How trusts and schools narrow attainment gaps between ethnic groups: a preliminary investigation

Research report

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Executive summary

Introduction

This research was commissioned as part of *Inclusive Britain*, the government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED). The research sought to answer three main questions.

1. Where schools and trusts have closed attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups, has this been the result of a deliberate strategy (i.e., focused on raising the attainment of pupils from specific ethnic groups)?

2. What practices have schools and trusts used to close attainment gaps and foster a sense of belonging for all pupils (including those from different ethnic groups)?

3. Can we draw practical lessons about closing attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups from the work of schools and trusts (including lessons that are applicable to schools and trusts working in different contexts)?

The research was designed to be exploratory. It focused on the role and practices of trusts and schools. The evidence we gathered came from interviews with the leaders of nine academy trusts and leaders of individual schools within those trusts (plus one local authority maintained school). It was not within the scope of the research to gather evidence on the extent of ethnic disparities or discrimination that may be experienced by pupils and staff. These are important areas of study in their own right.

Chapter 1: Where schools and trusts have narrowed or closed gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups, has this been the result of a deliberate strategy?

There were three main messages from our interviews with trust and school leaders.

1. Trust and school leaders stated consistently that, while they used and were aware of data showing the breakdown of ethnic groups and other pupil groups, they did not use ethnicity as a factor to identify pupils who needed intervention to close attainment gaps or in the design of those interventions. Trust and school leaders described how they based interventions aimed at closing attainment gaps on the educational needs of individual pupils, and that a pupil's ethnicity did not automatically equate to an educational need.

2. Trust and school leaders described a range of practices, broader than focusing on attainment gaps, which related to building the ethos of a school and fostering a sense of belonging among its pupils. They described how, within these practices, there was a deliberate focus on pupils' ethnicity, as well as on their culture,

religion, nationality, language and broader experiences linked to socio-economic status, immigration and mobility.

3. The trust and school leaders that participated in this research attributed the narrowing and closing of attainment gaps between ethnic groups to whole-school approaches and targeted, pupil-level interventions. Trust and school leaders did not attribute these trends to deliberate strategies designed to close attainment gaps between ethnic groups.

Chapter 2: What practices have schools and trusts used to close attainment gaps and foster a sense of belonging for all pupils?

During the research, trust and school leaders described two broad sets of practices. The first related specifically to closing attainment gaps. Examples of these practices included:

- **having an ethos of high expectations for all pupils**, coupled with swift identification of need and intervention to address barriers to learning;

- **strong systems for capturing and analysing pupil-level data**, seen by trust and school leaders as vital to identifying and addressing gaps in and barriers to learning;

- **assessment and progress monitoring** – having agreed age-related expectations and a common assessment process was seen as crucial to schools' ability to track the progress of individual pupils and identify who might need additional support; and

- **specific intervention programmes for pupils** – targeted at the educational needs of individual pupils, such as literacy and reading, oracy, and raising aspirations for life beyond school.

The second set of practices related to promoting a culture of inclusion and a sense of belonging between pupils and their schools. Examples of these practices included:

- **diversifying the curriculum** – all of the trusts to whom we spoke had reviewed their curriculum in the last three years to ensure that it was more representative and inclusive;

- **leadership and staff diversity** – trust and school leaders described how they had sought to build leadership and staff teams that reflected the diversity of their school communities;

- **celebrating cultural diversity and inclusion** – trust and school leaders described how they celebrated the cultural identities of staff and pupils and made these a core part of the life of the school;

- **community engagement** – trust and school leaders described pro-active approaches to building strong relationships with parents and the wider community; and

- **pupil voice** – trust and school leaders described approaches to strengthening pupil voice overall, as well as for specific groups within the pupil population, and putting this at the heart of work to promote equality, diversity and inclusion.

In addition to these two broad approaches, there were two other examples of more targeted support aimed at specific groups of pupils. The first type of support was for pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), refugees and new arrivals. The second was where trusts and schools were taking action to redress instances where pupils from different ethnic groups were disproportionately affected by negative outcomes, such as suspensions, exclusions and school absence.

Chapter 3: Can we draw practical lessons about closing attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups from the work of schools and trusts?

There were three broad points to make in response to the question of whether we can derive practical lessons from our findings about how trusts and schools have narrowed attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups.

1. There are practical lessons about how to narrow and close attainment gaps. These lessons are not specific to different ethnic groups, but rather they relate to the "basics" of effective school improvement.

2. There is not a universal, one-size-fits-all approach to these practices. Instead, trust and school leaders emphasised the importance of adapting these approaches to reflect the local context and the community served by a school. This requires engagement with pupils, parents/carers, staff and the wider community, and sensitivity in, for example, the design of the curriculum, staff recruitment, community engagement, pupil voice, and the celebration of cultural events and practices within school.

3. Trust and school leaders suggested that using broad labels to describe pupil groups can be helpful when looking at the macro level and identifying potential disparities. They considered that a more nuanced and individual approach is needed when identifying and seeking to overcome pupils' barriers to learning. They considered that this was important in making a reality of the ethos of high expectations for all pupils, and in avoiding negative stereotyping of pupils based on their ethnicity.

The trusts and schools we engaged did not have a deliberate focus on closing achievement gaps between ethnic groups as an aim in itself. This contrasts with a time in

recent decades when initiatives to close attainment gaps between ethnic groups was a [feature of national policy and school practice](). Our research suggests that this reflects two broad contextual changes – first, the fact that national-level attainment gaps between ethnic groups have narrowed or closed, and second, that school demographics have become increasingly diverse and complex. Many of the school leaders we engaged described how their schools had seen rapid demographic change. This meant that those schools had pupils from a wider range of ethnic, socio-economic, national, linguistic and cultural groups, rather than from one or two predominant and established communities.

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Introduction

Aims and scope of the research

This research was commissioned as part of *Inclusive Britain*, the government response to the CRED 2021 report. The CRED report highlighted that the nature of ethnic disparities in the United Kingdom is complex. Among its recommendations, the report argued for greater recognition of the successes of minority groups, and for the need to move beyond crude comparisons between white British and ethnic minority groups.

This is relevant to the education sector, where the experience of different ethnic groups is not uniform, and the attainment of some ethnic groups has improved significantly over time. The CRED report described education as 'the single most emphatic success story of the British ethnic minority experience'. In England, children from Chinese and Indian backgrounds have consistently outperformed national average attainment, while children from black African and Bangladeshi backgrounds have overtaken national averages within the last two decades. Within broad ethnic groups, such as 'Asian' and 'black', there is considerable variation in educational success and experiences. The CRED report also recognised that the achievement of pupils from different ethnic groups is connected to contextual factors, such as socio-economic deprivation and geography.

The CRED report authors drew particular attention to the central role of schools, stating that 'good education for one kind of child is exactly the same as good education for another, irrespective of their sex, ethnicity, religion or other characteristics'. This question about the role of schools, and how pupils' ethnicity features in informing school practices, has been the central question this research has sought to explore.

In *Inclusive Britain*, the Department for Education (DfE) committed to undertake research to understand the factors that drive differences in educational success and achievement of different ethnic groups. In January 2023, the DfE, working with the Cabinet Office's Equality Hub, commissioned Isos Partnership to undertake a research project to fulfil this commitment. The research sought to explore how schools and trusts have improved the achievement of pupils from different ethnic groups, and closed achievement gaps between pupils from different groups, by focusing on three questions.

1. Where schools and trusts have closed attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups, has this been the result of a deliberate strategy (i.e., focused on the attainment of pupils from specific ethnic groups)?

