the gap activities and offers recommendations for other school leaders carrying out such work.

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

This is not a new message but one that school leaders have been grappling with for some time. It is not restricted to this country; other countries such as Finland have been particularly successful over the last 20 years in addressing the achievement gap between low and high achievers (Sahlberg, 2009). The challenge is then for our country to rectify this too.

The Cambridge Review (Hofkins & Northen, 2009) noted that children in England can be marginalised by their religion, race, disability and even their gender, while the *Narrowing the Gap* project (Martin et al, 2009) underlined the importance of a strong and consistent focus on the needs of all pupils, but particularly the most vulnerable.

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, 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 number of able girls were not reaching expectations in mathematics. The research focuses particularly therefore on the relative performance of higher attaining girls in maths at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and questions how school leaders address 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?

This research provides an opportunity to learn how primary school leaders address gaps in pupil achievement and attainment using strategies, systems and behaviours to achieve this.

Literature review

This literature review is divided into two parts. The first identifies some of the issues related to girls and their achievement in mathematics. The second identifies leadership strategies for closing the gap.

Issues related to girls and their achievement in mathematics

Over the last 12 years, there has been greater emphasis on developing equality. This is reflected in legislation that European countries have introduced, including the Human Rights Act 1998, Equality Act 2006 and the Equality Act 2010. All public institutions have to address how they are going to perform against these new requirements. It rightly falls to schools to ensure that they are working to meet all their pupils' learning needs. Professor John West-Burnham notes in Idr (2011) that 'the most challenging aspect of leadership in schools is the imperative to secure excellence and equity'. This is not limited to those pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds but includes all those who are vulnerable to underperformance in our schools. However, although gender can be one factor affecting performance gaps, there are additional complexities to be considered:

While gender is one of the key factors affecting educational performance, it affects different sub-groups of boys and girls in different ways.

DCSF, 2008:1

While at Level 4 there is little variation between attainment by boys and girls at KS2, at Level 5, boys continue to outperform girls in maths: in 2010 by 5 per cent and in 2011 by 4 per cent. This inconsistency at higher attainment levels might indicate that teaching and learning at these levels favour boys, and validates the warning:

The crucial point is in ensuring that policies designed to improve boys' results do not do so at the expense of girls.

DCSF, 2008:1

In meeting gender-related learning preferences, the literature highlights different teaching strategies that can be introduced. For example, a focus on single-sex grouping for teaching was noted by the DCSF publication, Single Sex Teaching (2008b), which commented that:

Boys felt that the use of fast-paced lessons with short-term tasks made the lessons more enjoyable and interesting. Girls on the other hand accrued less benefit from this arrangement and this may reflect the observation in other research in this area, that boys' single sex lessons are adapted and tailored more than girls' single sex lessons.

DCSF, 2008:30

Different teaching styles have also been recognised to affect gender-related learning. Dweck's research (1999) highlights how negative labels can affect some pupils' performance. This might be displayed for example through teachers' perceptions of the performance of girls in maths and their communication of these:

Almost anything that reminds you that you are black or female before taking a test in the subject that you are supposed to be bad at will lower your test score.

Dweck, 1999:75

Related to this, Paule (2008) notes that in achieving gender equality in teaching and learning, talking about gender issues is a first important step. She adds:

Gendered self-perceptions can be central to learning behaviours and choices and these can be either be ameliorated or negatively reinforced by school and subject cultures.

Paule, 2008:3

Paule suggests using methods such as focus groups with pupils to give teachers and/or leaders an in-depth view of the issues.

The National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) has published research (Welch & Harding, 2010) illustrating that investigative activities could contribute to girls achieving Level 5 in maths. This was allied to a focus on promoting skills and attitudes such as resilience, reasoning and discussion of ideas that could raise the girls' confidence in the subject. These skills and attitudes would accord with Claxton's view that 'children do not develop learning skills and stamina by being protected from difficulty' (Claxton, 2000: 4). Emphasis in the lessons researched in this study was accordingly 'put on the problem-solving process rather than finding answers' (ibid). The outcome of the project was that the girls in the study achieved Level 5 but that this approach also benefited boys.

