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National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Schools and academies

Leadership for closing the gap

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Philippa Cordingley, Julie Temperley, Natalia Buckler

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE)

Resource

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Background

In 2008/09, the National College launched an initiative on leadership for closing the gap. This was in response to the national emphasis placed on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and also reflected the priorities and concerns of many school leaders. The aims of the initiative were to:

- improve participants' leadership for closing the gap by increasing their confidence and capacity to act, and deepening their understanding of successful practice
- demonstrate effective approaches to improving leadership for closing the gap
- share the outcomes with a wider audience

In the first year, 87 groups of schools, varying in size and characteristics, took part in the initiative. Most of them continued their closing the gap projects in the second year of the initiative, when more than 70 new groups joined the programme, bringing the total number of participating groups to 142. They developed action plans, introduced closing the gap initiatives in their context, reviewed their work and reported on outcomes. Each group received a grant from the National College to complete this work.

In June 2009, the National College commissioned the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) to help develop a range of support for group leaders to enable groups to build an evidence-base on effective leadership for closing gaps.

The support mechanisms made available to participating groups by the National College, its regional leaders and CUREE included:

- tools and suggested documentation (eg action plan, report etc)
- regional and national events
- phone and face-to-face contact from regional leaders
- feedback on action plans
- resources (eg on the website)

- additional support and visit from the research team to 11 core groups
- online seminars and hotseat discussions¹

By June 2010, more than 90 per cent of groups had submitted reports on their leadership work to close the gap, which are synthesised in this report. Where possible, the report findings were illustrated by evidence collected by the research team after working with the core groups.

This report is in five sections. [Section 1](#) provides a descriptive map of all the reports submitted by the groups participating on the programme. The map illustrates the contours of the groups' activities aimed at improving pupil outcomes and indicates the types of impact they were linked to. [Section 2](#) offers an analysis and synthesis of leadership for closing the gap practices **across** the groups, whose reports (28 in total) were selected for in-depth data extraction. In [section 3](#), we offer a discussion and explore connections with the wider research evidence. [Section 4](#) offers some tentative conclusions and implications for policy and practice. Finally, [section 5](#) describes our methodology and is followed by references and an appendix of case studies.

We are grateful to Professor L Stoll and Professor D Mongon for their comments on the report and their advisory contribution to the project.

¹ The order in which the support mechanisms are presented here is based on how helpful they were perceived to be by participants (from most to least helpful) in a survey carried out as part of the National College's evaluation of the programme.

Section 1: Map of groups' final reports

All 129 group reports (57 from cohort 1 and 72 from cohort 2) have been analysed for overview data about their projects and mapped according to:

- the size of the group
- phase of education
- characteristics of schools in the group
- location (by local authority)
- main stakeholders involved
- extent to which schools and other agencies worked in partnership
- nature of the gap being addressed under the initiative
- types of positive outcome identified to date, with supporting evidence

Size of groups

A total of 482 schools and children's centres were involved in the project. The breakdown by group size (numbers of participating schools in each group) is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of participating schools in groups

Group size	No.	Per cent
3 or fewer	72	55.8
4-7	42	32.5
8-11	14	10.8
Unclear	1	0.8

The majority of groups worked in small partnerships of up to three schools. Where only one school represented a partnership, it typically worked with one or more external agencies or had been recently amalgamated (ie had formerly comprised two or three schools).

The exact number of external agencies involved in the project was difficult to establish; however, 25 groups (just under 20 per cent) named organisations other than schools as their partners. These included local authorities, the Connexions Service, universities, churches and community organisations.

Pupil characteristics

A significant minority of groups indicated that large numbers of their pupils were disadvantaged². Other indicators of disadvantage reflecting localised problems were high levels of mobility, high rates of teenage pregnancy, prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse and high unemployment (Table 2).

Nine groups (7 per cent) explicitly stated that their pupils in general did not experience disadvantage and many of them came from affluent, well-educated families. These groups often focused on identifying the gap in their context and raising awareness of the issue among their staff.

Half of the groups (50.3 per cent) did not specify their background characteristics.

² 'Disadvantage' was calculated by reference to four main areas: proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals (FSM), proportion with a statement of special education need (SEN), proportion speaking English as an additional language (EAL) and proportion living in areas of social or economic deprivation

Table 2: Schools' background information

Characteristic	No.	Per cent
High FSM	14	10.9
High SEN	6	4.7
High EAL	9	7
Area of social or economic deprivation	39	30.2
Other	19	14.7
None of the above	9	7
Not specified	65	50.3

Note: More than one characteristic could apply to a group or school, and therefore the results do not total 100.

Phase

Almost half the participating groups were composed of primary schools. A quarter were secondary schools, and the remainder were cross-phase partnerships, with the latter reflecting colleagues' attention to transition issues (Table 3).

Table 3: Phase of participating groups

Phase	No.	Per cent
EYFS	3	2.3
Primary	62	48.1
EYFS and primary	9	7
Secondary	33	25.6
Primary and secondary	14	10.9
All three phases	6	4.7
Not specified	2	1.6

Partnership working

Agreeing a common issue and/or approach to closing the gap and strategic planning were most frequently done in partnership with other schools. Working together to deliver the selected approach (termed 'interventions') and joint continuing professional development (CPD) programmes were less common. Reports were coded 'other' when either no partnership work was present, (ie, only one school was involved) or when the degree to which the group worked in partnership was not clear (Table 4).

Table 4: Partnership working

Degree of partnership work	No.	Per cent
Developed vision and approach together	99	76.7
Planned together	95	73.6
Shared good practice and outcomes	64	49.6
Shared resources	53	41.1
Joint CPD	43	33.3
Joint delivery (staff and/or pupils from different schools working together)	33	25.6
One school cascaded previously developed approach to others	4	3.1
Other	11	8.5

Note: More than one manifestation of partnership work could apply to a group or school, and therefore the results do not total 100.

Stakeholders involved

Pupils or students (81.4 per cent), members of senior leadership teams (SLTs) (72.1 per cent), including headteachers (71.3 per cent) and class/subject teachers (71.3 per cent) were the main types of stakeholder involved in the project. Middle leaders (51.1 per cent), parents (40.3 per cent) and teaching and learning assistants (31 per cent) were also involved. Colleagues in the wider workforce and representatives of other agencies were typically included as 'other' (30.2 per cent) (Table 5).

Table 5: Stakeholders involved

Stakeholder	No.	Per cent
Pupils/students	105	81.4
SLT	93	72.1
Headteacher	92	71.3
Class/subject teacher	92	71.3
Middle leader	66	51.1
Parent	52	40.3
Teaching assistant	40	31
Local authority adviser or similar	27	20.9
External specialist	24	18.6
Mentor/tutor/coach	16	12.4
EYFS practitioner	8	6.2
Governor	6	4.7
Advanced skills teacher	4	3.1
Volunteer	4	3.1
Other	39	30.2

Note: More than one type of stakeholder could apply to a group or school, and therefore the results do not total 100.

Identification of target group

Many groups, particularly those from cohort 1, tended to scale up their projects, ie transfer good practice linked to positive outcomes for vulnerable pupils to make it available to all pupils. This might help explain why, in the majority of cases, a target group of children or young people was not specified (Table 6). This also tended to happen in schools serving particularly deprived areas: these schools often viewed most or all of their pupils as being disadvantaged.