2. What practices have schools and trusts used to close attainment gaps and foster a sense of belonging for all pupils (including those from different ethnic groups)?

3. Can we draw practical lessons about closing attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups from the work of schools and trusts, including lessons that are applicable to schools and trusts working in different contexts?

The research has focused on the role of schools and trusts. Specifically, the research has sought to explore how school and trust leaders describe their practices relating to closing attainment gaps for pupils, and the extent to which a focus on pupils' ethnicity features in and informs these practices. This has been an exploratory research project, commissioned on a small scale. The findings are not intended to be generalisable across the education system in England, but rather to inform the direction of any future research in this field.

It was not within the scope of our research to gather evidence on the incidence, nature or extent of ethnic disparities that may be experienced by pupils or staff in the education system in England. Equally, this research has not been able to capture individual pupils' and wider school staff's experiences based on ethnicity and ethnic disparities within or affecting their time in school. These are important questions and areas that would require dedicated research to explore in their own right. That would complement this research's specific focus on how school and trust leaders describe their practices relating to closing attainment gaps and fostering a school culture, and the extent to which these are informed by a deliberate focus on ethnicity.

Our approach

The research took place between January and May 2023. It was carried out by a team led by Ben Bryant and Simon Day from Isos Partnership, working with Richard Eyre (who led on specific fieldwork engagements and contributed to the final report) and Kikelomo Agunbiade (who advised on the overall approach, fieldwork tools and final report). We approached the research in three phases.

Phase one: preparing for the research

The main activity we undertook during the first phase was to construct a sample of schools and trusts to invite to participate in the research. Our focus was on exploring the approaches of schools and trusts that had narrowed or closed attainment gaps. Relatively little is known at national level about the practices used by individual schools and trusts to close attainment gaps between ethnic groups. It was necessary, therefore, to adopt a sampling approach using attainment data to identify schools and trusts that had narrowed or closed attainment gaps between ethnic groups.

We used a dataset constructed by DfE analysts. The dataset was based on key stage 4 attainment data for the three academic years before the Covid-19 pandemic (and the consequent disruption to school performance data) – from academic year 2016 to 2017,

to academic year 2018 to 2019. This was checked against the data from the most recent academic year for which data was available (2021 to 2022). We used secondary school attainment data because there were more data on secondary attainment than primary, and because the number of pupils in each cohort was larger in secondary schools than in primary. As this was exploratory research, if this approach was found to be useful, then consideration could be given to extending this to the primary phase.

The dataset identified the top 100 schools that had shown that they had improved attainment and narrowed attainment gaps for pupils from at least one ethnic group, and the top 100 schools that had maintained high attainment without gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups. The dataset also identified academy trusts with schools in the top 100 for either improving the attainment of an ethnic group or maintaining high attainment without gaps.

Initially, from within this dataset, we developed a sample of ten individual schools and five academy trusts to invite to take part in the research.[1] In this initial sample, we selected schools and trusts that could show improvement in attainment for one or more ethnic groups or high attainment without gaps. We constructed the sample to include schools with pupils from many ethnic groups, schools where the majority of pupils were from one non-white ethnic group, and schools where the majority of pupils were white British and there was a minority of pupils from other ethnic groups. We sought to ensure our selection was balanced in terms of geography, levels of deprivation, proportions of pupils with EAL, urban and rural areas, and type of school.

At the outset, while we had a positive response from academy trusts, we found it difficult to engage individual schools, and consequently had a very low response rate from the latter. In parallel, some national organisations that we engaged advised that findings from individual schools may be so specific to their context that it would be difficult to identify practical lessons.

For these reasons, we decided to adapt our approach, and pivot from recruiting individual schools to focusing solely on recruiting more academy trusts to participate in the research. This approach allowed us to hear from a wider range of trust leaders about how ethnicity informed trust-level practice, while at the same time being able to work with trust leaders to engage the leaders of individual academies within each trust to hear about school-level practice. In total, nine academy trusts took part in this research. Continuing to use data to inform our sampling strategy, we selected trusts in which schools had raised attainment for pupils from different ethnic groups or in which pupils

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[1] Academy trusts are not-for-profit companies that are responsible for the performance of academies in their trust. In this research, we originally sought to recruit five multi-academy trusts (trusts that were responsible for several academies), as well as 10 individual schools (these might be schools maintained by a local authority or individual academies). See https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school for more details.

from different ethnic groups had similarly high attainment. We sought to ensure our selection of trusts was as balanced as possible in terms of size and geography.

The trusts we selected are not representative of the wider education system in England. They were selected specifically to help us explore the key questions of this research. We note that, by focusing on trusts that had narrowed or closed attainment gaps between ethnic groups, the trusts selected were more likely to be high performing and based in more diverse (usually urban) areas.

In parallel, during the first phase, we held conversations about the broad aims of the research with stakeholders in national organisations, including the Confederation of School Trusts, the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, the National Association of Head Teachers, and Mission 44. These conversations allowed us to test our overall methodology and refine the questions we planned to explore in the fieldwork.

Phase two: fieldwork

Fieldwork took place in the second half of the spring term and the first half of the summer term 2023. During this time, we engaged leaders from the following nine academy trusts (the number of academies in each trust at the time of the research is given in brackets).

- United Learning (80)
- Academies Enterprise Trust (57)
- The Harris Federation (52)
- Ark Schools (39)
- The Co-operative Academies Trust (30)
- The Lionheart Educational Trust (14)
- Tudor Grange Academies Trust (12)
- Trinity Academy Trust (10)
- The Futures Trust (8)

In each instance, we interviewed senior leaders from the trust (for example, the chief executive and/or senior leaders responsible for school improvement, closing gaps, inclusion or research and insights). We also held individual or small group discussions with leaders from a selection of individual academies (mostly those covering the secondary phase, but with some primary and cross-phase academies). The number of individual academy leaders we engaged depended on the size of the trust and ranged from two to three in some smaller trusts to eight to ten in larger trusts. We also interviewed the headteacher of one maintained secondary school, who had responded to our initial invitation to participate in the research.

Phase three: reporting

In the final phase of the research, we collated the evidence we had gathered through the fieldwork. The key findings are summarised in this report.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the leaders of schools, academy trusts, and national bodies that contributed to this research for giving of both their time and insight. We are also grateful to Cabinet Office and DfE colleagues for their support and advice during this research project.

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Chapter 1: Where schools and trusts have narrowed or closed attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups, has this been the result of a deliberate strategy?

Trust and school leaders stated that they would not base interventions aimed at closing attainment gaps solely on a pupil's ethnicity

Trust and school leaders stated consistently that they did not use ethnicity to identify pupils for interventions to close attainment gaps or in designing those interventions. Instead, school and trust leaders described their approach to closing attainment gaps as a blend of whole-school practices and interventions targeted at the needs of individual pupils.

Trust and school leaders stated that they based interventions aimed at closing attainment gaps on the educational needs of pupils. While they were aware of pupils' ethnicity and the data for different ethnic groups, trust and school leaders considered that ethnicity did not automatically equate to an educational need. They said that interventions may be delivered to groups of pupils that have characteristics in common, such as ethnicity, language, religion, cultural capital and mobility, as well as their educational needs. Put simply, trust and school leaders stated that they would not select a pupil for a specific attainment-gap-closing intervention solely based on ethnicity. Furthermore, trust and school leaders did not have interventions for closing attainment gaps that were specific to ethnic groups.