As girls are noted (Brandell & Staberg, 2008) for worrying more about how they do at school, are we perpetuating failure in maths by teaching that getting a problem wrong is incorrect? Other research has also studied children's attitudes towards mathematics. Ashby (2009:8), for example, noted that 'girls expressed much lower confidence than boys, even among the high achievers'. Brandell and Staberg (2008) also noted in their study that mathematics is seen as a more male domain.

Research by Nunes et al (2009:1) focusing on the development of mathematical capabilities and confidence in primary schools noted that 'children's self-confidence in maths is predicted most strongly by their own mathematical competence but also independently by their gender (girls are less confident than boys) and by streaming'. They suggested that the implication of this is that it is 'important to pay attention to the affective aspects of children's maths learning' (ibid).

While the section above only briefly considers some of the issues related to girls' achievement in mathematics, it highlights the importance of identifying what the specific barriers are to learning and what might be done to address these. This is one of the key aspects of leadership for closing the gap and it is the leadership aspects that the second section now considers.

Leadership for closing the gap

In *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership* (Leithwood et al, 2006:7), the authors claim that leadership 'is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning' and that 'leadership has very significant effects on the quality of school organisation and pupil learning' (ibid:8). It follows that leadership for closing the gap should hold substantial influence over practices that seek to achieve this in the classroom.

In *What we know about school leadership* (National College, 2007), we are told that successful leaders need to be:

Contextually literate... [which] means using a mix of school evaluation methods and student outcome data to recognise trends and the 'brute facts' of the school's levels of performance.

National College, 2007:5

Clearly, the use of performance data to identify gaps and understand their contextual significance is likely to be a key focus for closing the gap and leaders' roles in this.

While numerical data is one source that leaders will wish to explore, there are other possible sources of information that aid leaders in understanding context. MacBeath (2005) reminds us that 'pupils in the school are the largest, untapped knowledge source' (MacBeath, 2005:24), referred to by Soo Hoo as 'the treasure in our backyard' (MacBeath, 2005:34). Jackson (2005) similarly highlighted how valuable the pupil voice can be

in gaining further insight into monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning in school classrooms:

Pupil voice work is about valuing people and valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities and the multiple voices in our school.

Jackson, 2005:21

The use of pupil focus groups in this study represents such an insight into pupils' learning.

The authors of *Review of the Landscape: Leadership and Leadership Development* also highlight the importance of the leadership role for teaching and learning:

The leader needs consciously to create a strong sense of being a professional community... with professional development, reflective practice and quality improvements practice all part of the routines.

Lewis & Murphy, 2008:24

In *Narrowing the Gap for Vulnerable Groups*, there is emphasis on the importance of 'creating the right positive ethos, emotional climate and culture' (Kendall et al, 2007:3). This research also notes that:

There is good evidence to suggest that providing a supportive framework for learning which addresses individual and group needs is a key component in raising achievement amongst disadvantaged and under-performing groups.

Kendall et al, 2007:4

It could be said that these principles can be applied to any approach to closing the gap, not just those targeted at working against disadvantage.

A subsequent report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) focusing on narrowing the gap (Martin et al, 2009) pinpointed six ways in which leadership helped to narrow the gap in pupil attainment, again centring on disadvantaged pupils. These largely reinforce the points made above and comprise:

- 'prioritising the most vulnerable and developing a local vision
- championing the voice of vulnerable groups and encouraging their participation
- using good-quality data to identify needs and provide services for vulnerable groups
- developing and motivating the workforce to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups
- having an unrelenting drive and passion to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups
- fostering partnership working around vulnerable groups'

Martin et al, 2009:iv-v

Linked to closing the gap in pupil outcomes, a National College report (2006) noted that effective leaders addressed in-school variation through:

- raising awareness and responsibility
- using data
- learning from peers
- reviewing curricular provision
- developing standard expectations for teaching and learning
- having consistency in behavioural expectations

Prioritising and sustaining the focus on vulnerable groups is recognised as being vital to success and

therefore key to the leadership role. A National College report on reducing within-school variation highlighted the headteacher's role in prioritising its importance as heads can see 'the overview and invest personal attention in deciding upon steps required in narrowing the gap' (National College, 2006:36). However, the Narrowing the Gap project noted the importance of sustainability, stating that:

Many interventions have been short term, with resourcing reduced just when they begin to be effective and before there is time for them to be properly evaluated.