For example, in some groups, 96 per cent of the children were below the age-related expectations for speech and language development, meaning the whole cohort was regarded as a target group for interventions aimed at closing the gap between the children in the given context and the national average.

Table 6: Identification of target group

Has a specific group of pupils been identified for intervention?	No.	Per cent
Yes	60	46.5
No	69	53.5

Problems addressed by the initiative

The main coding criteria were social and economic disadvantage, ethnicity and gender gaps suggested in research as primary indicators of possible disadvantage (Strand, 2010), and risk of underachievement.

The majority of the groups (55.8 per cent) chose underperformance as the focus of their project. Gender, social and emotional problems, SEN, EAL and ethnicity were typically additional focuses, indicating the type of underperformance being tackled (Table 7).

For 9.3 per cent of the projects, the research team was not able to specify the focus of the project.

Around half of the clusters identified more than one issue they were trying to tackle, typically alongside underperformance. Just under half (48.1 per cent) of additional focuses were classified as 'other'. Focuses for projects appearing in this category included:

- pupil wellbeing and self-esteem
- pupil engagement and motivation
- attendance
- transition between schools or key stages
- involving parents
- language and communication (particularly at EYFS)
- whole-school development issues (eg, curriculum development or embedding a new assessment approach, such as assessing pupil progress (APP))
- networking and CPD (eg, activities to bring school staffs together or training for teaching assistants)

Some of the approaches selected and activities undertaken by the groups to close gaps in outcomes included:

- engaging with parents and the local community
- workshops or programmes targeting revision and exam preparation
- mentoring and coaching for students
- transition events and programmes
- language and literacy interventions such as guided talk, reading and writing, Every child a talker (ECAT), talking partners, Love writing, ReadWrite, etc
- curriculum and learning resources development
- student voice and participation activities (student involvement in the development of learning resources, peer support, data collection)
- developing colleagues' leadership skills
- staff development, including use of coaching and observation
- using APP and other assessment mechanisms
- using ICT and multimedia to increase student engagement and achievement

Table 7: Identification of problem for focus of intervention

What problem(s) did the project set out to tackle and how? What gap was identified for closing?	No.	Per cent
Underperformance (general)	72	55.8
Gender-related underperformance, disengagement etc	21	16.3
Socioeconomic disadvantage (FSM or looked-after)	12	9.3
Social, emotional and behaviour problems	11	8.5
In-school (variation)	5	3.9
SEN	4	3.1
Ethnicity-related issues	3	2.3
EAL	2	1.6
Risk of falling into the not in education, employment or training (NEET) category	1	0.77
Other	62	48.1
Unclear	12	9.3

Note: More than one problem could be identified by a group or school, and therefore the results do not total 100.

Positive outcomes reported

Enhanced collaboration and communication between staff within and between partner schools and the development of leadership skills were the two most frequently reported outcomes for leadership and wider school improvement. In terms of outcomes for children and young people, almost half (49.6 per cent) of the groups reported positive changes to pupil motivation, engagement and enjoyment of learning. Improved confidence (25.6 per cent) and academic progress in a particular area of learning (24 per cent) were reported by about a quarter of the groups (Table 8).

Around half of the groups reported various additional positive outcomes. Examples of these included:

- better relationships: peer relationships between pupils/students, as well as between pupils/students and staff, pupils/students and parents, and parents and the school
- richer and more stimulating learning environment

- better staff understanding of pupil/student needs
- bespoke teaching and learning
- pupils/students appropriately challenged
- improved pupil/student wellbeing
- pupils/students taking more ownership of their learning
- development of leadership skills among students/pupils
- reduction in racial incidents

Table 8: Types of positive outcome reported by groups

Broad category of outcome	Specific outcome	No	Per cent
Leadership outcomes including leadership learning	Enhanced collaboration and communication between staff within and between partner schools	70	54.3
	Development of leadership skills and attributes	42	32.6
	Improved understanding of alternative contexts and ways of dealing with similar issues	40	31
	Better use of data	39	30.2
	Better awareness of barriers to learning and understanding the gap	37	28.7
	Expansion of distributed leadership	30	24
	Increased parental involvement	31	24
	Greater openness to change/learning	6	4.7
Staff outcomes	Improved teaching and learning practice	33	25.6
	Improved staff confidence	22	17.1
Pupil/student outcomes	Improved pupil/student motivation, engagement and enjoyment of learning	64	49.6
	Improved pupil/student confidence and self-esteem	33	25.6
	Improved pupil/student achievement in a particular area of learning	31	24
	Improved basic skills (literacy, numeracy)	20	15.5
	Improved attendance and behaviour	12	9.3

Note: More than one outcome could be identified by a group or school, and therefore the results do not total 100. Note also that the outcomes listed are not mutually exclusive; thus 'use of data' can be seen as both a leadership and a staff outcome, etc.

Types of evidence

Groups generally reported using a good range of evidence (Table 9). Student/pupil perceptions, assessment data, and staff reflections and/or perceptions were those mentioned most frequently.

Additional types of evidence, coded 'other', included samples of children's work, attendance and behaviour records, wellbeing matrices and checklists, case studies, and staff development resources (eg materials created for CPD events).

Table 9: Types of evidence of impact collected

Evidence	No.	Per cent
Student perceptions (surveys, focus groups, interviews)	69	53.5
Test/assessment data	65	50.4
Teacher/teaching assistant assessment data	60	46.5
Staff reflections (eg, learning journals or logs) and perception data	59	45.7
Meeting notes	55	42.9
Parental perceptions data	42	32.6
Observation data	36	27.9
Review or consultation outcomes	29	22.5
Photos	28	21.7
Video/audio footage	15	11.6
Other	56	43.4

Note: More than one type of evidence could be used by a group or school, and therefore the results do not total 100.

Project type

The majority of the projects evidenced their outcomes well; in 10.9 per cent, the quality of data collection and analysis met criteria that might be applied to small-scale academic research.

Twelve projects (9.3 per cent) were classified as 'description'. Commonly, they either did not indicate the types of evidence employed, or the evidence did not immediately relate to the reported outcomes, eg pupil performance data and expansion of distributed leadership (Table 10).

Table 10: Types of project evidence and research

Typ of project evidence	No.	Per cent
Research (relevant evidence from different sources, most of which is project specific, evidence is triangulated, pre-and post-intervention comparison)	14	10.9
Evaluation (at least three kinds of evidence from different sources, some specifically developed or adapted for the project, attempts to track changes in leadership practice)	60	46.5
Monitoring (evidence from up to two sources, one of which is pupil progress tracking mechanisms, not tailored for the project. No evidence about leadership and its development)	42	32.6
Description (virtually no relevant evidence supporting claims of outcomes)	12	9.3

Section 2: Synthesis of evidence

Having mapped all the leadership for closing the gap reports, we sought to:

- identify, through filtering, reports where the quality of evaluation, description of leadership and closing the gap approaches were good
- complete in-depth data extractions of the identified reports
- synthesise of the findings across the data-extracted reports, using core groups' case study reports to add depth and clarity to the described processes and findings

Following the three-stage filtering process, assessing the quality of evidence and the extent to which leadership and closing the gap processes were explicit, 28 reports were selected for in-depth data extraction. The findings emerging from the analysis and syntheses across the sample 28 reports are presented in this section.

Leadership for closing the gap: processes, strategies and attributes

This section presents the synthesis of the findings structured in accordance with the enquiry sub-questions agreed with the National College for the in-depth data analysis stage.