> None of our approaches to improving outcomes have started with ethnicity. (Academy principal)

> It is not something we focus on. We focus on kids who have fallen behind, but we do things to make the school reflective and representative of the community … There is nothing we do in this school that is for an ethnicity. We do not do things for brown kids, or black kids. We do things for kids falling behind in maths who like sport. (Headteacher)

> We do the best for all students and catch those under-achieving individually. There are individual interventions to close gaps, but not targeted at specific groups per se. (Academy principal)

We think about this at a universal level in terms of high aspirations for all or a targeted approach to meet the needs of individual young people. We do not have a targeted approach for particular ethnic groups. (Trust chief executive)

The school and trust leaders we interviewed gave two reasons for this. First, they considered that ethnicity did not automatically equate to an educational need. School and trust leaders noted that ethnic groups were broad, and that there was considerable variability of educational needs within ethnic groups. School and trust leaders said that, while some pupils from the same ethnic group may have similar individual needs, those needs may relate as much to socio-economic status, attitudes to education, language spoken at home, migration (whether a pupil is from a second or third generation immigrant family, or are themselves newly arrived in England) or mobility (whether moving home, local area and/or school). School and trust leaders affirmed the importance of having approaches to identify and unpick individual pupils' specific needs and barriers to learning. They considered that demographic data based on established pupil groups, including ethnicity, while useful in analysing disparities at a whole-school level, could mask the complexity of individual pupils' needs if used on their own to target interventions. As such, several school and trust leaders stated that they did not target interventions aimed directly at closing attainment gaps at pupils on the basis of their ethnicity. Indeed, some stated that it would be invidious, and tantamount to stereotyping, to do so.

Being black does not give you a particular set of support needs. Being black and disadvantaged might, or being black and having a particular special educational need definitely would. But it is meeting those needs we would be looking at, not the ethnicity of a student. (Trust chief executive)

It would be invidious to have a catch-up group because pupils are black – they may be black, but they are identified for catch-up support because each has an individual educational gap or need. (Trust chief executive)

If you wanted to raise attainment of students in English, you would not focus on ethnicity – it is not relevant. You would focus on the individual needs of students. (Trust senior leader)

We do not tackle gaps by strategies directed at these [ethnic] groups. (Academy principal)

> Within a single ethnic group, we have second, third or fourth
> generation established families with fluent English and recent arrivals
> who are new to English and might have low parental literacy in their
> home language. So, we need to look at children as individuals.
> (Academy principal)

Second, some school and trust leaders, particularly those working in areas with high pupil mobility (pupils moving between schools), in-year admissions, and overall population migration, described how rapid changes in the ethnic make-up of the school population had meant that their schools had needed to focus on consistent whole-school approaches and on individual pupils' needs. These school and trust leaders described how they had needed to be able to respond more quickly to new arrivals and changes in the pupil population. They considered that a response based solely on data about broad pupil groups, including ethnic groups, would result in the school missing individual pupils' needs and opportunities to address them.

School and trust leaders described celebrating ethnic diversity as important in creating a school's ethos and pupils' sense of belonging

One academy principal, who stated that ethnicity was not the starting point for their school's work to prioritise, design and target practices to close attainment gaps, went on to say:

> … If I had never discussed ethnicity, race, or diversity, we could not
> have improved our school, and could not have met the needs of our
> pupils.

While school and trust leaders stated that they did not use a pupil's ethnicity to target interventions to close attainment gaps, they emphasised that a wider awareness of the needs, characteristics and make-up of their local communities was crucial in developing the ethos and culture of their school and how the school supported its pupils. Trust and school leaders did not consider that they had become blind to ethnicity and ethnic disparities. They stated that understanding the local communities in which their schools worked was crucial to building the ethos and practices of a school, developing a full picture of each individual pupil, and designing appropriate interventions. School and trust leaders described three ways in which a focus on ethnicity (along with other equality, diversity and inclusion characteristics) could inform how a school built its ethos, culture and support for its pupils.

First, trust and school leaders stated that taking account of pupils' ethnicity – and other characteristics, such as religion, nationality, cultural heritage, cultural practices, gender,

and sexuality – was essential in creating a school that reflected its community. Leaders stated that recognising pupils' characteristics was vital in creating a sense of belonging to and trust in the school on the part of pupils, families and the wider community. Several of the trust and school leaders to whom we spoke described how the murder of George Floyd and the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 prompted a period of significant reflection and engagement with pupils and their local communities on the part of leaders. In the words of one school leader, this was 'a huge moment of reflection as a school, where we explicitly reviewed our policies, rules, uniforms, menus, and looked for any bias'.

Leaders of those trusts and schools described their work both in terms of promoting diversity, but also in terms of addressing negative disparities and becoming a 'pro-actively anti-racist' organisation. Trust and school leaders took this term to mean taking steps pro-actively to identify and address any practices that could contribute to disadvantageous racial and ethnic disparities across their trust or school. Leaders of one trust, for example, described how a focus on ethnicity informed their decisions on how to spend pupil premium funding, with the aim of encouraging more openness about the need to address disparities between ethnic groups.

For some school and trust leaders, the rationale for fostering a sense of belonging was not connected to academic outcomes – it was simply, as one trust chief executive described it, 'the right thing to do' from an ethical perspective. Other school and trust leaders were more explicit that fostering a sense of belonging and trust among pupils was a crucial pre-requisite for keeping them engaged in learning, and thus laid the groundwork for achieving other educational outcomes.

We describe some of the approaches schools and trusts have used to foster this sense of belonging in Chapter 2. In this sense, ethnicity is something that schools focus on when building the culture and connection between the institution and pupil population, as one among a number of pupil characteristics related to equality, diversity and inclusion.

> Although we don't have specific initiatives targeted at ethnic groups, we do take account of race where it's relevant to issues like school culture and belonging. (Trust chief executive)

Second, school and trust leaders also described how they might adapt their whole-school approaches and/or their targeted interventions to reflect the school's context and the communities it serves. Again, the ethnic make-up of the pupil population and the wider local community would come into this, but as one of several inter-related characteristics, including cultural practices, language, socio-economic status, cultural capital and family experiences of education. In this sense, what school and trust leaders described was less a specific ethnicity-focused approach, and more of an approach focused on understanding local context. Trust and school leaders described different ways in which

they adapted their approaches to what they saw as the specific needs of their local communities. We provide some examples below.

- One trust leader described how they tried to find a leadership style for each school that would fit best with a school's context and forge the best relationships with the school community.

- The leader of another trust described how they would adapt their approach to behaviour, suspensions and exclusions when working with families from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups, using approaches that fostered inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups in education.

- The leader of another trust described how their trust had responded to community tensions in a predominantly white school by providing external training to support a group of Muslim girls to be empowered as "agents of change".

- The leader of one academy talked about how they sought to facilitate discussions between female pupils and their parents from one ethnic group around exam results day to encourage their female students' aspirations while also sensitively addressing parents' expectations about further and higher education, and future career prospects.

As one trust chief executive stated, 'Locality matters more than ethnicity in this sense.' Trust and school leaders considered that it was vital that they understand the local community they serve in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and socio-economic status, rather than any single factor in isolation.

Third, school and trust leaders described how focusing on a specific school improvement priority might predominantly benefit pupils from a specific ethnic group. We heard several examples of this from leaders of trusts and schools that had focused on improving attendance and parents' engagement in their children's education. These were both issues that trust and school leaders considered had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For example, at one school in a diverse London borough, leaders had found that children from black African backgrounds and experiencing socio-economic deprivation were disproportionately represented among pupils with low attendance. The school's response, however, was not focused specifically on ethnicity, but rather on working with individual families to engage parents and overcome barriers to attendance.