Kendall et al, 2007:7

The importance of leadership capacity to prioritise and sustain focus is something Reynolds noted in relation to the within-school variation project, stating:

It might well be that one limitation to whole-school evaluation and improvements is that headteachers are often over-loaded because of problems that should fall to middle managers.

Reynolds, 2008:18

This adds credence to the importance of distributed leadership for successful school leadership, as recognised by Davies (2008).

Closing the gap is a focus for leaders worldwide and while, as highlighted in the introduction, this most frequently relates to the least advantaged in relation to the most advantaged, this can be seen as a wider issue. Michael Fullan's foreword to the McKinsey report poses the particularly challenging question 'How do we actually "raise the bar and close the gap" for all students?' (Barber et al, 2010:6), while the precursor report (Barber & Mourshed, 2007) highlighted the work of the Singaporean education system in closing the gap between different ethnic groups.

School leadership in the literature cited has the power to make a significant impact on the learning outcomes of a vulnerable group but, arguably, to far greater effect when the leadership is distributed and where the school has a culture of learning for all which is modelled by the school leader. There are clear focuses above for those leading approaches to close gaps and this provides a helpful backdrop to the remainder of the report, which focuses on what school leaders did to address gaps in their own contexts.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology within four schools in the City of York, all graded good or better in their most recent Ofsted inspection at the time of the research. This provided an opportunity sample¹ to the researcher, also a primary headteacher in York. Two of the schools were in favourable socio-economic areas and two had more disadvantaged catchments. The methodology used four pupil-focus groups with approximately 12 pupils in each and interviews with four headteachers and three teachers.

Focus groups with pupils (all girls) were carried out in May 2010. These were chosen to investigate teachers' gender expectations and pupil views at each of the schools. The groups were made up of Year 5 and Year 6 girls from three ability levels: below, average and above average in terms of age-related national expectations for maths. The girls had cards numbered 1-10 which they used to vote on the questions they were asked. The questions included a focus on maths. This proved to be a good device to ensure that the pupils participated. During the sessions, some of the pupils' comments were noted down. The pupils' responses guided the researcher in developing the interview questions for headteacher and teacher interviews.

Interviews with the four headteachers were carried out in June 2010. Interviews were also carried out with the Year 6 class teacher in three of the schools following the headteacher interviews. The headteacher interviews comprised approximately 15 questions on the following areas:

- background of the school
- leadership strategies
- identification of trends
- leadership strategies for improvement and closing the gap

The Year 6 teacher interviews included questions on lesson planning and personalisation of pupils' learning. The semi-structured interview style used with all interviewees allowed the questions to be guided around the areas noted above, allowing comparisons to be made between responses.

It is recognised that interviewing a greater number of headteachers across a wider geographical region would have enriched the research, as would interviewing a greater number of Year 6 teachers in each school.

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

Findings

The findings showed that schools engaged in four main activities in their leadership for closing the gap, namely:

1. identifying the gaps through use of data
2. identifying barriers to achievement
3. taking action
4. evaluating impact

These are developed below.

Identifying the gaps

All of the leaders interviewed ensured there were systems in place to track individual and group performance in order to identify underperformance and potential trends. These systems included involvement of the leadership team in analysing data at a strategic level.

The extent to which systems were distributed in their leadership varied: for example, one headteacher took a prime role in analysing pupils' progress:

"I look at the data in the summer. I analyse all the results and then I can see dips. Data flags up the rate of progress - if not the expected rate, what are the barriers?"

Headteacher

One school had established a raising achievement team which included the KS1 and KS2 specialists who were also the literacy and numeracy leaders, a pastoral worker, special educational needs co-ordinator and the headteacher:

"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

Another school devolved responsibility for analysing data to the assessment co-ordinator and deputy headteacher. All team members in these distributed approaches were recognised as having particular skills and all headteachers spoke positively of these teams, recognising how their contributions helped consideration of barriers and strategies for improvement.

Some schools used progress meetings to ensure that regular review of pupils' progress occurred to help ensure that identified gaps were closing and others were not emerging. For example, one school had termly meetings with class teachers and teaching assistants involving the assessment co-ordinator and headteacher:

"The reason we did it was to check on those pupils who were on the edge of slipping."