How do partnerships with good evidence about leadership for closing the gap:

- select aims and focuses?
- select interventions?
- select which leaders and other staff to involve?
- identify and overcome obstacles?
- work with partners?
- approach roll-out?
- approach CPD?
- fare re outcomes?

The findings related to the last sub-question – the quality of the outcomes – are presented separately below.

Clarifying aims and focuses

There seem to have been three different approaches taken by group leaders to identifying and framing their achievement gap problem and then clarifying their aims and focuses, beyond simply closing it:

- school improvement approach
- what worked well approach
- needs analysis approach

School improvement approach

One approach was to look at school development priorities and to choose from among existing plans and targets something that matched the criteria for taking part in the project. This seems pragmatic and efficient in respect of resources, although focuses identified in this way tended to be broad, cover the whole school and were more likely to centre on raising attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) or GCSE. Children and young people identified through this approach belonged to large, unsegmented groups, for example boys, or gifted and talented pupils.

Examples of focuses identified in this way are:

- raising standards and achievement across the school, with a focus on boys' writing
- addressing spelling and handwriting, identified as barriers to achieving Level 4+
- extending opportunities for gifted and talented pupils, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds

What worked well approach

Other groups clarified their focus by learning from developments that had worked for them in the recent past. These groups built on earlier success and refined the approach with a specific group of children and young people (either the same group or a different one), or extended it to a wider group, sometimes a year group or the whole school. Large groups of children and young people tended to be identified in these projects, eg girls in KS2 maths.

Example of focuses identified using this approach are:

- coaching and team-building exercises to raise aspirations
- developing a dance project linked to dialogic learning to raise pupils' self-esteem
- motivation of pupils, a key focus being girls in maths, particularly targeting Level 5

Needs analysis approach

A third set of groups turned their attention to the specific needs of different groups of pupils to help identify and clarify a suitable focus. Using attainment data as a starting point, these groups looked for patterns that suggested a particular group might be at risk of underachievement. They then worked with others (colleagues in school, partners and the local authority, children and young people and sometimes their families) to find out whether there really was a pattern, and whether the pattern indicated a problem that the school could reasonably tackle.

Children and young people identified in these projects tended to come from specific sections of the school community and the groups were able to articulate in considerable detail their hypotheses about what might explain what was going on for the children on whose learning they intended to focus.

Examples of focuses identified using this approach are:

- supporting parents of pupils achieving at two or more sub-levels below the national average in maths to engage with their children's learning
- working with families of migrant children to develop children's language skills in the early years to encourage dialogue at home
- collaborating across two schools and with the community to raise attainment of Somali children and Pakistani girls in maths at KS2

Selecting an intervention

Having clarified their aim, groups then set about identifying an intervention that would support their work towards achieving it.

Groups tended to tackle this in stages, beginning with consultation within the group before extending consultation to partner schools, professionals (especially the local authority), and children, young people and their families.

Groups also researched similar programmes, for example by looking at proprietary programmes for coaching or learning support, especially in connection with the reading featured here (see References). Programmatic approaches developed by and in use in other schools were also considered for suitability by some groups.

Research approaches included reading articles, piloting interventions before roll-out, using observation and interviews, and gathering evidence from practice.

After the initial action plan was submitted to the National College, the five schools met to discuss their plans and a focus on assessment for learning (AfL) was established as a way of helping schools to focus their strategy for closing the gap between [pupils in receipt of] FSM and attainment.

Almondbury High School case study

The intervention for the first cohort involved a two-week intensive support programme in mathematics which involved significant modifications to the students' timetables, including missing other lessons. The classes were single sex, chosen by the students as their preferred way of learning. Each group worked during either the morning or afternoon session, alternating each day for the two-week period. When they were not in the mathematics lessons, the students followed their normal timetable.

In response to feedback from the first cohort of students, the intervention for the second cohort was slightly different. The classes were mixed and the intervention not as intense. Taking place over the spring term, the students were taken out of normal timetabled lessons once a week to take part in hour-long intervention classes which aimed to encourage them to increase their participation in mathematics.

Hope Valley College case study

Some groups moved more quickly than others towards making their decision, ie in one or two steps rather than three or even four. Groups taking longer to select their intervention sometimes used the decision-making process to build ownership for the project among key stakeholders, including staff, students and parents. Other groups used the process to develop deeper relationships between partner schools, for example by setting up visits to understand each other's context better, before making a final decision on an approach that could work for all of them.

Involving others

Most partnership projects involved a wide range of participants from among teachers and middle and senior leaders in the school. Children and young people were involved as agents in some projects, as were families, especially parents. A small number of projects also involved local authority personnel.

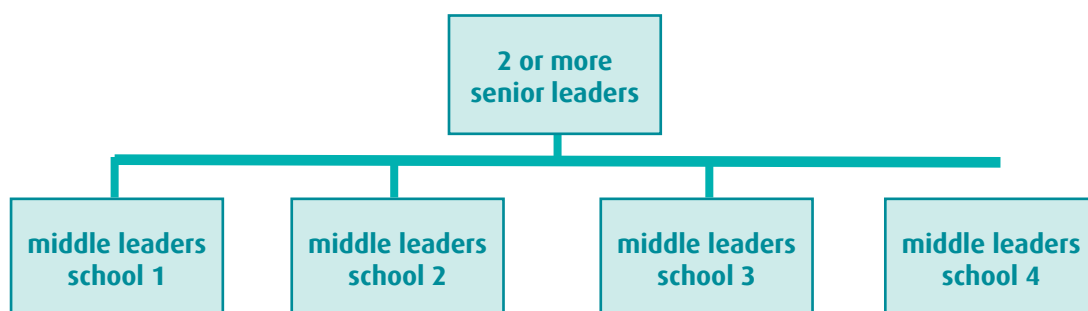
Two distinct models capture the different arrangements that groups set up to lead their projects (Figures 1 and 2).

Groups adopting the leadership group model (Figure 1) replicated existing school leadership arrangements by appointing representatives in each participating school, and making overall leadership of the project the responsibility of a small group. Most frequently, this was two headteachers or deputy headteachers, and often the same pair or group who had made the initial application to take part in the programme.

The middle leader representatives in participating schools were usually nominated by their headteacher or were a natural choice due to the relevance of their role to the focus of the project (eg, by key stage or subject leader, special educational needs co-ordinator etc). Others were chosen because they had a leadership role in professional development as lead learners or coaches.

Middle leaders were responsible for involving colleagues, pupils and families in their schools. Some group leaders also led the project in their own schools. Others appointed one of their own middle leaders to undertake this role.