For the majority of trust and school leaders to whom we spoke, the group of pupils about which they were most concerned was white British working-class pupils. This message was consistent across trusts and schools working in ethnically diverse areas, where white British pupils did not represent the majority of pupils, and for schools and trusts in less diverse areas, where the majority of the pupils were from white British working-class

backgrounds. Trust and school leaders did not think that an ethnicity-based response was what was required. Instead, leaders were trying to find approaches that could address a combination of factors related to deprivation, inter-generational poverty, negative experiences of education, levels of aspiration, and local career prospects. Trust and school leaders described approaches based on building relationships with families and local communities, establishing a culture of high expectations, building cultural capital, and providing activities that fostered positive engagement with education. At the same time, trust and school leaders recognised that this was a challenge that they had not yet succeeded in overcoming.

Schools and trusts used whole-school activities and pupil level interventions to close attainment gaps, rather than explicit strategies targeted at ethnic groups

Our overall finding in response to our first research question has been that the leaders of schools and trusts where attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups have closed attributed this to whole-school approaches (both school improvement and fostering a sense of belonging) and specific targeted interventions focused on the educational needs of individual pupils. As the leader of one school that had seen improvement in the attainment of pupils from a Pakistani background stated:

> We have just raised standards overall. We have not had a specific focus on specific [ethnic] groups. We have raised the culture, expectations, we have got the quality of staffing right. (Academy principal)

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Chapter 2: What practices have schools and trusts used to close attainment gaps and foster a sense of belonging for all pupils?

Introduction

In this chapter, we detail the practices that trust, and school leaders considered had contributed to closing attainment gaps and fostering a sense of belonging for all pupils. First, we cover a set of practices related to trusts' and schools' overall approach to school improvement, improving outcomes for all pupils, and closing attainment gaps, which were not targeted at specific ethnic groups. Second, we detail a set of trust and school practices focused on promoting a culture of inclusion for all and fostering a sense of belonging between pupils and their schools. At the end of the chapter, we describe support for pupils with EAL, refugees and new arrivals, and the way trust and school leaders were seeking to redress instances where pupils from different ethnic groups were disproportionately affected by negative outcomes, such as suspensions, exclusions and school absence.

Approaches aimed at closing attainment gaps

High expectations for all

> We expect all children to achieve, despite the challenges of disadvantage. (Trust director of education)

> It is all about high aspirations – having people who will leave no stone unturned in what we are going to do to close any gaps. (Trust director of education)

> Our whole approach as a trust is about finding the barriers to children progressing and removing the barriers. (Academy principal)

> High challenge, high support drives our school improvement model – we need to develop a culture that underperformance is not acceptable. (Trust chief executive)

For most trust and school leaders to whom we spoke, their starting point was the importance of having high expectations for all pupils coupled with swift identification of need, and intervention to address barriers to learning for individual pupils. While trust leaders said that they would look at data on pupil groups, including ethnic groups, they

stated that they did not have a specific trust-level approach to targeting attainment of pupils in specific ethnic groups.

Some trust leaders said that they did explicitly scrutinise the performance of different ethnic groups at trust level. This was to ensure ethnicity and ethnic disparities were discussed openly across the trust and were on school leaders' radars, and to raise expectations. Leaders of one trust, for example, described how they shared performance data for all ethnic groups at their annual trust conference to ensure that all leaders and staff across the trust were aware of and reflecting on the performance of pupils from different ethnic groups. At the same time, this was also done to ensure that the trust could celebrate the success of all their pupils from different backgrounds. The trust in question has a significant proportion of black pupils and has had success in raising their achievement. The trust sought to showcase this success by, for example, celebrating all black pupils who had gone on to study at Oxbridge.

> We really believe it. If any staff says, "this kid can't achieve", we challenge them on it. (Trust chief executive)

> Our Trust framework is the way we think about this across the Trust. At its heart is the belief that every child can succeed. Everything we do is about achieving that aim – we take it very seriously. (Trust chief executive)

For other trusts, having high expectations meant senior trust leaders behaving in a way that demonstrated to school leaders and staff that all pupils can achieve and challenging anyone who said that there might be limits on what certain pupils can achieve. Some trust leaders linked this to expectations about how pupils should behave. They stated that high aspirations also meant having high expectations around pupil behaviour and a strong and consistent application of behaviour for learning policies. (There was some discussion about the potential negative consequences of behaviour policies and whether these disproportionately affected certain ethnic groups. We discuss this in the final section of this chapter.)

In other trusts, the concept of "high expectations for all" was linked to their age-related expectations as well as ensuring all children have access to a wider range of learning experiences inside and outside the classroom. Trust leaders described their role as helping schools within their trusts to think about the needs of their pupils and how best to meet them. Again, the focus described to us by trust leaders was on the individual needs of pupils, rather than on specific ethnic groups.

Use of data

Having strong data systems and regular flows of data across the trust were seen by many trust leaders as vital to their ability to identify any performance gaps and to take action to address those gaps. For some trusts, this meant making sure that they had the basic data systems and processes in place to give trust and school leaders access to data when they needed it during the year. The data could then be used to support open and honest conversations between the trust and individual schools.

For other trusts, their focus on data had moved beyond school-level data to scrutinising pupil performance and giving trust and schools leaders to have access to much more detailed data that allowed them to look at individual needs at a more nuanced level.

> As a trust, we have been on a journey of improving outcomes and reducing achievement gaps by instilling a data-driven culture of accountability. (Trust chief executive)

One trust leader said that previously there had not been enough focus on data, so the trust had increased the focus on and accountability for the quality and analysis of data for individual schools. This was seen as especially important in enabling school leaders to focus closely on the needs of each individual pupil. This trust had identified their best school data manager and put them in a central team to support their counterparts in individual schools across the trust. Trust leaders had found that school-level data practice had improved as a result.

Leaders from another trust described how their well-established and strong trust-wide data systems gave them a rapid and fine-grained analysis of the performance of all schools and different pupil groups.

> We use that data to meticulously target any under-performance wherever we see it, but that tends to be at the level of the individual student not at particular groups and certainly not ethnic groups. (Trust deputy chief executive)

Trust leaders said that they could use data to look at the performance of ethnic groups and they would be able to spot if there were gaps for any ethnic group. They stated, however, that understanding and responding to any gaps that appeared in trust-level data for specific ethnic groups would require a more nuanced focus on the needs of individual pupils, rather than assuming a causal link with ethnicity.

Leaders of one larger trust said that, at trust-level, their focus was on needs that were common across the trust. In that vein, the trust was focused on specific pupil groups, including those eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs

and disabilities. They stated that they did not focus on specific ethnic groups at trust level since the ethnic make-up of pupil populations was different between their academies. Trust leaders said that, if the data revealed gaps for pupils from specific ethnic groups at a school level, this would be picked up in school improvement conversations, and the school's leadership would be expected to investigate and act on the data. There would not, however, be an expectation of a trust-level focus on a specific ethnic group. This may reflect the fact that the trusts that took part in this research were those that had narrowed or closed gaps for pupils from different ethnic groups. It is possible, therefore, that trusts and schools with wider attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups might describe a different approach and focus on specific ethnic groups. The trust leaders who took part in this work did not think this was likely, however.