Headteacher

One headteacher identified a target group for underperformance that was highlighted by the data:

"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

Analysing pupil progress data was seen as part of the wider picture of assessing pupil achievement and was supplemented by approaches that provided additional information. These included:

- Classroom observations: used to gain complementary perspectives on pupil performance. For example, in one school this hinged on the headteacher and deputy headteacher regularly monitoring progress in all classes.
- Assessing pupils' work and consulting with them/interviewing them: this provided an alternative but rich perspective.
- Pupil surveys: in one school a survey was used to provide data on pupil aspirations. This highlighted a lack of aspiration in girls: having a baby in the future was their main aspiration. Martin et al (2009:3) recognised that 'championing the voice of vulnerable groups and encouraging their participation' is a key leadership role.

The last example links to the next section. In identifying low aspirations in the data, the headteacher in this school identified this as a barrier to achievement.

Identifying barriers to achievement

Once the data highlighted gaps in a particular area, leaders spent time analysing these by considering the reasons for the gaps and looking for root causes of 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.

Views of leaders and teachers

One headteacher stated that when she first took the school over:

"We had a trend of value-added being low in maths particularly at the top end [ie more able pupils]."

Headteacher

She then worked with the maths subject leader and the local authority maths consultant to pinpoint the problem. Following observations of teaching and learning across the school, the key barrier that emerged was that some teachers' expectations were insufficiently high. This was evidenced both in insufficient levels of differentiation in planning and in teachers not using more challenging questioning techniques to draw out pupils' higher order reasoning.

The pupil progress meetings schools held were seen as opportunities to aid teachers' analysis of the data, consideration of likely barriers and decisions about what could be done to secure improvement:

"[The meetings] have been useful in getting teachers not only to identify why [some pupils are] failing but what to do about it... [it] helps teachers make the connection."

Headteacher

In another school, year-group teachers talking to pupils about their maths work led to recognition that there was variation between classes and that this was a barrier to the learning and achievement of pupils across the cohort.

Barriers relating to pupils' wellbeing and their effect upon their achievement were also highlighted in interviews, characterised by the statement:

"If children feel ready, secure and safe then they are successful."

Headteacher

Allied to this was the awareness of headteachers that for some children, transition can be pivotal to their progress (Sharples et al, 2011). A change of teacher and the time required to build new relationships were seen as potential barriers to progress, as was new class teachers being insufficiently knowledgeable about a child's learning needs.

Schools recognised that more vulnerable pupils required more support at points of transition because the performance of these pupils was susceptible to easily slipping:

“We really keep a keen eye on our looked-after children to make sure that they do not lag behind.”

Headteacher

Another headteacher spoke about ‘highlighting individuals at transition points that coast or who are quiet’ so that transition effects were highlighted.

All the headteachers reiterated how important it was for class teachers to know their children really well so that underachievement could be spotted. However, some also stated that there need to be checks and balances in place so that someone other than the class teacher has oversight of pupil progress so that, for example, a group of children does not go unnoticed. One headteacher commented that these groups ‘tended to be the quieter children who don’t present with any problems but just get on’. The same head noted that these could be ‘quiet, not very streetwise girls, non-resilient girls’.

Pupils’ limited language skills were also identified as a barrier to achievement in some schools. Some children were viewed as starting school immediately disadvantaged in terms of these. A headteacher from a socially disadvantaged area noted:

“The challenges at age three are that the children are already in catch-up mode [and consequently] their fall-down [later on in the school] is to read to solve [maths] problems: language pulls them back.”

Headteacher

Another headteacher from a similarly disadvantaged area had similar issues but saw the root cause as a social factor:

“We get children who are coming in with very little language [but it’s] not a social class issue; more technology issues which keep children occupied [but] that does not involve talk.”

Headteacher

Pupil interview findings

The views expressed by the groups of girls interviewed in each school give another perspective on potential barriers related to their learning in maths. The girls identified the following barriers.

Groupings can create problems related to pupils’ perception of their ability in the subject. In two schools, the girls recognised that ability groups were not fixed and they could change according to their performance. These pupils appeared to have a more positive view of maths than those from schools where they considered they could not move ability groups. This suggests that flexibility within groups can link to pupils’ attitudes. The system of groupings can create unforeseen problems as noted in the title of a paper by William and Bartholomew (2004): ‘It’s not which school but which set you’re in that matters: the influence of ability grouping practices on student progress in mathematics’.