Figure 1: The leadership group model

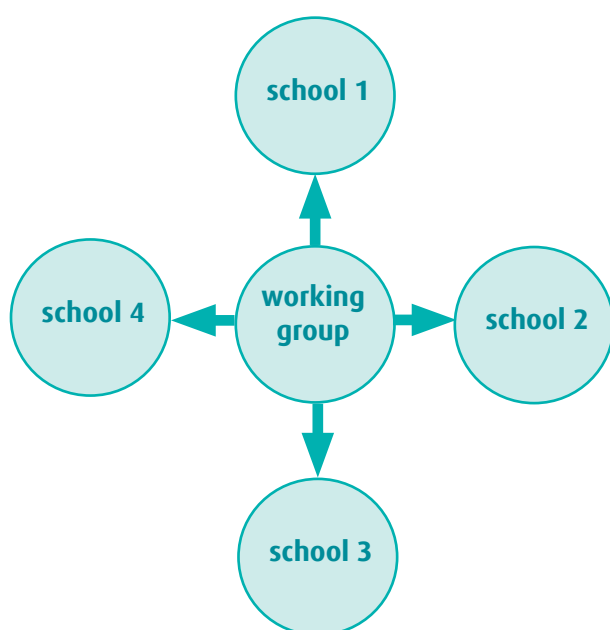


The group leaders organised groups of three key staff in each school to implement the changes and compare the various outcomes. These staff visited each other's schools to identify good practice, which they brought back and shared in their own schools. Middle leaders led all activities and interventions, which were structured around the following strategic elements:

- identifying groups for tracking and interventions
- identifying and implementing appropriate interventions
- monitoring pupils' performance through tracking
- monitoring attitudes through pupil voice

Blackpool primary schools case study

Figure 2: The working group model



In the working groups model (Figure 2), representatives from each participating school met to take part in partnership activities including planning and decision-making. Working groups tended to draw from a wide range of roles in schools, including teachers and occasionally support staff. As members of the working group developed the project in their own schools, traditional hierarchies were disrupted as teachers from the working group led their more senior colleagues in adapting and implementing project activities.

Participants in the working group were either nominated by their headteacher or had volunteered on the basis of a general invitation to staff. In one group, staff had to make a formal application to join the working group, as participation was seen explicitly as taking up a new leadership role.

A few projects achieved very limited reach, for example involving a small group in a single school or involving only senior leaders, usually headteachers, in the partnership.

Working in partnership

Methods for working together within the partnership included:

- **meetings** of the leadership or working groups in which approaches were developed and decisions affecting the partnership made
- **visits** made by group leaders and others between schools to observe and share practice
- **centralised training** at which larger groups were brought together and new practice was modelled and adapted for context
- **exchange of resources**, for example where materials that were in use were shared among partner schools
- **workshops**, for example where student/pupil work and other evidence from practice was shared and interpreted

Group leaders identified a range of benefits, which they attributed to working in partnership:

- specialist knowledge and expertise from other schools, parents and the local authority
- new and different ideas
- critical friendship

Some highlighted the motivation that comes from working with others as critical to the success of their project: "The meetings have clearly invigorated and motivated teachers, which has led to improved standards," said one member.

Identifying and solving problems

As well as creating opportunities to raise achievement, unsurprisingly, a challenging issue such as closing the gap through partnership work threw up problems on the way. An important role of group leaders was to understand and resolve problems as they arose. Table 11 summarises problems that group leaders highlighted, and some of the solutions that they found.

Table 11: Problems encountered by group leaders

Problem	Solutions
Motivating staff to get involved and change their practice	<p>Provide joint CPD sessions in which staff get to meet each other, learn about each other's schools, encounter new ideas and approaches and work together to think about how they might adapt them for their context.</p> <p>Provide a range of different ways for staff to engage with the project, noticing anyone who is struggling and providing extra support for them.</p> <p>Involve staff in identifying target groups and selecting interventions.</p>
Attending to individual and group learning needs	Offer coaching for individuals alongside more generalised CPD opportunities.
Differentiating the project approach for different school contexts	<p>Choose a big picture focus or intervention and then encourage each school to adapt it according to context.</p> <p>Value a range of sources of evidence. This was especially important where external agencies were involved.</p>
Keeping everyone involved in larger groups	Hold in-school meetings as well as meetings between schools that are members of the group.
Making suitable practical arrangements, especially space and time for partnership working	<p>Have an explicit project plan that makes visible the problem and then engage a wide range of people in finding solutions.</p> <p>Ensure good general communication so that staff are informed and up to date and foster goodwill towards the project.</p>
Involving parents	<p>Create opportunities for parents to learn and work alongside their children in school on project activities.</p> <p>Provide a range of different ways for parents to engage with the project, for example home visits and one-to-one meetings, to build confidence.</p> <p>Produce a project plan and online diary and share them with parents so they know what is going on in the project and why.</p> <p>Recruit volunteer advocates from among parents to work in the community to secure involvement from hard-to-reach parents.</p>
Working within different school cultures and differences in leadership styles	Make learning about being in a partnership an explicit strand of the project so that differences in approach are made visible and can be tackled and learned from as they arise.

Two groups had explicit strategies for anticipating problems and developing plans for solving them. One had a project plan including milestones and deliverables and a headteacher who was appointed to monitor progress against these. By using project management techniques, the head was able to notice when things were not going according to plan and intervene to find out why and resolve the difficulties. Another group completed a risk analysis at the beginning of the project in which it identified all the things that could possibly go wrong and came up with contingency plans for responding if and when they did.

The vignettes below illustrate how some of the challenges were tackled.

The main leadership challenges for the Hillingdon Improvement Partnership Project (HIPP) were due to the nature of the group's dimensions. Having four schools involved in the project along with a local education service, with each school following its own path, could have been problematic for those leading the group. To combat this, leading the group as a whole fell to the HIPP manager, whose leadership role mainly took the form of oversight of the project and making sure the group met regularly to discuss the project and progress. The challenge for the manager has been to get the schools together at regular intervals, and to get the information needed from them to be able to put together the evidence required by the National College. Individual schools were responsible for leading their own projects, and each had its own challenges. For most, it was getting members of staff involved in the project and delegating roles and responsibilities to them to ensure the project ran smoothly. Deputy heads at all four schools worked as project leads, so balancing workloads was another key area to keep on top of.

Hillingdon Improvement Partnership Project case study

Different schools adopted different approaches. In the group leader's school, the sessions were run across year groups. In another school, the pupils were organised in mixed-age groups. The day-to-day running of the programme was in the hands of co-ordinators who led and monitored the project, coaching other project members, managing staff, and organising assessment every six to eight weeks. The co-ordinators were identified by the group leaders in individual schools. For example, in the group leader's school, a newly qualified teacher (NQT) showed particular enthusiasm and demonstrated a range of skills appropriate for the task, such as being a good listener, being able to work well with staff, having a thorough understanding of the scheme and having effective communication skills and the drive to keep everybody informed.

St Helens primary schools case study

All four schools had similar problems, such as the presence in school of pupils who underachieved, pupils at risk of becoming demotivated and the pressure to raise achievement overall. The group leader felt the key to making progress was to identify and build on existing good practice. Key unifying points were that all the schools had experience of earlier efforts to raise attainment and overcome barriers to learning for vulnerable pupils and were interested and motivated by the project. The group leader believed it required somebody who was experienced in this area to draw other schools into a collaborative arrangement to tackle underachievement, and that he could fit this role. It was also important to create a balance between individual ownership of the project by schools and centralised leadership of the group, which was needed to maintain direction, organise activities and distribute resources.

Swindon secondary schools case study

Providing leadership development and CPD

Many groups used leadership development and CPD opportunities as the key driver for their project. It was the principle method by which they involved staff and sought to change practice to meet the needs of specific groups of children and young people.