Among the trusts we engaged, some had developed more sophisticated ways of analysing the needs of individual pupils, moving beyond the broad pupil groups and characteristics for which data is collected (e.g., pupil premium). For example, one trust described how they had introduced a banding system that allocated scores to each individual pupil representing the different levels of needs they might have. This system included a richer set of contextual data, related more directly to pupils' needs, such as whether pupils had experienced trauma or high mobility, or whether they were recent arrivals or refugees. The trust had begun this approach for pupils eligible for the pupil premium, but had found it was so effective that they had expanded it to all pupils. Trust leaders described how this allowed conversations with schools that were precisely targeted and focused on the pupils with the greatest needs.

> We have been improving our use of data over the last five years, taking advantage of the size of our trust to spot trends and test hypotheses. We have an executive leadership structure – we think they are better placed to challenge schools on outcomes than local governing bodies. (Trust chief executive)

Another trust used what they called "COBRA"-style meetings – i.e., those with a single focus on an urgent priority – to bring subject leaders and senior leaders together across the trust to look at individual pupils and consider the support that they need. This support might include extra intervention, curriculum adaptation, or work with specific staff. Leaders in this trust considered that this enabled them to carry out a detailed analysis of pupils' needs and put swift follow-up support in place.

Assessment and progress monitoring

> We have a really tight assessment process. We know where our children are. (Academy principal)

All but one of the trusts to whom we spoke had age-related expectations for their pupils and a common assessment process to track progress against these expectations. They saw this as vital to their ability to track the progress of individual pupils and to identify where additional support may be needed at a school and individual pupil level.

Three of the nine trusts we engaged had recently introduced common trust-wide standardised assessments because it gave them more consistent data. As one trust leader put it, 'it has created a no-excuses culture around attainment across all our schools'. Another trust leader described how the frequency of trust-wide assessment points had reduced over time as their schools had improved. They considered that a regular and consistent approach to assessment had been a key part of their early improvement journey.

Trust leaders said that having regular and robust assessment information allowed them to look at differences in outcomes for different pupil groups, including ethnic groups. In what was a consistent theme throughout this research, they stated that their focus was likely to be on barriers to learning for individual pupils, rather than associating those needs with a specific ethnic group. For example, one trust described how their trust-wide "big test" in Years 7 to 9 gave them granular detail about which pupils did well in relation to specific questions and tasks, and which pupils found certain areas harder. This allowed them to tailor support and interventions to individual pupils.

Leaders from another trust stated that having a consistent trust-wide approach to assessment was crucial in ensuring that there was a focus on the progress and achievement of individual pupils, and that these were not masked by looking at the aggregated data for broad pupil groups. Leaders from this trust considered that this was crucial to making the ethos of "high expectations for all pupils" concrete and real for all staff, and to combatting any potential teacher bias in lowering expectations for pupils. This trust used national benchmarks from the [Fischer Family Trust](#) to set expectations about pupil progress. All schools had to aim for the top 20% of outcomes for all pupils, and the top performing schools were encouraged to aim for the top 5% when setting targets. The trust in question had moved to standardised assessment twice a year across the trust because this gave them common data to use in trust leaders' conversations about progress with all schools and teachers at the same time.

> That data is a "game-changer". Because we have been able to show teachers the accuracy of our projections they've bought into our system and are now more willing to base their own expectations for pupil progress on what the data says – this has been a helpful way of raising their aspirations for all students. (Trust chief executive)

Specific intervention programmes

> We identify which students have gaps, address those gaps and seek
> success. (Academy principal)

The interventions that trust leaders identified as contributing to closing attainment gaps were related to the educational needs and barriers experienced by individual pupils, and groupings of pupils with the same needs. Trust leaders were clear that the interventions they needed to use could change over time. They considered that, just because something worked 10 years ago, that did not mean it would work again now. Trust leaders talked about the importance of measuring the impact of their interventions to see what was and was not working. A number of trusts had used the Education Endowment Foundation framework to guide their choice of interventions and evaluate them. There were three main areas where trust leaders talked about focusing their support and interventions to close gaps:

1. literacy and reading;

2. oracy; and

3. raising aspirations.

Literacy and reading

Several of the trusts we engaged had developed trust-wide reading strategies across all schools and introduced specific reading catch up-programmes. Some said they had had success with one-to-one catch up interventions and online programmes that allowed pupils to work outside the classroom using tablets. Trust leaders thought that this had been particularly effective for reducing the stigma of needing extra support, for white working-class boys in particular.

Oracy

Several trusts had focused specifically on improving oracy through trust-wide programmes. Leaders from one trust said that they could see a direct link between improved oracy and better outcomes and written work at GCSE, and it had become their primary focus for additional support to schools. Leaders from other trusts talked about the importance of oracy specifically for pupils who might not be exposed to a language-rich environment or where English is not the spoken language at home.

One trust, for example, had encouraged a focus on oracy in their schools. One school within the trust had developed this to reflect their local community, because they found that their female students were often not confident about speaking at length or asking questions in class. In this approach, there was an explicit focus on teaching vocabulary, idioms and colloquialisms that might otherwise limit access to other learning, parts of the

curriculum or general life. Leaders from another trust talked about having a systematic approach to monitoring functional and social language acquisition, then academic language, and then subject-specific language. They considered that oracy was particularly important for pupils who were bilingual.

Raising aspirations for life beyond school

Trust leaders also talked about focusing on life beyond school as an important way of raising the aspirations of many of their pupils and families. One trust had focused heavily on their careers education programme across the trust and encouraged schools to use the Gatsby benchmarks to assess their provision. Leaders of that trust thought this had been an important part of engaging specific communities and parents in conversations about aspiration and why doing well at school matters.

Leaders of another trust talked about the significant role university students had played as mentors within their schools, as well as the importance of university visits and raising awareness of opportunities beyond school. Leaders from another trust described how they had been influenced by the Sutton Trust report, *Life Lessons*, and had added time to the school day to provide more opportunities for pupils to engage in debating skills and preparation for success at sixth form and progression beyond.

Approaches aimed at creating a strong sense of belonging for pupils

> Children will only work hard … if they feel a sense of belonging in
> that school, families feel a sense of buy-in. (Academy principal)

Diversifying the curriculum

All the trusts to whom we spoke had reviewed their curriculum within the last three years to ensure it was more representative and inclusive. Trust and school leaders considered that this was an important part of pupils being able to see themselves in what they were learning and feeling a genuine sense of engagement and belonging within their schools. Within some trusts, this had been a trust-wide exercise, engaging leaders, staff and pupils in shaping a new curriculum. In trusts that did not have a trust-wide curriculum, the focus had been on encouraging school leaders to have these discussions within each school community in order to shape a curriculum that reflected the context of the school.

One trust chief executive argued that there was no trade-off between having a knowledge-rich, rigorous and stretching curriculum and ensuring that it gave opportunities for everyone to see themselves and to see others reflected in the curriculum. They thought that there were benefits to all pupils in having a broader range of experiences and examples from which to learn. School leaders in another trust

described how the trust's experts had supported them to review their curriculum. At a primary level, this work had been undertaken primarily by groups of teachers from across the trust to ensure they had a more representative group of teachers developing curriculum content than they had had before (or could get in any one of their schools). At secondary level, in addition, there had been strong engagement with pupils through pupil councils so that pupil voice was also shaping curriculum choices.

In many of the schools and trusts we engaged, there had been a specific focus on the English curriculum, looking at the texts being used. Even within a common curriculum, school leaders described having choices about the texts they taught, which allowed them to tailor their choices to their own school communities. One school leader described how this was important when showing prospective parents around the school – 'I can show them what their children will be learning, and they can see their own experiences and that of their community will be part of that learning.'