The girls’ view of maths seemed to be affected by their relationship with their teacher for maths and their perception of how their teacher viewed their effort and/or ability. Views voiced included:

- Female teachers praise you about how you learn.
- Males are picky.

-
- Female teachers are patient, understanding and listen to you.
 - Men are fun.

These comments highlight perceptions of different gender characteristics based on the experience of the small sample of girls interviewed. However, such perceptions might influence attitudes towards the subject and achievement. This links with recommendations about paying attention to the affective aspects of children's mathematics learning (Nunes et al, 2009).

When asked about which aspect of the maths lesson they liked best, only a third of the girls in the focus groups liked mental maths. This mirrors the DCSF (2008) evidence which noted that it was the boys who liked fast-paced lessons. The girls' preference was for problem-solving but this varied from nearly all to two-thirds of the pupils interviewed.

Taking action

Once performance gaps had been analysed and barriers to achievement considered, leaders sought to take action by identifying strategies they believed would secure improvement and close gaps.

The highlighting of girls' low aspirations by a survey caused the school's headteacher to decide that: 'We needed to build in something more for aspiration'. As a result, each year group adopted a curriculum focus on aspirations which coincided with a career adviser developing a career-related scheme that the school could take part in. The interview responses from the group of girls in this school, carried out as part of this research, indicated the impact of this development. The subjects displayed greater recognition than the other groups of the importance of maths for their future learning and careers. Only 1 girl out of a group of 12 thought it would not be important.

The school that identified teachers' low expectations of higher attaining pupils to be a barrier planned a series of strategies to address this. This took the form of:

- staff development focused on planning for this particular group as well as the questioning skills required to increase reasoning
- reviewing and subsequently changing the way learning support staff were deployed in classes so that differentiation was supported more effectively

This approach reflects NFER findings which emphasise that one of the ways in which leadership helped to narrow the gap was 'to develop and motivate the workforce to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups' (Martin et al, 2009:29).

Issues relating to transition were addressed in one school by employing a teacher with a teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) point for 'chasing on transition information flow properly' (headteacher). This was because it had been recognised by this school's progress team that its systems were preventing the school from being efficient with its data in some cases.

Where variation in pupils' progress within a cohort was identified through pupil consultation, teachers took action by adopting a more consistent, year-group-based approach to planning learning. This reflects the point made in the *Narrowing the Gap* report (National College, 2006) that effective leaders address standardisation in teaching to reduce in-school variation.

In working against the potential effects of pupil wellbeing issues and their potential impact on achievement, one headteacher spoke of the school's 'vulnerable children and what we can do to support them'. In this instance, the school chose to recruit a new staff member to a new position of pastoral worker. This benefited the school as it meant that problems affecting children's progress could be picked up by someone with a specific role for doing so.

Schools that faced issues of poor language skills addressed these through two separate approaches:

- adjusting the teaching in the Foundation Stage to create a more language-intensive environment
- setting up parenting classes focusing particularly on speech and language

“One of the things we do look at with parents is how to talk with your child.”

Headteacher

It was anticipated that these approaches would not only impact on being able to read maths problems later on but improve pupils’ skills in English and their overall achievement.

For the school that focused on the quiet, middle-band girls, a mini-action plan was developed. This focused on what needed to be done in terms of teaching and learning for specific pupils:

“Linda is 3c, what is going to spark her off? We need to get the curriculum right. What is right for one group is not necessarily right for another group. What is it that is going to take those children into learning?”

Headteacher

This view was reinforced by other interviewees:

“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

One headteacher commented:

“It is about picking up individual pupils’ needs and tweaking and thinking about what you do... [you have]... got to evaluate as you go along and think I want to tweak that. You have to give people time to try things out, see what works and what doesn’t.”

Headteacher

Headteachers were also aware of the danger of repeating a strategy for these pupils because it worked last time:

“Know your groups and make sure that they are learning effectively.”

