Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives

National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Schools and academies

Leadership for closing the gap

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Leadership for closing the gap: full report summary

The National College's initiative on leadership for closing the gap was aimed at improving participants' leadership for closing gaps in achievement by increasing their confidence and capacity to act, deepening their understanding of successful practice, demonstrating effective leadership approaches, and sharing the outcomes with a wider audience. This report presents a synopsis of the reports produced by groups working on the programme, explores and synthesises the leadership practices across a sample of the groups and makes connections with the wider research evidence. It ends with suggestions for the implications for policy and practice.

Summary of key findings

Leadership processes, strategies and attributes

Clarifying aims and focuses: Group leaders took one of three approaches to identifying and framing their achievement gap problem and clarifying aims and focuses:

— a pragmatic, whole-school improvement approach, looking at school development priorities and choosing something from existing plans and targets

— a what worked well approach, learning from developments that recently worked for them and refining the approach with a specific group of children and young people or extending it to a wider group

— a needs analysis approach, using and verifying attainment data to explore the patterns relating to the needs of different student groups in order to identify and clarify a suitable focus

Selecting an intervention: To identify an intervention that could achieve their aims, groups often went through several steps:

— consulting within the group, pooling knowledge and ideas

— consulting beyond the group, talking to colleagues, children and young people and their families, and other professionals

— investigating approaches in use elsewhere

— using a range of research techniques

Some groups moved more quickly than others towards making their decision, but those taking longer sometimes used the process to build ownership among key stakeholders or to develop deeper relationships between partnership schools before making a final decision.

Involving others: Teachers, and middle and senior leaders were the core participants. Children, young people and their families were also sometimes involved as agents. Two main models of project leadership arrangements were established:

— a leadership group model, replicating existing school leadership arrangements by appointing representatives (generally middle leaders) in each participating school, with overall project leadership given to a small group, usually two headteachers or deputy headteachers

— a working group model, drawing from various school roles, and disrupting traditional school hierarchies as teachers from the working group led more senior colleagues in adapting and implementing project activities

Limited reach was achieved if the partnership only involved a small group in a single school or was confined to senior leaders.

Working in partnership: Methods for collaborating within the partnership included leadership or working group meetings, visits to observe and share practice, centralised training, resource exchange and workshops. Benefits of the partnerships included specialist knowledge and expertise, new ideas and critical friendship.

Identifying and solving problems: Tackling a challenging issue such as closing the gap and working in partnership to achieve this inevitably threw up problems on the way, such as attending to learning needs, differentiation for diverse contexts, staff motivation, keeping everyone involved, practical arrangements, parental involvement, and differences in school cultures and leadership styles. An important role of group leaders was to understand and sort out problems as they arose. Explicit strategies included project and risk management techniques.

Providing leadership development and CPD: Leadership development and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities were often used by leaders as the principle method of involving staff and seeking to change practice to meet the needs of specific groups. Leadership development programmes tended to be broad-based and focused on developing general leadership skills that were useful but not necessarily specific to the project. CPD opportunities, by contrast, tended to focus on skills directly relevant to project aims and focuses, often introducing new practice to support interventions. School leaders were practically involved in designing and delivering the CPD.

Developing plans for roll-out: Groups' plans for project roll-out fell into three categories. Some aimed to transfer the new practice within partnership schools or to a wider group of schools. Others tried to extend or change their approach to focus on the needs of additional or different groups of children. A third group intended to develop capacity as a project team or partnership further in order to tackle new projects.

Knowledge, skills and attributes for leadership in closing the gap: Groups drew on generic leadership attributes, knowledge and skills whilst working on closing the gap and to help overcome related problems. In particular, moral purpose and values were essential attributes. Credibility, rigour and tenacity were also important. Groups drew on their knowledge of local needs and working understanding of effective practice on the frontline. The most important skills were the ability to delegate, data analysis, communication and strategic thinking.

Leadership for closing the gap: outcomes

Impact on learners: The most common impacts on students were: improvements in performance across the curriculum or in specific areas of learning; affective benefits (eg, improved attitudes, motivation, enjoyment, engagement, self-esteem, aspirations and relationships), development of transferable skills and greater independence in learning.

Impact on leaders, staff and stakeholders: There was also a range of positive outcomes for senior and middle leaders, teachers and support staff, governors and members of the wider workforce. These included:

— greater confidence in partnership and collaborative work on closing gaps in outcomes

— the development of specific knowledge, skills and attributes related to the content and focus of the project work

— development of processes for designing and implementing interventions

— participation in general leadership activities that led to improvements in leadership skills, knowledge and attributes

— opportunities for learning, reflection, strategic thinking and relationship-building

Wider school and partnership impact: For a significant number of participants, the initiative also had a wider impact in influencing whole-school or, sometimes, partnership development, by putting in place new systems and mechanisms, developing ethos and culture, forming better relationships and improved parental involvement.

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