Alongside English, trust and school leaders also highlighted the history curriculum as another area where they had reflected on the topics being covered and how they were taught. One trust described how they had moved away from having a black history month, replacing this with an approach whereby every history topic had a black history element.

Leaders of one trust described how they had used the concept of the curriculum as both a "window and mirror" to prompt discussion with school leaders. They argued that it was equally important for pupils to be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and for the curriculum to provide a window into broader experiences. Leaders of this trust considered it was crucial to strike the right balance here, and that, in the past, there had been too much focus on the "window" aspect of the curriculum. They were seeking to redress this balance, particularly in key stage 3, where there was greater flexibility in the curriculum. Leaders from other trusts said that it was important to look beyond what was taught in the classroom, and think more broadly about how to ensure wider resources and experiences on offer around the school – invited speakers, books in the library, images used around the school, school visits – were diverse, inclusive and representative of the school community.

> It goes beyond just the curriculum – we think about it in relation to speakers, visits, books you have in the library. (Academy principal)

As well as reviewing their overall curriculum, one trust described how they had developed what they called a "global issues curriculum" to allow them to address historical and current affairs topics that had animated pupils and had the potential to be controversial or emotive. Trust leaders described how they were using their global issues curriculum to develop pupils' writing and debating skills.

Leadership and staff diversity

Many trust and school leaders described the benefits of having a more diverse workforce. For example, they saw that this brought different perspectives to bear on the day-to-day running of the school, as well as enabling pupils to see leaders and staff that they felt reflected them, their cultural practices and the community served by the school. Trust and school leaders also described the benefits of having staff with the language skills, knowledge and relationships to be able to engage effectively and sensitively with families and pupils' communities. Most trust and school leaders said that they would not set specific targets for recruiting staff from particular ethnic groups. Instead, their focus was on improving their recruitment and development processes so that they were attracting high-quality candidates from a wide range of backgrounds. Some trusts described how they had taken steps to recruit support staff and governors from specific groups.

Other trusts had taken different approaches to promoting a diverse workforce. Several trusts that we engaged had held focus groups for black and Asian staff, led by black and Asian school and trust leaders. These groups had been established to develop a better understanding of the barriers to career progression for black and Asian staff and to explore what trusts and schools could do to address those barriers. Trust and school leaders saw this as an important step in demonstrating a trust's or school's commitment to supporting black or Asian staff to become school and trust leaders. Other trusts had set up shadow boards with representation from staff from different ethnic groups. The shadow boards provided different perspectives, offered advice on leadership and governance issues, and helped leaders to test their decision-making to ensure that it took account of a wider range of perspectives across the trust and the communities it served. Others had focused on increasing diversity among trustees and governors.

One large trust that ran its own teacher development scheme reported seeing a significant increase in teachers from different ethnic groups that have not been well represented in leadership moving into middle leadership roles. The trust had a strong track record of developing senior leaders from within their trust and ran a dedicated "diverse leaders" programme. Consequently, trust leaders were confident that they would see increasing diversity at senior leadership level over the next five to 10 years.

Some trust and school leaders described how they had taken the opportunity post-pandemic to adopt a more targeted approach to recruitment for specific positions. For example, they had expanded their inclusion and pastoral teams, and used this to attract prospective candidates from more diverse backgrounds and non-traditional experiences. Trust and school leaders considered that this approach was particularly important for community-facing roles, especially those related to encouraging attendance, tackling absenteeism, and family and community liaison.

Trust and school leaders, especially those operating outside London and large cities, said that they had found the challenge of increasing diversity in recruitment more challenging, simply because they were not seeing applicants from different ethnic groups.

Celebrating cultural diversity and inclusion

Many of the trust and school leaders to whom we spoke described the importance of recognising and celebrating the cultural identities of their staff and pupils, and of finding ways to make this a core part of school life. Many of the steps they had taken were relatively small and simple, for example ensuring the school calendar recognised different religious festivals and events equally, and putting on specific celebrations in which different groups were asked to share their experiences through world food days or through wearing traditional costumes to school.

> One of our kids produced the idea of a culture day instead of a non-uniform day. Kids can come in different costumes and dress that reflect their culture. (Academy principal)

One primary school described how they had used music and dance to build cultural capital and pupils' confidence in expressing themselves. Leaders considered that all the cultures with which their pupils identified had a strong element of music and dance. As such, celebrating those elements affirmed to pupils and their families that they had something to contribute to the cultural capital of the school. School leaders considered that this approach of mutual contribution was better and more inclusive than marking specific cultural moments in one or two cultures that were predominant in the school community.

In one school, the leader described how, two years ago, Muslim pupils had fed back that they did not feel the school cared about them. School leaders reflected on how they demonstrated that they were taking an interest in and incorporating into the life of the school the identities, backgrounds, communities and practices that mattered to their pupils. As a result, the school increased its focus on school and community events to mark Ramadan and Eid. School leaders reported that they had received overwhelmingly positive feedback from pupils. The headteacher described one pupil saying, 'Thank you, sir, nobody has ever done anything like that in the five years I've been here.' The school's celebration of Ramadan and Eid has been repeated in subsequent years.

Community engagement

Trust and school leaders described the importance of building strong relationships with parents and the local community. While community engagement may focus on ethnic groups, trust and school leaders also described the importance of understanding the make-up of the community and engaging with religious groups and groups of different

nationalities. Trust and school leaders emphasised the need to work pro-actively with local community or religious groups, and to empower staff in specific community-facing roles to build relationships with families and the local community.

Leaders of trusts and schools with large Muslim populations talked about the importance of engaging with religious leaders. They described how religious leaders had helped them to understand how to organise school activities, such as targeted catch-up interventions, to avoid clashes with religious activities in which pupils were involved. They said that this also helped them to address any issues in the wider community sensitively and to reinforce messages to families about the importance of education and school attendance. For example, one school talked about how they had struggled to get Muslim pupils to attend revision classes that the school held at certain times. They discussed this issue with leaders from the local mosque. These discussions revealed that the school's revision class clashed with the times pupils were expected to attend the mosque. School and mosque leaders worked together to agree a timetable that worked for both the school and the pupils, and saw attendance at revision classes increase as a result.

Another school gave the example of noticing a drop-off in the performance of a group of Somali boys, which contrasted with the high performance of Somali girls in their school. Conversations with religious and community leaders revealed that this was due to issues related to boys being given more freedom to go out than girls. The school used this to inform a more targeted programme of intervention and support for this group of Somali boys that addressed their under-performance.

Trust and school leaders recognised that, while engagement with religious and community leaders could be very powerful, how schools and trusts went about this would be different depending on the make-up of the local community. As such, they considered that there was not a universal approach to community engagement that could be mandated at trust level; individual school leaders needed to determine how best to engage the community served by the school according to its context. Some trust leaders said that this was an area where they could do more work to share and showcase effective practices across different schools within the trust.

Trust and school leaders also emphasised that engaging religious and community groups would not be appropriate in all contexts, and that engaging families directly was often necessary. School leaders talked about the importance of building on parents' aspirations for their children's education and developing their understanding of the education system in England, especially for parents who had not been to school in England. This might include events to help parents/carers to understand different pathways and access to further and higher education. Many of the trust leaders we engaged described how they ran enrichment programmes to offer pupils and their families a broader range of cultural experiences. Some talked about the importance of engaging with parents alongside pupils to discuss their aspirations for the future and what was involved, to address

parents' concerns and avoid their expectations placing a limit on pupils' aspirations (for example, where parents may have lower expectations of young women). Leaders in another school described how they engaged directly with parents to promote school attendance and get their advice on how best to address reasons for low attendance.