Leadership development programmes tended to be broad-based and focused on developing general leadership skills that were useful but not necessarily specific to the group's chosen focus, for example:

- programmes for middle leaders aspiring to become senior leaders including secondments to partnership schools
- workshops outlining skills required for various leadership (middle and senior) roles
- a partnership masters programme

CPD opportunities on the other hand tended to focus much more on skills directly relevant to project aims and focuses and often introduced new practice that formed some or all of an intervention designed to close achievement gaps, for example:

- interpreting attainment and other data
- assessment for learning strategies
- classroom talk that improves writing
- the use of phonics

In both leadership development and CPD, there was remarkable consistency in the range of methods used, which included:

- workshops on sharing existing practice
- workshops on developing new practice
- peer and specialist observation
- peer and specialist coaching

In observation and coaching, the chosen specialist was often a member of the project leadership team. As school leaders were often in these roles, this meant that they were practically involved in the design and delivery of CPD. Examples of this were:

- a headteacher conducting classroom observations on relevant practice through learning walks

- assistant headteachers leading a partnership-wide CPD day

One group offered training for support staff; another involved parents in CPD.

Developing plans for roll-out

Plans to roll the project out fell into three categories:

- transfer new practice
- draw in additional or different groups of pupils
- develop the capacity of the project team

Transfer new practice

Some groups aimed to transfer the new practice to a wider group of schools by expanding the size of the partnership, or by transferring practice between subject areas or departments within a school, such as science to maths, maths to English etc.

Draw in additional groups

Some groups aimed to extend or change their approach to focus on the needs of additional or different groups of children, including an earlier cohort to catch the problem sooner or all children in a key stage or year group.

Develop capacity

The final group of partnerships intended to develop their capacity as a project team or partnership further in order to tackle new projects.

Some groups discussed no immediate plans for roll-out, including two that were explicit in their view that there was more work to do before they would be in a position to expand or significantly alter the project.

For those groups that did intend to roll out their approach, joint CPD and the development of resources were the methods identified for achieving this.

Knowledge, skills and attributes for leading closing the gap

Some group leaders reflected on the leadership attributes, knowledge and skills that they felt helped them succeed in overcoming problems or were required of them generally whilst working on closing the gap. To identify these, individual group reports were coded using the framework developed by the National College as part of the Leading for Outcomes research project.

Attributes

In almost 80 per cent of sample reports, group leaders reflected on the leadership attributes required for successfully leading a closing the gap project. Half felt that **moral purpose and values** were essential attributes for closing the gap. Determination was advocated by almost 20 per cent. Qualities such as **credibility, rigour** and **tenacity** were highlighted in one or two reports. Examples of some of these attributes included:

The schools were very much focused on doing what was best for their pupils and listened to what the pupils had to say. They were then happy to act on it.

Group leader

The monitoring process has been rigorous to ensure that all staff involved across the four schools were on track and were fully supported.

Group leader

Knowledge

Three-quarters of the sample groups identified specific leadership knowledge that was important in closing gaps in outcomes. **Knowledge of local needs** and a **working understanding of effective practice on the frontline** were important for 8 groups (38 per cent of those who indicated the types of leadership knowledge in their reports). The latter included knowledge and understanding of interventions (eg, reading or mathematics support programmes) that could be implemented in order to close identified gaps. **Knowledge of what constitutes an effective system, professional knowledge** and **knowledge of current thinking** and **political context** were highlighted by two groups. Examples included understanding how mentoring should be approached in the secondary context and understanding the importance of putting a business case forward in

order to establish the viability of a pre-school.

Skills

In all sample reports, colleagues identified a number of leadership skills they considered essential in their closing the gap work. **Delegation** was highlighted by the majority of groups:

Identifying the right people to drive this forward was an important leadership decision and giving these people the right level of support and training was essential to the project's success.

Group member

The importance of **data analysis** and **communication skills** were emphasised by 9 groups (32 per cent). Leaders of 8 groups (29 per cent) recognised the need for **strategic thinking** when closing gaps. The skills of **resource** and **change management** were highlighted by 6 groups (21 per cent). Other skills suggested by the Leading for Outcomes project were indicated by two groups or fewer.

Leadership for closing the gap: outcomes

Groups collected impact data by:

- tracking student progress
- interviewing stakeholders
- conducting observations
- taking meeting and consultation notes
- collecting case studies
- writing leader reflection logs
- securing photographs and video/audio footage

In each case, there were at least three kinds of evidence from different sources, some of which were specifically developed or adapted for the project. Some groups made explicit attempts to track changes in leadership practice.

Impact on pupils

The most commonly reported forms of impact on students included a mixture of improvements in performance, affective benefits, development of transferable skills and greater independence in learning.

Improvement in student attainment

Improved student performance was noted in 18 groups (almost 64 per cent of the sample, compared with 24 per cent for the programme as a whole). This improvement affected students across the curriculum or in specific areas of learning including basic skills.

Across the curriculum

Mentoring and coaching programmes for secondary students aimed at developing their communication, social-emotional and study skills typically resulted in improved achievement in a number of curriculum areas.

Students talked with their coach about targets, organisation, coursework deadlines, using time more effectively, and how they might get the information they need, for example, when researching a topic. "It makes them feel a bit special," said one leader. In one school, most of the students improved their attainment by one predicted grade at GCSE over the year. The students recognised the positive effects coaching was having on them: "The project helps me across subjects - I now ask questions in English and science," said one student from the Swindon case study.

Where primary school leaders reported improved pupil progress in a number of areas of learning, they highlighted the need to take a holistic approach to the identification of the gap and piloted closing the gap interventions, such as:

- focusing on the whole child, eg needs for nutrition, safety and emotional wellbeing alongside teaching and learning
- increasing through inter-school collaboration the number of strategies in place to meet pupils' broader needs. A broad spectrum of support and enrichment activities was developed that could engage and motivate children to do well whatever their social circumstances
- addressing social gaps between pupils by providing an inclusive, welcoming atmosphere that valued everyone's participation and contributions
- considering important local issues such as carbon reduction and offsetting, Fairtrade and food miles
- developing a context-based, integrated curriculum aimed at improving engagement and facilitating transition

In a specific area of learning

Groups involving primary schools reported improvements in pupils' basic skills (literacy and numeracy):

In Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre, the development of speaking and listening skills of 66 per cent of children is on track, compared with 93 per cent being below their age-related expectations on entry. Its partner school reported almost 100 per cent improvement in Foundation Stage pupils' development of language and communication skills, compared with last year's cohort.

Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre case study

In one of the schools, all the target girls have made improvements in maths attainment, with some making accelerated progress up to an average point score (APS) of 8. The other school did not anticipate a major impact on attainment within the first year of the project; however most pupils did progress by an APS of 4.

Parkfield and Rosary RC case study

Some of the interventions aimed at improving primary pupils' basic skills included:

- introducing a Mathletics³ programme complemented by the creation of additional learning opportunities at school and in pupils' homes and provision of learning resources
- modelling good communication skills and helping pupils develop them during child-initiated play and through trialling new approaches (eg, ECAT⁴, Special time and Time to talk) that are focused on the speech, language and communication needs of individual and small groups of children, and key workers personalising children's learning

³ Mathletics is a commercial programme aimed at increasing pupil engagement and progress in mathematics through the use of IT and fun activities. More details are available at: www.mathletics.co.uk.

⁴ Every child a talker (ECAT) is a programme designed to help create a stimulating environment (in an EYFS setting or at home) in which children enjoy experimenting with language and are supported to learn it. More details are available at: <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/153286>.

Interventions in secondary schools leading to improved student performance in a particular curriculum area tended to focus on English and maths and were in one instance directly linked with preparation for a GCSE exam. Underperformance in these two curriculum areas was often reported to be linked with student gender. For example, a number of leaders, both primary and secondary, focused on the development of boys' writing. Even when the selection of the cohort of students was not gender based, colleagues trialled their closing the gap interventions separately with male and female students (see Hope Valley case study).