Headteacher

Introducing revised systems to involve different groups of pupils in their learning was evident in the schools researched and reflects West-Burnham’s (2009) emphasis on critical reflection. One approach taken to engage girls more was to put in place approaches that encouraged girls to take part in the interactive part of the maths lesson, as they traditionally engaged in this less. This included more targeted questioning of girls. Another teacher spoke of using peer-support approaches, based in part on her own experience as a student:

“I needed a lot of practice to learn with A-level maths, the teacher used to make fun of me. The girl I sat next to in A-level really helped me... I do a lot of encouraging where they work together [as] study buddies.”

Teacher

Another headteacher commented on the deployment of learning support assistants through the use of targeted intervention programmes such as Springboard. Its effectiveness, however, he considered largely dependent on teachers carefully identifying children who needed support, and monitoring their progress throughout the programme.

Other headteachers saw the impact of one-to-one tuition on pupils’ confidence as the way to unlock learning for some pupils. This had impacted upon pupils in a very positive way. However, it meant that the tutor needed to have the interpersonal and motivational skills to promote confidence, with one headteacher stating that when this was not evident, impact was negligible.

These comments highlighted the importance of headteachers knowing the strengths of their staff so that they are able to deploy them feeling confident that their intervention will have a positive impact on pupils' performance.

Allied to this was investment in staff training, for example in relation to teacher programmes for one-to-one tuition, or those that could be taught by learning support staff so that staff were well equipped:

“Every half-term, half a day is set aside for teaching assistant training.”

Headteacher

Headteachers also spoke of the importance of work with parents in terms of supporting pupils in school. Although some headteachers had similar challenges, it was evident that they used different strategies to develop learning in their school and further involvement of parents in their child's learning. This confirms the view noted in *Review of the Landscape* (Lewis & Murphy, 2008) that school leaders have to be responsive to their own context in order to do the best for their pupils. Pupils, when asked about how they knew they were doing well, cited in 60 per cent of responses that it was their family who told them so. This reflects again the importance of parental involvement in children's learning for children's wellbeing.

In taking action, leaders were critical in considering which strategies to use so that these would meet the needs of the pupils:

“We will only do something that makes a difference... we won't jump on a bandwagon because it is a new initiative. We evaluate to see if it's going to have that impact. It's very much geared to meeting our children's needs which are different to [those of] other children in other schools.”

Headteacher

The actions that the headteacher interviewed took to address closing the gap issues have similarities with those practices recommended in the literature review.

In *What do we know about school leadership* (National College 2007:5) 'successful leaders need to be contextually literate'. Examples such as strategies for working with parents evidenced in the research are a clear example of this. Headteachers working in catchments where parents needed a lot of support recognised the need for alternative staffing systems, and the offer of parenting classes. As the NFER report noted:

There is strong evidence to suggest that putting in place prevention or early intervention strategies that address the underlying issues preventing children's well-being is a more effective approach than intervening later.

Kendall et al, 2007:5

The school leader setting up different systems for addressing the language problems of the youngest pupils in school is an example of a headteacher leading in this respect.

Evaluating impact

As a consequence of taking action, schools then ensured that they evaluated the impact of strategies used. All headteachers referred to making staff accountable for pupils' learning and had systems in place to make sure that agreed systems were being carried through:

“[There is] quite a lot of checking done through the year. It is about systems. It is just seen as part of the life of the school. This is what we do and this improves our work.”

Headteacher

The means through which they did this included tracking and analysing pupil performance data using internal, school-based systems and externally produced reports. This might be done through a combination of pupil progress meetings, leadership or other team meetings and staff in-service training (Inset):

“All staff are wholly involved in monitoring and reviewing the work that we are doing. Training days are set aside for this.”

Headteacher

“The whole system can track impact of intervention.”

Headteacher

Another method for accountability was reporting to school governors:

“Co-ordinators report to governors what is going well, what needs to improve. [They] identify which children are sticking and what they need for next year.”

Headteacher

Headteachers considered that these systems contributed to staff awareness, knowledge, accountability and responsibility. This accords in part with effective leaders being recognised in *Narrowing the Gap* as those ‘raising awareness and responsibility’ (National College, 2006:36) in order to address in-school variation.