Pupil voice

Several trust and school leaders described undertaking specific pieces of work to strengthen pupil voice overall, as well as for specific groups of pupils, including ethnic groups. For example, leaders of one trust talked about supporting work in schools with a high proportion of Asian pupils through a female empowerment lead, to ensure their female pupils were confident in expressing their hopes and ambitions for life beyond education. In the same trust, schools with a high proportion of black Caribbean pupils had focused on raising aspirations and encouraging pupils to become positive advocates for change for their local community.

For some trust and school leaders, encouraging and strengthening pupil voice was at the heart of their work as an organisation in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion, and being pro-active in tackling negative racial and ethnic disparities. Leaders of those trusts and schools described the importance of using channels for capturing pupil voice as a means of enabling pupils to talk about their experiences of ethnic disparities and perceived bias, and to respond to those experiences constructively. Those trust and school leaders also argued that pupil voice could be an important mechanism for testing the extent to which an ethos of high expectations for all pupils and fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging matched up to the day-to-day experiences of pupils in the school and its wider community.

Some trusts were using pupil and parent feedback to influence their work in other areas and to make sure they were listening to all voices within their communities. As we noted earlier, some trusts and schools had actively engaged pupils in their work to update the curriculum. Other trusts ran trust-wide surveys of pupils and parents that were administered independently of their schools to ensure they were identifying any concerns or issues without bias. They also discussed with the school how they planned to respond.

Tailored support for specific pupil groups

Some trust and school leaders considered that they needed to have a more specific and tailored programme for pupils with EAL. They noted, however, that EAL pupils were not a homogenous group, and that there was a considerable difference between the needs of a bilingual pupil who spoke English well but qualified as EAL and a pupil newly arrived in the country who spoke very little English.

Trust and school leaders described how they were having to adapt their approaches in response to changing patterns of migration and pupils who had come from an increasing range of countries. Trust and school leaders described how they had adapted their approaches where they had pupils who had arrived from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and more recently Ukraine, as well as changes in migration patterns following Brexit. Again, for trust and school leaders, the focus was on the needs of individual pupils, rather than treating EAL pupils as a single group with the same needs.

Trust and school leaders reflected that, because of the breadth of needs among pupils with EAL and changes in the countries from which pupils arrive, there was a need for more focused research into effective practice in this area. It was notable that, within some of the trusts we engaged, individual schools that had received significant numbers of pupils from abroad were seen to be at the forefront of developing practice in supporting new arrivals and pupils who needed to learn English, and were being used as a source of advice and support for other schools within the trust.

One trust talked about developing a tailored approach to their support for this group. This approach was built on a baseline assessment and diagnostic assessments over several weeks to determine what the appropriate intervention strategy should be for each pupil. The trust leaders said that, if a pupil was strong in their first language, then the school would support the pupil around translation so that they could apply concepts they already knew. If the pupil's skills in their own language were weaker, the school would focus more on language acquisition. For pupils with EAL who had already acquired functional English, it would only be necessary to focus on applying English in an academic context.

Other trust and school leaders said that they adapted their approach to supporting pupils with EAL depending on how similar a pupil's spoken language was to English. One school had such a large number of new arrivals that they had set up dedicated specialist support for them. They split this between pupils who spoke languages using the Latin alphabet and those using non-Latin alphabets. Leaders from other trusts and schools described how they had had most success with immersion, as they had found that EAL pupils were previously taken out of the classroom, missed too much of the curriculum and fell further behind. This was another area where trust and school leaders recognised the value of having a diverse workforce, with staff who could build relationships and communicate with pupils and families in languages other than English.

Linked to language acquisition, trust and school leaders also described the importance of support focused on building cultural capital for all pupils. One school with a large number of new arrivals said they had spent a lot of time on helping newly-arrived pupils and their families to understand what to expect from life in a British school. They also focused on helping pupils to prepare for life beyond school by running a range of enrichment activities including visits other parts of the UK, and by introducing them to future education paths such as apprenticeships or higher education. Another school described

the importance of giving pupils a range of experiences so that they were not disadvantaged in subjects that assumed familiarity with certain pastimes or specific experiences. Both primary and secondary school leaders said that there were some subjects and qualifications, such as aspects of literacy (primary) or English language (secondary), that assumed familiarity with activities or concepts that pupils may not have encountered and for which they could not revise. They described how pupils, particularly those who may have recently arrived in the country or may not have experienced activities beyond their immediate community, would find it difficult to relate to activities of which they had no knowledge, like visiting stately homes, surfing, beekeeping or caving (to name examples of topics of unseen texts described to us by school leaders).

Identifying and addressing instances where negative outcomes disproportionately affected pupils from specific ethnic groups

We also explored with trust and school leaders whether they saw different ethnic groups being disproportionately affected by negative outcomes and how the trust or school would address this. Such negative outcomes might include suspensions, exclusions, low attendance, or a lack of progression to certain levels of qualifications.

Some trusts said they had actively looked at the data to consider this question but felt that there was no discernible trend that suggested any ethnic groups were disproportionately represented in the data on negative outcomes. Other trust and school leaders stated that, while data showed that some negative outcomes disproportionately affected pupils from specific ethnic groups, the reasons for those negative outcomes were not related to those pupils' ethnicity (and were not common to all pupils from a specific ethnic group), but were related to a broader set of needs (for example, socio-economic deprivation). This was the area of our interviews with trust and school leaders where, while the issue was recognised, the detail of how trusts and schools were addressing apparent disparities in negative outcomes between ethnic groups was thinnest.

Other trusts said they had seen some examples where they felt the outcomes were skewed for particular ethnic groups, and this had made them examine what was behind this more closely. In one school, leaders described how they had identified that black Caribbean girls were more likely to be given behaviour points (sanctions for bad behaviour) than other pupils. When they explored this issue with staff and pupils, they found that it related to the way that pupils perceived some staff were talking to them, how they responded to this, and how staff perceived that response. By addressing the issue directly and sensitively with the pupils and staff concerned, the school was able to defuse unnecessary conflict, and reduce the disproportionate impact on this group of pupils.

Another trust chief executive made a similar point about the importance of adapting and adjusting a school's leadership style and approach to implementing behaviour policies to different community groups within a school. This was not an argument for having different standards of behaviour for some pupils or groups, but rather an argument for a degree of sensitivity and adaptability in the way that behaviour standards were managed and upheld for different groups that could potentially help to avoid unnecessary conflict. This proved a controversial view in discussion with school leaders within this trust, however, who felt that having consistent behaviour standards applied equally to all pupils was fundamental to treating all pupils fairly.

Another trust, facing challenges around exclusions and behaviour in some schools, was addressing these challenges by running a network across the trust for all vice-principals leading on attendance and behaviour, so that they could learn from one another. This provided a forum for discussions about specific issues affecting different pupil groups.

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During the course of the fieldwork, we sought to capture evidence of the impact of specific practices that had closed attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups. The challenge we found was that the practices that trust and school leaders described for closing attainment gaps were not specific to and targeted at ethnic groups, while the broader practices for recognising ethnicity and fostering belonging were not directly linked to closing attainment gaps.