Leaders who focused on improving student attainment in a specific area of the curriculum reported accelerated pupil progress, which was evidenced by pre- and post-intervention comparisons:

Year 2 writing results at the beginning of the project indicated that 47 per cent of boys were on track to achieve their expected outcome of Level 2 compared with 87 per cent of girls. The latest assessment shows that 80 per cent of boys are now on track to achieve Level 2, a significant rise on the outcomes of previous years.

Group leader

The 10-week coaching programme that encompassed communication and social-emotional skills resulted in an combined closure of the gap between academic ability and actual performance of seven units (where one unit is equivalent to a grade between target and actual attainment grade) for the sample of eight female Year-10 students. The mean grade closure across the group was 0.875 of a grade per student.

Group leader

Affective benefits

Out of 28 sample groups, 20 (71 per cent) noticed a range of positive outcomes for students which could be classified as affective, including:

- transformed attitude to learning
- better motivation

- greater enjoyment of learning
- improved engagement in learning and school life
- higher self-esteem and aspirations
- better relationships with peers and staff and other improvements in student wellbeing

The interventions that were linked with these benefits for children and young people commonly included elements of:

- coaching
- peer mentoring and involving members of the community as mentors
- basic literacy skills interventions (reading and writing programmes)
- pupil voice activities and students' involvement in the co-construction of their learning experiences
- involvement of parents (eg, as partners in their child's learning) and members of the community
- curriculum development work, including the offer of extra-curricular opportunities outside the classroom

Observation and perception data, as well as various indicators of self-esteem, wellbeing, effort and attitude, were used by groups to evidence the reported outcomes:

What has really made a significant impression is the change in attitude, the positivity and determination to learn expressed by the students themselves.

Group leader

Data ... [from the] PASS⁵ surveys indicates that the project had a positive impact on measured aspects of pupils' attitudes towards self and school.

Group leader

⁵ The PASS (pupil attitudes to self and school) survey was tailor-made for the project.

Development of other skills and attributes

Several leaders highlighted the development of transferable skills, such as leadership, collaboration, thinking, problem-solving, learning to learn and increased independence in learning as important student outcomes.

These were reported as an outcome of interventions that had elements of:

- peer support, including mentoring
- AfL and involving students in assessment
- philosophy for children
- students co-constructing and leading some aspects of projects (eg, working on issues important to the local community and producing a physical outcome, such as planting an orchard)
- curriculum development, particularly at transition stages

Group leaders commonly saw the development of skills, attitudes and the other affective benefits described above as the foundation for further improvements in student academic performance as well as being important outcomes in their own right:

Raising children's self-esteem and meeting their emotional needs can and does have a significant impact on their attainment.

Group leader

Children gained transferable skills which raised their self-esteem and enabled them to become confident and independent pupils.

Group leader

Impact on leaders and other staff

Participating groups reported a range of positive outcomes for senior and middle leaders, teachers and support staff, governors and members of wider workforce. These broadly related to or were felt to result from:

- partnership and collaborative work
- content and focus of the work to close the gap
- processes for designing and implementing interventions

- participation in general leadership activities
- increased opportunities for staff

Partnership and collaborative work

This first category included benefits such as better collaboration skills and a shared sense of purpose and responsibility for individual children and their groups, which was commonly highlighted by groups.

Better understanding of other contexts, both within and beyond the school, added to leaders' clarity about the nature of the gaps and strategies that could address them and helped them to see things from a strategic point of view:

By working across the different settings, the group gained a shared understanding of why practitioners needed to prioritise vulnerable children.

Group leader

School leaders in the partnership benefited from working collaboratively by examining and experimenting with strategies used in each other's schools to address the target group's needs and leaders' capabilities for meeting them.

Group leader

Improved ability to work with stakeholders and members of local communities and recognising the benefits of such work through the positive project experiences were identified by some groups:

Significant findings for leadership have included the ability to run and lead projects involving wider communities.

Group leader

Finally, by working with staff in different leadership roles and settings, leaders involved in the project could extend their repertoire of leadership strategies and further develop their leadership style.

Content and focus of the work to close the gap

Leading and participating in the processes of improving outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people helped the staff involved develop specific knowledge, skills and attributes.

Bespoke teaching and learning – both in terms of staff recognition of its importance and their increased ability to deliver it in the classroom – were identified by the groups as one of the major outcomes for teaching and learning practice in participating schools. Some groups reported that teachers became more innovative in their practice and deployed a wider range of strategies aimed at engaging and challenging pupils.

Identification of pupils' needs and rigorous monitoring of their development through a variety of assessment methods and tools featured in the majority of reports. Staff not only became skilled at using data and assessment as part of the project but they also gained confidence in its use:

Staff, especially class teachers, have seen a positive impact on their approach ...[of] using data as a diagnostic tool to inform their teaching ... as well as [to] identify individual gaps in a child's learning.

Group leader

Staff have developed the confidence to change the curriculum to meet the needs of the children. The learning is ... [context-based] and purposeful to the children.

Group leader

Several groups emphasised their understanding of the importance of approaching closing the gap holistically as one of their main findings. Rather than focusing solely on achievement and attainment, these groups tried to take their pupils' overall wellbeing, attitudes to learning and ability to learn into account.

Part of the task of building a shared vision involved convincing other headteachers and consultants of the impact of the project when data tended to be qualitative rather than quantitative. Headteachers in the schools involved initially focused mainly on raising academic performance but came to see other benefits to students - and the school - such as improved behaviour and attitudes to learning.

Swindon secondary schools case study

Processes for designing and implementing interventions

Improvements in leadership skills, knowledge and attributes resulted from practitioners frequently undertaking certain actions, such as making decisions or identifying and overcoming challenges, and being involved in ongoing and multilayered processes, such as project management, distributed leadership or support of professional development for themselves and their colleagues.

Participation in general leadership activities

Recognition of the potential of some colleagues and other stakeholders emerged as an important outcome resulting from their involvement in the project:

The most significant development across the schools has been the leadership role of teaching assistants; their improved confidence and skills and their new enhanced status within each establishment.

Group leader

The main impact on leadership has been recognition of the skills and potential of a broad group of staff members and volunteers, enabling a greater distribution of roles and responsibilities.

Group leader

Increased opportunities for staff

Finally, colleagues often identified opportunities as being among the benefits of working on the project. These included opportunities for:

- reflection on current practice and its review
- developing a more strategic view of closing the gap issues through collaboration and research
- getting to know students better
- professional development
- a wide range of stakeholders to get involved in leadership

Wider school and partnership impact

More than half (57 per cent) of the sample groups reflected on the wider impact of the initiative and identified a number of ways in which their work was influencing whole-school (or, less commonly, partnership) development. These were broadly grouped by the research team as:

- establishment of new systems and mechanisms
- development of ethos and culture
- growth of better relationships
- improvement in parental involvement

New systems and mechanisms

New systems and mechanisms that were being embedded across schools as a result of leaders working on their closing the gap projects commonly included assessment (including AfL), monitoring and tracking arrangements, key stage transition policies and practices, and teaching and learning strategies (such as a whole-school handwriting model). In one instance, colleagues reported the creation of a pre-school (opened in September 2010), which they hoped would benefit not only their school but also the local community, as an output of its closing the gap work.