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

The evidence above demonstrates that headteachers needed to have an open mind in devising strategies to support pupils causing concern. They created cultures that supported enquiry and reflection and this would seem to be pivotal to ensuring that gaps are closed for all pupils. One headteacher, for example, spoke of the value of creating other interventions besides national initiatives and giving staff the freedom to do this. Another recognised how leaders need to support staff to encourage them to try different strategies. Headteachers therefore presented solution-focused behaviours that were distributed in style. National College research suggests that when leadership is distributed, it is learning-centred leadership that most needs to be shared:

Learning-centred leadership relentlessly focuses on learning, most of all student learning processes and outcomes, but also staff learning and development, especially pedagogic development.

National College, 2007:8

There was clear evidence of headteachers empowering their teams, recognising that some strategies might work better than others for different groups of children, and that what mattered was team members signing up to improve practice for these groups. This also reflects one of the points about effective leadership in the *Narrowing the Gap* project (Martin et al, 2009), namely developing and motivating the workforce to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups.

To be effective in doing this required a well-organised and structured organisation with recognised systems for managing and developing staff, as well as for monitoring and evaluating quality. Behaviours that modelled the importance of these systems and prioritised their development and implementation underpinned much of the schools’ work. This would seem to support a comment by Leithwood et al on effective school leadership:

The most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g. in their pursuit of high expectation of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient and optimistic.

Leithwood et al, 2006:14

Another behaviour shown by all the headteachers interviewed was their individual passion to do the best for all the pupils in their school. Interestingly, in the majority of cases, it was the headteachers who oversaw the analysis of performance data in school and raised questions about why expectations were not being met. Reynolds (2008) too promoted the value of headteachers identifying and targeting within-school variation.

More importantly, the schools interviewed continued to monitor the progress of these children through their time in their environment. This included for example ensuring that the focus group of children attend school regularly:

“We have to make sure children attend school regularly. If they didn’t they would fall behind. It takes a disproportionate amount of time.”

Headteacher

This reiterates NFER’s finding about outcomes, particularly in reference to ‘an unrelenting drive and passion to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups’ (Martin et al, 2009:v). The headteachers interviewed also exhibited behaviours of tenacity and thoroughness to ensure that pupils met expectations.

Their behaviours mirrored research identified in the earlier Narrow the Gap project (Kendall et al, 2007), which identified the importance of sustaining the focus on vulnerable groups. This commitment to pupils’ achievement was complemented by headteacher aspiration for their achievement, as in the case of the headteacher who put in place a programme to raise aspirations for girls.

What was particularly interesting was the variety of strategies that each school used to develop learning for vulnerable pupils. There were examples of a focus on working with partners (for example setting up parenting classes), recognised in the Narrowing the Gap project (Martin et al, 2009:15) under the heading ‘Fostering partnership working around vulnerable groups’ as effective leadership practice. Headteachers therefore maintained an outward focus in developing learning strategies for their pupils.

Conclusion

The study identifies 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. 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. This included pupils with poor attendance, pupils who coped badly at transition points, and pupils who for whatever reason were unmotivated. This suggests that in this study, schools have other data that they draw on outside the hard pupil performance data to inform their planning for groups of pupils. It also underlines the importance of having knowledge about the local context in order to be effective as a school leader in implementing new strategies successfully.

Identifying barriers to achievement

Each school recognised barriers that might prevent pupils from meeting expectations. This often involved using other teachers' expertise to recognise what may be causing the problem. The subsequent focus on engaging in dialogue around learning could be regarded as aligned with learning-centred leadership (National College, 2004).

The interviews with the girls suggested other possible barriers to learning such as grouping, relationships with the teacher and preferred learning styles. These could be seen to reflect some of the conclusions of other studies that investigated how some systems can enhance learning for a majority of pupils but can disadvantage a minority. This would also support Nunes et al's study suggesting, for example, that it is 'important to pay attention to the affective aspects of children's maths learning' (Nunes et al, 2009:1).

Taking action

Taking action included a wide range of strategies that were not confined to intervention programmes 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 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 different strategies
- recognition of the needs of a particular cohort of children and teaching adjusted to meet their needs
- programmes to build confidence as well as improve learning, eg one-to-one tuition
- recognition of the importance of parents/carers and family in supporting pupils and encouraging 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 other issues such as barriers to children's emotional wellbeing and confidence in school. Staff teams were involved in checking 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.

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