Some trust and school leaders saw practices relating to closing attainment gaps and fostering belonging respectively as largely separate and unrelated. Other trust and school leaders considered that there was a link between fostering a sense of belonging and improving educational outcomes. Those trust and school leaders argued that pupils feeling safe, valued and recognised in school was a vital pre-requisite to improving any other learning outcomes. Some could point to overall improvements in standards that coincided with a deliberate focus on belonging and achievement. With a few exceptions, we did not hear many examples from trust and school leaders of how a focus on belonging might influence the delivery and effectiveness of interventions to close attainment gaps. The few examples we did hear are described in this chapter. We did, however, hear some trust and school leaders describe how a focus on high expectations and overcoming barriers to learning for all pupils could foster greater inclusivity, sensitivity to and understanding of pupils' experiences and identities. Overall, within the scope of this research, it has not been possible to identify a direct causal link and quantify the impact of these practices on educational outcomes.

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Chapter 3: Can we draw practical lessons about closing attainment gaps between pupils from different ethnic groups from the work of schools and trusts?

Three practical lessons

There are three inter-connected responses to the third question that this research set out to answer – whether there are practical lessons about narrowing and closing attainment gaps between ethnic groups that are applicable to schools and trusts working in different contexts.

1. **There are practical lessons about how to narrow and close attainment gaps that are applicable to trusts and schools working in different contexts.** Those approaches are not, however, specific to different ethnic groups. Instead, the practical lessons concern the "basics" of effective school improvement – a clear ethos and high expectations, strong leadership and governance, high-quality teaching and learning, a broad and engaging curriculum, effective use of data, and effective progress monitoring and interventions. The approaches described by trust and school leaders that took part in this research were broadly similar in their component parts (notwithstanding the fact that trusts do these things differently and with different degrees of effectiveness). Furthermore, the trusts that we engaged had developed common trust-wide approaches in these areas. This suggests that there are practices for closing attainment gaps that are applicable in different contexts.

2. **At the same time, however, it is necessary to adapt those broad approaches to reflect the local context and community each school serves.** All trust and school leaders we engaged described the importance of fostering a sense of belonging among pupils through, for example, the design of the curriculum, community and parental engagement, how the school marks cultural events and practices, staff recruitment, and pupil voice. Nevertheless, trust and school leaders contended that there was not a universal, one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, the design of the curriculum, community and parental engagement, staff recruitment, and pupil voice need to be grounded in and shaped by the characteristics of the community served by each school. Trust and school leaders described this as an ongoing process, particularly in areas with high pupil mobility and/or a rapidly changing local demographic. While there are approaches to school improvement and closing gaps that can be systematised and applied in different contexts, sensitivity and adaptation to each context is prime among the practical lessons gleaned from this research.

3. **Trust and school leaders suggested that using broad labels to describe pupil groups can be helpful when looking at the macro level, but a more nuanced and individual approach is needed when identifying and seeking to overcome pupils' barriers to learning.** Trust and school leaders disagreed strongly with the idea that educational needs correlated with ethnicity. More broadly, trust and school leaders contended that while broad groupings of pupils in datasets can be useful when scrutinising trends at an overall institutional (trust, school), local area or national level, those same groupings are less relevant when seeking to identify and address specific barriers to learning that individual pupils are experiencing. We described in Chapter 2 how trusts and schools were using pupil-level data and assessments to ensure that the performance of broad pupil groups was not masking gaps for individual pupils. Trust and school leaders described how this was an important aspect of testing the reality of their aim of fostering high expectations for all pupils.

The trusts and schools we engaged did not have a deliberate focus on closing achievement gaps between ethnic groups as an aim in itself. This contrasts with a time in recent decades when, as [previous research](#) has highlighted, initiatives to close attainment gaps between ethnic groups were a feature of national policy and school practice. This may reflect two broader contextual changes. First, national-level achievement gaps between ethnic groups have generally narrowed, and closed completely in some cases. Disparities in educational outcomes between broad ethnic groups, as recorded in national statistics, is not a prominent feature of the education landscape in the way it once was. Second, as we heard from trust and school leaders quoted in this report, school demographics have become increasingly diverse and complex. Many of the schools we engaged described rapid demographic change, meaning that the school had pupils from a wider range of ethnic groups, and within those groups a wider range of socio-economic, national, religious, linguistic and cultural identities, rather than from one or two predominant and established communities. Initiatives focused on specific ethnic groups may have become an anachronism. This is not to say, however, that negative racial and ethnic disparities have disappeared from the education system in 2023. The trust and school leaders interviewed for this research expressed an ongoing commitment to pursuing better and more equal outcomes for all students. The remainder of this chapter identifies some ways in which government and the research community can support this.

Areas for further exploration

As we described in the introductory chapter, this has been a small-scale, exploratory research study, focusing specifically on trusts and schools that have narrowed or closed attainment gaps between ethnic groups, and gathering the views of leaders about the practices that have contributed to those trends. There are, however, other ways of

exploring the role of ethnicity in education, ethnic disparities and approaches to addressing them, which it has not been possible to include in a study of this scale. Further research in this field might usefully consider two broad areas that were suggested by participants in the present project.

First, to complement and build on our research, there may be value in engaging trusts and schools working in different contexts to those we engaged. Our approach was to identify trusts and schools that had narrowed or closed attainment gaps, and ask their leaders what had contributed to those trends. As noted in the introductory chapter, trusts and schools that have narrowed or closed attainment gaps tend to be located in urban areas with greater population diversity. While we did engage some trusts and schools in more rural and less diverse areas, it could be the case that a study focusing on trusts and schools with larger attainment gaps between pupils from ethnic groups reveals that those institutions are taking different approaches to address those gaps. We should also point out that, while many leaders would consider that their trusts and schools had a culture of high expectations, were inclusive, and provided effective needs-based interventions to close attainment gaps, the data suggest that some trusts and schools are doing this more effectively than others. This point was emphasised by the trust and school leaders in our sample, particularly those who had worked in different trusts and schools or had experienced significant improvement in their trust.

Similarly, our approach has involved speaking to people in positions of senior leadership in trusts and schools. Within the scope of the work, it has not been possible to speak to governors, staff, pupils or parents/carers. Speaking to a broader range of people from a school community would, however, provide a more rounded picture of the practices described by school leaders, and their impact on staff, pupils and the wider school community. It would also help to triangulate how the practices described by leaders are experienced by pupils and staff. This would require a very different research approach, focusing on how the ethos and culture of a school, its whole-school practices and interventions to close attainment gaps, and its fostering of a sense of belonging were delivered by staff and experienced by pupils. This form of research could illuminate some of the ways that staff foster a sense of belonging and trust, and build relationships with and support pupils through day-to-day interactions, recognising different aspects of a pupil's identity (including their ethnicity), and how this contributes to self-esteem, wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

Second, while trust and school leaders said that they did not use ethnicity in general to prioritise, design and target support aimed at closing attainment gaps, trust and school leaders did suggest that broader research on how to meet the needs of specific pupil groups would be valuable. Almost all trust and school leaders we engaged described the challenge of engaging some pupils from white British working-class backgrounds, and tackling a combination of issues linked to deprivation, inter-generational poverty, attitudes

to and experiences of education, and aspirations. Trust and school leaders also suggested further research into:

- approaches and practices used to support international new arrivals (including pupils who do not speak English at all, and those who do not speak English at home);

- practices used when supporting pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds;

- how interventions that are sensitive and adapted to pupils' characteristics are delivered, what affects whether these interventions are delivered effectively, and their impact on pupils' confidence, self-esteem, wellbeing and long-term outcomes, as well as on progress and attainment; and

- how to support and build resilience in schools experiencing rapid demographic change.

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