Ethos and culture

A number of sample groups (around 15 per cent) reported positive changes to their school culture and ethos. In several of the groups, this was manifested by, for example:

- significantly more conversations about students' learning among the wider workforce
- profile of vulnerable children being raised across the rest of the school or setting
- establishment of learning dialogues between all parties
- breaking of barriers and changes in culture to become more collaborative and open learning communities

Better relationships

Better relationships, particularly between staff and students, schools and parents, and schools and the local community, were reported by 15 per cent of the sample groups.

Parental involvement

Working with parents was an important priority for many groups; 32 per cent of the sample reported improvements in parental involvement and better home-school links, as in these extracts:

Four schools have successfully developed their partnership with parents which they feel has had a very positive impact on their children's progress in reading. A closer relationship has led to an openness between home and school and a greater understanding between the two.

Group leader

Through workshops and meetings, parents were empowered to support their children's learning at home.

Group leader

Parents' attitude to writing changed. By the end of the project some parents had a heightened awareness of the importance of writing at home and through family learning focuses, improved their skills of writing.

Group leader

Section 3: Discussion

Closing the gap: definitions and evaluation of outcomes

In their final reports, most leaders demonstrated their commitment to closing the gaps in outcomes in their contexts and an enhanced understanding of the nature and complexity of such work. At the outset of the initiative, leadership for closing the gap was defined as that which sought to reduce the difference between outcomes for specific groups and those for all children and young people, against a background of improvement for all. In practice, there was a considerable degree of variation of local interpretations of what constitutes the gap across the initiative.

Just under half the partnerships (46.5 per cent) identified a target group of young people, typically those who were underachieving and/or disengaged, and tightly focused their activities on improving outcomes for these pupils. In some instances, colleagues were able to link the reasons for underachievement and disengagement with pupils' background characteristics, such as gender, socio-economic disadvantage and (less frequently) ethnicity, and define their target groups accordingly, for example as 'boys who underachieve in writing'.

Just over half of the groups (53.5 per cent) tended to focus on improvement for all. Three trends emerged from this. For some groups, particularly those located in areas of socio-economic deprivation (30 per cent of the groups), the project was about closing the gap between the outcomes for their pupils and national averages. For instance, leaders of schools where more than 90 per cent of pupils start their formal education with language and literacy skills significantly below those of their more advantaged peers prioritised a specific area of learning, often a basic skill such as literacy. They worked with a whole cohort of pupils rather than just a target group. In other cases, colleagues who originally found it difficult to prioritise some pupils over others developed their understanding of the concept of closing the gap by participating in the initiative. The identification of the most disadvantaged and underachieving group in their context was a project outcome for these colleagues rather than an input.

Almost a third of leaders involved in the initiative explicitly identified their better understanding of the nature of the gap in their organisation and their improved ability to focus on vulnerable pupils as a leadership learning outcome. Finally, where groups witnessed the success of their work in year 1 of the initiative, they tended to maximise its impact by involving more pupils and transferring practice and learning across the curriculum (for example, between different departments) or through the school (for example from working with a small group of children with behavioural difficulties to adopting a whole-school approach).

Consequently, the benefits of the initiative for children and young people and the measurements of the extent to which the gap was closed varied considerably across the initiative. They ranged from highly specific comparisons of performance of a target group of pupils with a control group, through reports of better performance of target pupils compared with their predicted levels, to very generic trends and patterns suggesting positive improvements. Unsurprisingly, colleagues found it a lot easier to measure and track the progress of targeted pupils in specific skills than to link positive improvements for all, even where these were present, with their closing the gap interventions.

Some leaders were frustrated that due to the reporting deadlines in June they could not include national test data of improvements in student performance in their reports. But the majority of school leaders saw their involvement in the initiative as their first steps on the closing the gap journey and said they expected to see further benefits in years to come. Whole-school changes included increased involvement of all staff in learning and development, better use of data, targeted teaching to individual pupil needs and considerable improvements in pupil motivation and engagement. These suggest that the prospects for leaders' hopes of achieving better outcomes for their disadvantaged young people are good.

Relationship between the findings and the wider evidence-base

Several areas of leadership activity were consistently present across the initiative. Data analysis and its use were highlighted by many groups as a prerequisite to any closing the gap or school improvement work, and many leaders have reported improved skills in this area as one of the project outcomes. By participating in the initiative, large numbers of leaders have recognised the importance of involving pupils, their parents and (less frequently) the wider community in school life and learning and have identified ways of achieving this that were new to their context. Implementing interventions targeting specific barriers to learning and generally improving the quality of teaching and learning were also frequent features of the partnerships' responses to the gaps. Creating a collaborative learning environment by working with other schools, agencies and staff, and leaders' professional development were widely recognised by groups as essential in leadership for closing the gap. In this respect, participating leaders' activities initiated within the six areas identified in research and guidance (Martin et al, 2009) were important for closing the gap:

- creating a local vision, prioritising the most vulnerable
- focusing the organisation, working in partnership with others
- developing and motivating the workforce
- using data/intelligence and managing resources and people effectively
- creating a learning culture
- responding to local circumstances, and working effectively with local communities

In most of the project partnerships, developing and motivating the workforce featured strongly and was also closely linked to activities focused on developing a learning culture. As can be seen from the discussion about definitions of gaps, prioritisation of the needs of the most vulnerable over the needs of the school cohort as a whole was a significant challenge for many partnerships. Similarly, working effectively with local communities was not a strong element of activity for many partnerships.

Guidance regarding leadership aspects of closing the gap and reducing variation has been further developed in the framework for action, to be published by the National College (Mongon et al, 2010). This framework takes account of leadership, management and partnership roles in closing the gap. These are manifested through eight patterns of activity, consisting of:

- awareness
- acceptance
- advocacy
- analysis
- action
- application
- alignment
- area focus

The leaders' reports from this closing the gap initiative emphasised some of these activities more than others.

Awareness, defined as recognising and prioritising an issue of inequality or injustice and a target group, was an area that some groups found challenging (see the above analysis on the complexity of prioritising a target group of students for some leaders). Increased and/or deeper awareness frequently became a leadership development outcome for participating colleagues. At the other end of the spectrum, partnerships that had good evidence of both leadership and positive student outcomes prioritised moral purpose, values and social justice and demonstrated a sophisticated level of awareness that was embedded in their actions.

Acceptance that they or the school could be both part of the problem and contribute to its solution was present in some leaders' work. Such groups started their projects by auditing their own practice and skills in order to identify areas for development which they believed would then facilitate improvements in young people's learning and outcomes.

Advocacy, which involves ‘creating a living vision and participating in focused workforce development to introduce sustainable change’ (Mongon et al, 2010) was an important element for the most effective groups. Leadership and professional development were seen as key drivers in changing practice and were linked strongly with advocacy. This resonates with the findings of Robinson’s best-evidence synthesis (2009), which recalculates the effects, for pupil and student outcomes, of the full range of leadership contributions. Robinson’s large-scale review of evidence, like the work of the project partnerships, highlights the importance of leaders’ own enquiry-based learning, and the effects of that as a model for knowledge about and leadership of learning in schools.

Analysis, understood as ‘using data and other information to create a high-definition picture of how an issue manifests itself locally’ (Mongon et al, 2010), was an essential element in most groups’ work. Not only did colleagues highlight the importance of data in their work and report improvements in the collection and use of data, they also extended the range of sources of data they used. In their attempts to unveil barriers to learning that were causing underachievement, in addition to traditional test and assessment data, leaders consulted students and often their parents; many also attempted to systematically collect colleagues’ perceptions or document observations of young people and their learning. The importance of the role of leaders in identifying and organising the collection and interpretation of relevant data and the linked use of evidence from the wider public knowledge-base (eg, evidence relating to closing the gap) is reinforced by the findings of a recent, large-scale review of practitioner use of research (Cordingley et al, 2010), which demonstrated the positive impact of the leadership of assessing and exploring the impact of interventions on pupils for driving forward learning outcomes.

Action which focused directly on the target group and the issue was at the forefront of leaders’ minds. The groups spent time exploring and clarifying their aims in order to select appropriate interventions. The groups with tightly defined target groups and issues found it easier to track the impact on pupils. Leaders felt that determination, rigour and tenacity were the qualities required for the effective introduction and embedding of activities.

Application, which involved implementation of the plan and ensuring the quality of teaching and learning, was a central activity in many projects. Improving the quality of teaching and targeting it more closely towards individual pupils’ needs was a common thread in the groups’ reports.

The important role of CPD was again highlighted in this activity. CPD activities frequently involved leaders taking an active role in the design and delivery of both CPD and new teaching and learning strategies. Many of the activities also involved peer and specialist observation and coaching. The central roles of targeted specialist support, the importance of collaborative professional learning and leadership that harnesses the power of both have been demonstrated by systematic reviews of research into effective CPD (Timperley, 2007; Cordingley et al, 2007).

Alignment of students’ home and school experiences was present as a focus in projects that focused on pupils with parents from deprived socio-economic backgrounds. More frequently, partnerships and schools made efforts to build relationships with parents, especially those considered hard to reach, as one of a range of strategies for encouraging positive parental influence and ultimately improving student achievement, attendance and motivation.

Perhaps inevitably, given that the structure of the initiative required partnership working, **partnership** with other schools and agencies was a major factor in the groups’ approach to closing gaps in outcomes. Partnership work was most visible in the initial stages of projects: a significant majority of leaders developed their approach and planned their interventions together with colleagues from partner schools and agencies. Sharing resources, good practice and outcomes were strong aspects of partnership activities. In the key action phases, project work understandably became more focused on activity within schools, supported by colleagues from partner schools acting as critical friends who challenged leaders and stimulated their thinking and development.

Overview

Perhaps the key point to highlight in relation to these projects and the different models for understanding the leadership of closing the gap for vulnerable pupils and students is the multilayered nature of effective responses to what are inevitably complex leadership challenges. Where these projects had evidence of both processes and significant progress in a relatively short time, school leaders had been able to mount both a single-minded focus on the needs of a specific group and a wide-ranging and dynamically interacting set of strategies for considering the implications of these challenges for **all** members of the school community and at multiple levels and stages of school intervention.

The leadership of efforts to close gaps for vulnerable pupils and students emerges here as an exercise in holding ideas and actions that are to some degree in potential conflict with each other in creative tension, thus creating moral and practical benefits for the school community as a whole – as Yrio Engestrom et al (1999) have put it ‘without tension there is no learning’. The leaders who have been most successful in these partnerships have managed to harness obvious and important tensions to the advantage of all concerned. Those who have struggled to identify ways of using such tensions to focus in depth on the needs of the vulnerable may well have felt pushed to move too quickly from focusing in depth on the needs of the core group to focusing on the ways in which interventions that work for the core group can be harnessed for the school community as a whole.

Section 4: Conclusions and implications

The leadership for closing the gap initiative raises a number of points that are relevant to possible developments in the future: the pupil premium, increased autonomy of schools and greater engagement of schools with research and evidence.

The pupil premium

A strength of the initiative was the way in which it shone a spotlight on the needs of vulnerable pupils and challenged partnerships to close the gap. All the approaches to identifying and framing the achievement gap could be supported by the introduction of the pupil premium, which will provide additional money for each deprived pupil in the country. The money will go straight to the schools the eligible pupils attend, so that headteachers have the flexibility to decide how best to use the premium to support their education and raise attainment. This will have the potential to close the gap for individual pupils. There is an opportunity for adding operational value to the impact of the premium if policymakers at every level in the system consider the ways in which collaboration, leadership and alignment of the sort described in this report are used to ensure that additional resources are effectively deployed.'

Increased autonomy of schools

The project starts to illustrate some of the ways in which schools and their leaders may respond to increased autonomy in the future. The project aims were for partnerships to:

- improve participants' leadership for closing the gap by increasing their confidence and capacity to act, and deepening their understanding of successful practice
- demonstrate effective approaches to improving leadership for closing the gap
- share the outcomes with a wider audience

Yet the benefits of the initiative to children and young people and measurements of the extent to which the gap was closed varied considerably. Depth of progress was dependent on the extent to which partnerships could:

- clarify aims and focuses
- select suitable interventions and ways of collecting impact data
- work in partnership
- provide leadership development and CPD

In the future, schools may wish to consider strategies for developing these areas when planning initiatives to close the gap.

Greater engagement of schools with research and evidence

The initiative is also interesting insofar as it illustrates the ways in which partnerships of schools may draw on research and evidence from the wider public knowledge-base and from their own institutions. It is important to note the improvement in collecting evidence in the second year of the initiative. In the first year, a small number of schools had data to demonstrate the impact of interventions, but by the second year the vast majority of schools had such data. Support mechanisms also facilitated the schools' engagement with research. These included the provision of research tools, face-to-face workshops and online seminars. School leaders and policymakers may wish to consider ways in which schools can be supported in their engagement with research activities, particularly how they develop mechanisms for collecting appropriate evidence to monitor the impact of interventions on pupil learning.

Section 5: Methodology

Final report methods

This report presents the outcomes of an analysis and synthesis of the closing the gap groups' final reports.

The first stage of the analysis involved basic data extraction and coding of all the reports in order to describe the contours of the initiative in terms of the phases and background characteristics of participating schools, their partnership work, the range of stakeholders involved, the nature of the gap they were trying to close, types of positive outcomes identified to date and the evidence supporting them. All the data was recorded in a project database and a map created as a result of first-stage data extractions.

Following filtering, 28 reports were selected for in-depth data extractions. The filters were:

- quality of the evidence
- quality of the description of leadership work
- explicit focus on closing the gap for vulnerable young people

The in-depth data extractions of the sample 28 reports were completed to explore the enquiry questions, defined as:

- How do partnerships with good evidence about leadership for closing the gap:
 - select aims and focuses?
 - select interventions?
 - select which leaders and staff to involve?
 - identify and overcome obstacles?
 - work with partners?
 - fare re outcomes?
 - choose an approach to CPD?
- What were the leadership:
 - attributes?
 - knowledge?
 - skills?
 - strategies and actions?

The evidence distilled through in-depth data extraction was analysed to establish trends and patterns. Where possible, the findings were illustrated and exemplified by case studies.

Case study methods

The case studies (appended to the current report) were written following CUREE visits to clusters of schools in spring 2010. During each visit, group leaders explored the issues around leadership for closing the gap through a structured and recorded activity. Between three and five individual and group interviews were held with various stakeholders involved in or affected by the project. In producing the case study reports, the research team also used the groups' project summary presentations, learning logs and notes from telephone interviews with the group leaders. Reviews of the groups' own evidence of impact and any other relevant documentation supplemented the data synthesised in the case studies.

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Triumph Road,
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk
www.nationalcollege.org.uk

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